

WHO brings countries together to test collective pandemic response

4 April 2025 - Over the past two days, WHO convened more than 15 countries and over 20 regional health agencies, health emergency networks and other partners to test, for the first time, a new global coordination mechanism for health emergencies.

The two-day simulation, Exercise Polaris, tested WHO's Global Health Emergency Corps (GHEC), a framework designed to strengthen countries' emergency workforce, coordinate the deployment of surge teams and experts, and enhance collaboration between countries.

The exercise simulated an outbreak of a fictional virus spreading across the world.

Participating countries included Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ethiopia, Germany, Iraq, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mozambique, Nepal, Pakistan, Qatar, Somalia, Uganda and Ukraine, with additional countries as observers. Each country participated through its national health emergency coordination structure and worked under real-life conditions to share information, align policies and activate their response.

Regional and global health agencies and organizations, including Africa CDC, European CDC, IFRC, IOM, UNICEF and established emergency networks such as the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network, the Emergency Medical Teams initiative, Stand-by partners and the International Association of National Public Health Institutes, worked together to support country-led responses. More than 350 health emergency experts connected globally through this exercise.

"This exercise proves that when countries lead and partners connect, the world is better prepared," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "No country can face the next pandemic alone. Exercise Polaris shows that global cooperation is not only possible – it is essential."

Throughout the simulation, countries led their own response efforts while engaging with WHO for coordination, technical guidance and emergency support. The exercise provided a rare opportunity for governments to test preparedness in a realistic environment, one where trust and mutual accountability were as critical as speed and capacity.

"The exercise sought to put into practice the procedures for inter-agency response to international health threats. Efficient coordination and interoperability processes are key to guaranteeing timely interventions in health emergencies," said Dr Mariela Marín, Vice Minister of Health of Costa Rica, thanking the Pan American Health Organization for their support and the members of the National Risk Management System for their engagement.

"Polaris demonstrated the critical importance of cultivating trust before a crisis occurs," said Dr Soha Albayat from Qatar. "The foundation of our collaborative efforts is significantly stronger than in years past. We've moved beyond reactive measures, and are now proactively anticipating, aligning, and coordinating our cross-border emergency response plans."

"The Global Health Emergency Corps has evolved into a powerful platform, building on practice, trust and connection," said Dr Mike Ryan, Executive Director of WHO's Health Emergencies Programme. "Exercise Polaris showed what is possible when countries operate with urgency and unity supported by well-connected partners. It is a strong signal that we are collectively more ready than we were."

At a time when multilateralism is under pressure and preparedness is often framed through a national lens, Exercise Polaris reaffirmed that health is a global issue. tes with the STANDARD G6PD Analyzer, a hand-held device, delivering results in a few minutes.

Available from: <https://www.who.int/news/item/04-04-2025-who-brings-countries-together-to-test-collective-pandemic-response>