

May 2020

### COVID-19 information note 3

## As Somalia races against time to limit community transmission of COVID-19, WHO helps ramp up testing capacity for diagnosis of the virus

As the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly escalates and Africa becomes the next hotspot, the WHO country office in Somalia has helped the country rapidly establish and scale up its testing capacity for COVID-19.

### Test, trace, track and treat: taming the outbreak

In March 2020, when the Somalia's first case of COVID-19 was laboratory-confirmed, the country had no capacity for testing and diagnosis of the virus. The WHO Somalia country office sent nasopharyngeal swabs from four returning travellers, all Somali citizen, to the Kenya Medical Research Institute in Nairobi for testing. This institute has an accredited Biosafety Level 2 laboratory that can test for viral and emerging pathogens, and is supported by WHO and the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On 16 March, WHO received the laboratory test results for these four samples, one of which tested positive for COVID-19. This case, which was associated with travel outside the country, was the first reported case of COVID-19 in Somalia. The Ministry of Health and Human Services of the Federal Government of Somalia officially confirmed this first COVID-19 case immediately after the test result was officially communicated by WHO to the Ministry.

The WHO country office continued to ship increasing numbers of samples collected from



“ It is a testing moment for the world to come together to save lives and fight a common threat to humanity. We thank our partner, the Italian Development Cooperation, for their generous contribution to establish three functioning laboratories for testing for COVID-19. We also thank the World Food Programme for air-lifting this machine and other supplies from Nairobi to different locations in Somalia, despite the lockdown and air travel suspension in and out of Somalia ”

**Dr Mamunur Rahman Malik**  
WHO Country Representative for Somalia

different parts of country to the Kenya Medical Research Institute and many of them tested positive. Given these results and to prevent community transmission of the disease, the country needed to rapidly develop its testing capacity for COVID-19 and have decentralized laboratory testing in order to quickly isolate and treat cases and trace close contacts, in line WHO's strategy to "test, trace, track and treat". To respond to this need, three laboratories with molecular testing capacity were rapidly established by WHO in April with financial support from the Italian Development Cooperation – one each in Mogadishu, Garowe and Hargeisa.

### Action for all: solidarity from all

Somalia is one of the most fragile and vulnerable settings of Africa, with weakened health systems as a result of protracted conflict, long-standing war and political instability. The

effort to scale up Somalia's capacity to deal with the virus reflects global action and the power of solidarity to work to defeat COVID-19. The Italian Development Cooperation provided the funds to buy the molecular testing machines for the three laboratories, the real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (rRT-PCR) assay which is regarded as the gold standard. The machines were air-lifted by the United Nations (UN) Humanitarian Air Services operated by the UN World Food Programme directly from Nairobi to Mogadishu, Garowe and Hargeisa. The WHO country office funded the establishment of these laboratories, which included ensuring biosafety practices, buying essential supplies, training laboratory staff and providing molecular diagnostic assays to start testing.

The UN World Food Programme, through the coordination of its Logistics Cluster and UNHAS, has been supporting health partners with air transport for essential medical supplies. Apart from airlifting the PRC machines from Nairobi to Mogadishu, Garowe and Hargeisa, the UN World Food Programme continues to airlift and deliver COVID-19 samples to key locations as part of solidarity with WHO. The UN World Food Programme has also been supporting the handling, storage, and transport of vital medical and hospital equipment on behalf of the Ministry of Health.

### Public health laboratory: foundation for resilient public health system

The public health laboratories play a critical role in surveillance, especially in case detection and case tracing. Diagnostic testing for COVID-19 is critical in order to track the virus, and delay and suppress its transmission. This is particularly important for Somalia as slowing virus transmission will reduce the burden on the fragile health



“ We won't stop until we can stop this virus. We are committed to working together to get the vital medical supplies to the front lines to tackle this virus on all fronts. We must stand up to save humanity. We need action from all and for all. ”

**César Arroyo**

Country Director and Representative of the World Food Programme in Somalia

systems in the country.

The virus was slow to reach the country compared with other parts of the world, but cases have increased rapidly every day in recent weeks and the virus continues to spread. Cases have also been reported and confirmed in remote areas. While WHO continues to work with local health authorities in Somalia to scale up the public health response to the ongoing transmission, the establishment of the three laboratories with molecular testing capability using rRT-PCR is part of the strategy to decentralize testing across the country. This approach will not only enhance testing but will ensure rapid identification of cases, the tracing and quarantining of contacts, and the isolation and treatment of patients as part of a systematic strategy for containment.

In this interconnected world, we are only as strong as the weakest health systems. The public health crisis the world is currently experiencing is not the first and will not be the last. While the crisis is on an unprecedented scale, recovery from it must lead to building a better and more resilient public health system in Somalia. The three decentralized public health laboratories with molecular testing capability are also an investment for the future to ensure a more resilient health system for the control of other pathogens that may emerge at some later time, including any new respiratory pathogens.

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Country Office in Mogadishu, Somalia

Correspondence: +252616695096;

Email: [emacosomwr@who.int](mailto:emacosomwr@who.int); [emacosomexr@who.int](mailto:emacosomexr@who.int)

URL: <http://www.emro.who.int/countries/somalia/index.html>



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