Pandemic may take two years to end, says WHO

CONRAD DUNCAN

The head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) has said he hopes the coronavirus crisis can be ended in less than two years. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO’s director general, noted yesterday that the Spanish flu pandemic which began in 1918 took two years to end.

“Our situation now with more technology, of course with more [connectivity] ... the virus has a better chance of spreading, it can move fast,” Mr Tedros said. “At the same time we have the technology and knowledge to stop it.”

More than 22.81 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 have been reported around the world and 793,382 have died from the virus, according to a Reuters tally.

At the WHO’s media briefing yesterday, Mr Tedros also warned that countries needed to continue to suppress Covid-19 transmission until a vaccine or treatment is found.

“No country can just ride this out until we have a vaccine,” the health chief said. “A vaccine will be a vital tool, and we hope that we will have one as soon as possible.

“But there’s no guarantee that we will, and even if we do have a vaccine, it won’t end the pandemic on its own.”

He added: “We must all learn to control and manage this virus using the tools we have now, and to make the adjustments to our daily lives that are needed to keep ourselves and each other safe.”

His comments came amid growing optimism about the possibility of having a safe and effective coronavirus vaccine by the end of this year.

On Thursday, French president Emmanuel Macron said a vaccine for Covid-19 could be ready “in the coming months” as he spoke at a joint press conference with German chancellor Angela Merkel.

Mr Macron said there had been improvements in European cooperation on the issue of vaccines to ensure there would be capacity to produce and deliver them to people when they become available.

Russia claimed earlier this month that it had approved the first safe and effective vaccine against coronavirus but experts said the candidate had not passed sufficient tests to justify its use.
Scientists have also warned that a partially effective vaccine could encourage the coronavirus to mutate, potentially making the pandemic worse.

“Less than complete protection could provide a selection pressure that drives the virus to evade what antibody there is, creating strains that then evade all vaccine responses,” Ian Jones, a virology professor at Reading University, said.

“In that sense, a poor vaccine is worse than no vaccine.”