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country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva



Geneva Telegram

**Weekly overview of developments in multilateral Geneva on COVID-19
(20 March - 26 March)**

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The „Geneva Telegram“ analyses current developments in the multilateral organizations in Geneva relative to current events. During these weeks, it focuses on developments in the Geneva-based organizations related to COVID-19. The pandemic does not only have a health dimension but also substantial consequences for the future of the global economy, world trade, work, flight and migration, the humanitarian sector and human rights. It also affects the multilateral system as a whole.

In the last seven days, a noticeable feature was the repeated call for global solidarity made by various organisations. The most concrete example this week was the presentation of a global aid package of up to two billion US dollars. Multilateral Geneva is increasingly indicating that it expects economic and social upheaval in connection with the virus.

WHO: "Fight like hell" - a focus on preparing vulnerable countries

At the G20 Summit, the World Health Organizations' (WHO) Director General, Tedros Ghebreyesus, repeated his dramatic call of recent days ("Fight like hell") and appealed for intensified production of the necessary protective equipment. In advance of the summit, Tedros had asked participants to support vulnerable states - not only in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also in low- and medium-countries incomes generally. As before, the WHO is calling attention to the regions of South- and South-East Asia, which up to now were less affected. On 24 March Michael Ryan, Executive Director of the Health Emergencies programme, recommended "aggressive" measures for India; the future course of the pandemic would depend on them. We can note the reaction by India's government¹, who introduced restrictive measures that would apply for 21 days.

At the same time, the WHO is encouraging the international community to use the newly created window of opportunity in order to carry out a series of urgent measures. These include recruiting and training health personnel; intensifying test capacities to capture each and every suspected case; creating accommodation in which to isolate patients; and pooling resources to fight the virus. The high rate of deaths in countries with weak health systems is of concern to the WHO.

The organisation avoids expressing opinions on lockdown measures and school closures: every phase, they say, requires a different package of measures. Physical distancing and a defensive approach are not enough, it says, but should be part of a larger package of measures that includes intensive testing, tracking of contacts, isolation and treatment ("the offensive approach"). They continue by stating that a lockdown is difficult to maintain over long periods, not only because of the psychological effects², but also due to the social and economic effects. We should endeavour to break the vicious cycle of "lockdown-outbreak-lockdown": affected countries must move from a purely defensive to an offensive approach. The dilemma is that many countries lack the funds and the necessary protective equipment for an offensive approach: representatives of the WHO nonetheless admit that there are problems in all areas

¹ More information is available [here](#).

² The WHO has many times highlighted the consequences for the mental well-being of health personnel and the population in general.

of the supply chains, and in some cases even raw materials are in short supply. A total of 26 million health workers are in need of relevant equipment. The most severe criticism concerns export restrictions on protective equipment.

On Monday, Tedros warned against the use of untested medicines in the treatment of patients. This might do more harm than good and lead to a lack of medicines that are vital in the treatment of other illnesses. In view of these circumstances, the WHO created a study named "Solidarity" in order to acquire robust and high-quality evidence of the efficacy of four medications and their combinations in a replicable clinical study.

On 23 March, the World Health Organisation together with FIFA launched a campaign on the correct behaviour in fighting the pandemic and on observing the WHO's "Five-step approach".³ Current and former top footballers are involved in the campaign, including Germany's Miroslav Klose, Philipp Lahm and Célia Šašić.

Chancellor Merkel's address a week earlier was also praised within the WHO, not least by Director General Tedros.

Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the WHO marked World Tuberculosis Day, saying that not enough progress had been made. In parallel, the WHO published new guidelines on the prevention of the disease,⁴ which is causing around 4,000 deaths every day.

Other health organisations are engaged in the fight against COVID-19, too

While the work of the WHO draws most attention, other health organisations in Geneva are active in combating the virus. The WHO is working closely with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, GAVI. The Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria supports 11 countries in their response to COVID-19: Belarus, Eritrea, Georgia, India, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Malawi, Malaysia, the Republic of Moldavia, Myanmar, and Rwanda.

An extensive humanitarian aid package – risks in water and sanitation

Increasingly, regions that already were in a precarious situation and in need of humanitarian aid are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Appeals launched last week by various UN organisations are not about to decline in number. On 24 March, several UN organisations united forces to form the "COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan", a global aid package of 2 billion US dollars.⁵ It was developed with the assistance of the International Red Cross and relevant NGOs. The package aims to support the following measures: the supply of important technical and medical materiel for fighting the virus and treating sufferers, the installation of hand-washing facilities, the implementation of information campaigns, and the creation of air bridges and hubs in order to bring about the fastest transfer of humanitarian materiel and personnel possible. When presenting the plan, the head of the Office of the United Nations for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Mark Lowcock, the UN Secretary General Guterres, Tedros (WHO) and UNICEF chief Henrietta Fore, emphasise the fact that supporting particularly vulnerable countries was in the interests of all countries: If these countries were to be the scene of a humanitarian catastrophe, it could lead to a resurgence of the epidemic in other regions, too.⁶ Fore made a connection between vigilance in this context and the possible consequences of the epidemic for children (including through the closure of schools, and an increase in child labour and abuse) as well as with the lack of clean water in many countries – an important factor in containing the pandemic. The UN Water report published on 22 March stated that 2.2 billion people do not have access to clean drinking water, and 4.2 billion lack access to safe sanitation.⁷

Guterres called for a global ceasefire on 23 March. Since then, rebels in Cameroon and the Philippines have paid heed. The UN Special Envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, demanded a complete, immediate and country-wide ceasefire in Syria based on UN Resolution 2254. In the past week, the first official case of coronavirus was announced in Syria. According to Pedersen, the Syrian population is particularly vulnerable: health centres have

³ The five-step-approach can be found [here](#).

⁴ The guidelines can be found [here](#).

⁵ The Humanitarian Response Plan can be found [here](#).

⁶ A German-language version of the appeal is [here](#).

⁷ The report can be found [here](#).

been destroyed, he said, and there is little medical equipment and few personnel. A total of 13 million people are reliant on humanitarian aid. Full and lasting access to humanitarian organisations is therefore essential across all parts of the country. One of the consequences of the ongoing fighting is the disruption in water supplies from the Allouk reservoir in the north-east Syria, which supplies almost half a million people.

Several voices proclaimed the need to protect people in prisons and closed facilities (including refugee camps). The UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, said that in many countries, prisons were full to capacity and were thus not in a position to observe COVID-19 protective measures. Apparently, an increase in deaths was already being recorded. Bachelet and other groups of experts are issuing reminders of the universality of human rights: protective measures against COVID-19 should be available to all population groups without discrimination.

Bachelet also demanded that an exception be made in the case of countries that are particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis to effect a humanitarian easing of sanctions – including for the delivery of essential medical equipment; this applied in particular to Iran. Some sanctions could also be affecting medical efforts in countries like Cuba, North Korea, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. This would be particularly dreadful in view of the weak health systems of the majority of these countries. In return, Bachelet requires transparency and the readiness of these countries to accept humanitarian aid and to care for the most vulnerable parts of the population.

The backdrop here is the fact that the WHO evidently entertains doubts about the number of cases reported by the countries in question. Some international observers in Geneva are informally expressing doubts, especially with respect to the numbers of cases and deaths reported by autocratic countries; they assume that the actual figures are several times higher.

Various requests to help revive the economy and trade

Figures from organisations in Geneva are already surpassing the sober prognosis made at the beginning of the month. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) assumes a decline of between 30-40% in foreign and direct investments in 2020⁸. The airlines' umbrella organisation IATA, also headquartered in Geneva, is talking about losses in passenger revenues of 252 billion US-dollars and is asking for 200 billion in subsidies. Guy Ryder, Director General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), estimates that the prognosis issued last week of up to 25 million unemployed is probably understated and demands targeted measures for employees that are particularly affected, including temporary workers, freelancers and other workers on limited contracts.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) called on all countries not to hinder the free movement of goods⁹. State action at borders, to a great extent uncoordinated, was causing excessive delays at borders and leading to difficulties in maintaining supply chains. In the medium term, this could lead to problems in the supply of medical goods as well as food. Exaggerated restrictions on goods traffic could worsen the economic and social shock caused by COVID-19; it was necessary that existing systems for exchanging electronic data be actively used.

Ricardo Azevêdo, Director General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), drew an alarming picture in speaking of the consequences for the economy: they could be worse than the effects of the latest financial crisis. A WTO report will appear only in the coming weeks. At all events, the outlook points towards a sharp decline in world trade. Governments were to be congratulated for their measures up to now, but these should be coordinated: Azevêdo asked that news of trade restrictions imposed be communicated.

Effective management of the crisis would depend on transparency. The WTO is therefore keen to contribute to the flow of information about the trade policy consequences of the crisis and to improve the coordination of member states' responses. Azevêdo said that no country, be it ever so great and well developed, could afford to act in

⁸ More information from UNCTAD is available [here](#).

⁹ UNECE provides an Observatory on border crossings status due to COVID-19 which can be found [here](#).

a self-sufficient manner: trade would be the impetus for a faster and stronger economic recovery for all sides.

Some Geneva-based organisations reiterate demands that the world economy be rebuilt: these demands include calls for a basic income, without conditions – and free public services. The crisis, it is said, is an opportunity to address the 'dogma of endless growth' and to rethink consumer behaviour.

Comment

Economic and socio-political challenges are increasingly at the centre of concerns for Geneva's organisations. It is quite clear that several things are needed: solidarity, a (no doubt) exceptional feat of strength, and non-bureaucratic help for employees and companies who would never, under normal circumstances, have succumbed. In Geneva as in Berlin and Brussels (partly well-known) economic and trade policy demands are brought into the discussion that could create long-term 'path dependencies' and false incentives beyond the crisis (such as the demand for an unconditional basic income). All demands suggesting that globalisation be dismantled should be met with caution – beyond the justified appeals to abide by the 2030 agenda for sustainable development; current prognoses on the economic consequences of the lockdown highlight the great extent to which the prosperity achieved over recent decades is based on globalisation.

Independently of inspecting and possibly adjusting supply chains, WTO warnings should be specially heeded, within the many demands currently being voiced. Protectionism and a failure to reinforce rules-based trade will make economic recovery from the crisis extremely difficult.

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