

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY AT APPROX. 12:30PM

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Secretary-General Press Remarks on COVID-19 CRISIS

19 March 2020

We are facing a global health crisis unlike any in the 75-year history of the United Nations — one that is spreading human suffering, infecting the global economy and upending people's lives.

A global recession – perhaps of record dimensions – is a near certainty.

The International Labour Organization has just reported that workers around the world could lose as much as 3.4 trillion U.S. dollars in income by the end of this year.

This is, above all, a human crisis that calls for solidarity.

Our human family is stressed and the social fabric is being torn. People are suffering, sick and scared.

Current responses at the country level will not address the global scale and complexity of the crisis.

This is a moment that demands coordinated, decisive, and innovative policy action from the world's leading economies. We must recognize that the poorest countries and most vulnerable — especially women — will be the hardest hit.

I welcome the decision by G20 leaders to convene an emergency summit next week to respond to the epic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic – and I look forward to taking part.

My central message is clear: We are in an unprecedented situation and the normal rules no longer apply. We cannot resort to the usual tools in such unusual times.

The creativity of the response must match the unique nature of the crisis – and the magnitude of the response must match its scale.

Our world faces a common enemy. We are at war with a virus.

COVID-19 is killing people, as well as attacking the real economy at its core – trade, supply chains, businesses, jobs. Entire countries and cities are in lockdown. Borders are closing. Companies are struggling to stay in business and families are simply struggling to stay afloat.

In managing this crisis, we also have a unique opportunity.

Done right, we can steer the recovery toward a more sustainable and inclusive path. But poorly coordinated policies risk locking in -- or even worsening -- already unsustainable inequalities, reversing hard-won development gains and poverty reduction.

I call on world leaders to come together and offer an urgent and coordinated response to this global crisis.

I see three critical areas for action:

FIRST, TACKLING THE HEALTH EMERGENCY.

Many countries have exceeded the capacity to care for even mild cases in dedicated health facilities, with many unable to respond to the enormous needs of the elderly.

Even in the wealthiest countries, we see health systems buckling under pressure.

Health spending must be scaled up right away to meet urgent needs and the surge in demand -- expanding testing, bolstering facilities, supporting health care workers, and ensuring adequate supplies -- with full respect for human rights and without stigma.

It has been proven that the virus can be contained. It must be contained.

If we let the virus spread like wildfire -- especially in the most vulnerable regions of the world -- it would kill millions of people.

And we need to immediately move away from a situation where each country is undertaking its own health strategies to one that ensures, in full transparency, a coordinated global response, including helping countries that are less prepared to tackle the crisis.

Governments must give the strongest support to the multilateral effort to fight the virus, led by the World Health Organization, whose appeals must be fully met.

The health catastrophe makes clear that we are only as strong as the weakest health system.

Global solidarity is not only a moral imperative, it is in everyone's interests.

SECOND, WE MUST FOCUS ON THE SOCIAL IMPACT AND THE ECONOMIC RESPONSE AND RECOVERY.

Unlike the 2008 financial crisis, injecting capital in the financial sector alone is not the answer. This is not a banking crisis – indeed banks must be part of the solution.

And it is not an ordinary shock in supply and demand; it is a shock to society as a whole.

The liquidity of the financial system must be guaranteed, and banks must use their resilience to support their customers.

Let's not forget this is essentially a human crisis.

Most fundamentally, we need to focus on people -- the most vulnerable, low-wage workers, small and medium enterprises.

That means wage support, insurance, social protection, preventing bankruptcies and job loss.

That also means designing fiscal and monetary responses to ensure that the burden does not fall on those who can least afford it.

The recovery must not come on the backs of the poorest – and we cannot create a legion of new poor.

We need to get resources directly in the hands of people. A number of countries are taking up social protection initiatives such as cash transfers and universal income.

We need to take it to the next level to ensure support reaches those entirely dependent on the informal economy and countries less able to respond.

Remittances are a lifeline in the developing world – especially now. Countries have already committed to reduce remittance fees to 3 percent, much below the current average levels. The crisis requires us to go further, getting as close to zero as possible.

In addition, G20 leaders have taken steps to protect their own citizens and economies by waiving interest payments. We must apply that same logic to the most vulnerable countries in our global village and alleviate their debt burden.

Across the board, we need a commitment to ensure adequate financial facilities to support countries in difficulties. The IMF, the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions play a key role.

And we must refrain from the temptation of resorting to protectionism. This is the time to dismantle trade barriers and re-establish supply chains.

Looking at the broader picture, disruptions to society are having a profound impact.

We must address the effects of this crisis on women. The world's women are disproportionately carrying the burden at home and in the wider economy.

Children are also paying a heavy price. More than 800 million children are out of school right now — many of whom rely on school to provide their only meal. We must ensure that all children have access to food and equal access to learning — bridging the digital divide and reducing the costs of connectivity.

As people's lives are disrupted, isolated and upturned, we must prevent this pandemic from turning into a crisis of mental health. Young people will be most at risk.

The world needs to keep going with core support to programs for the most vulnerable, including through UN-coordinated humanitarian and refugee response plans. Humanitarian needs must not be sacrificed.

The 2008 financial crisis demonstrated clearly that countries with robust social protection systems suffered the least and recovered most quickly from its impact.

We must ensure that lessons are learned and that this crisis provides a watershed moment for health emergency preparedness and for investment in critical 21st century public services and the effective delivery of global public goods.

We have a framework for action — the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. We must keep our promises for people and planet.

The United Nations — and our global network of country offices — will support all governments to ensure that the global economy and the people we serve emerge stronger from this crisis.

That is the logic of the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals.

More than ever before, we need solidarity, hope and the political will to see this crisis through together.

Thank you.