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country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva



Geneva Telegram

**Weekly overview of developments in multilateral Geneva on COVID-19
(28 May - 11 June)**

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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.

Whilst the EU's focus has moved towards the easing of restrictive measures and the rebooting of the economy, processes in the multilateral organisations in Geneva remind people that the pandemic has lost none of its dangers nor its devastating effect on health, economy and society.

A mixture of bad news and glimmers of hope

Notification of withdrawal of the US from the WHO

In this period, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has seen hopeful progress – with bad news following close on its heels.

In the latter category, Donald Trump issued a statement on 29 May to the effect that the US wanted to end relations with the WHO, asserting that "the World Health Organisation is a puppet of China". The reason for this: the WHO failed to carry out the reforms demanded by Trump – consequently, funds would be diverted towards other global public health needs. The step came not 11 days after Trump's urgent reminder – announced by the World Health Assembly (WHA) somewhat as an aside – in which he gave the WHO a 30-day deadline for carrying out reforms, which were not given in detail. It is not clear whether the US president can in fact exit the WHO without the agreement of Congress.

Before leaving, there would be a requirement for all outstanding contributions to the authorities to be paid. The president's message was criticised by leading EU politicians and by many health experts in the US: withdrawal would be counter-productive for the aims of the US. Within the WHO, the step is being seen as an election manoeuvre by Trump. There was no open criticism on the part of the WHO – true to its maxim that member states would not be publicly rebuked. Rather, WHO Director General Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus praised the "immense" and "generous" contribution that the US makes to global health, and expressed the hope that the cooperation of many years would continue. The WHO had learned about the US decision from the media; no formal request to withdraw has yet been filed. Observers report that background talks are taking place between the US representation in Geneva and the WHO on how the withdrawal might still be avoided.

The new "C-TAP" initiative

Trump's announcement coincided with the launch of the WHO's COVID-19 "Technology Access Pool" (C-TAP), initiated by Costa Rica's President Carlos Alvarado. Its aim is to make vaccines, tests, treatments and other health-related technologies for

fighting COVID-19 accessible worldwide. It will provide direct support for 37 countries¹.

Countries undertake to give free access to patents and data on COVID-19 treatments and vaccines as “global public goods”. The initiative is being supported mainly by countries in the southern hemisphere, but also by four EU countries and Norway. However, numerous key players are not involved, like the US, which has invested billions in research into a vaccine for COVID-19. Also absent: the United Kingdom, Switzerland and other important European Union countries where many of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world are based, such as France, Germany and Italy. The chiefs of state and government leaders of the three latter countries recently demanded that any COVID-19 vaccine be treated as a “global public good”. Yet some of the specific aspects of the initiative go too far, in their opinion. Thus far, China and India have also failed to lend their support. At the same time the WHO and co-sponsor countries asked donors, researchers, industry and civilians to join the initiative and to support it. “The appeal goes far beyond the area patents' application and basically asks that everything of importance be shared that allows more companies to produce products that have proven effective against COVID-19”, said a spokesperson for Unitaid, the founder of the patent pool for medications and one of the WHO's most important partners in the initiative. A reaction from the pharmaceuticals industry was not forthcoming, however. The demands of the appeal were seen as critical by those pressing for a global franchise, including the relinquishment of intellectual property rights.

C-TAP is a sister initiative of “Accelerator Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT)” announced by the WHO and the European Commission. It has raised over 7.4 billion Euro for the development and distribution of medicines and vaccines.

WHO-foundation created

A new, legally separate WHO-foundation was created at the same time as Trump's withdrawal announcement (May 27)². It will make accessible the contributions of the broader public, individual major donors and enterprise partners of the WHO in

order to support global needs in the realm of public health. Its aim is to broaden the donor base of the WHO and work towards more sustainable and predictable funding. After more than two years' preparation, it will be headed by Thomas Zeltner, former Swiss health minister and Director General of the Swiss health authority.

A rising number of new infections

Meanwhile, nearly seven million cases of COVID-19 and almost 400,000 deaths have been reported to the WHO. Whilst the situation in Europe has improved, it has continued to worsen around the world. On 7 June over 136,000 cases were announced, the highest figure to be reported in a single day. Almost 75% of these cases were reported in North America, South America and South Asia. Tedros warned accordingly that after six months of the pandemic, it was not the right time for any country to “take the foot off the pedal”. In most countries on the African continent, a rise in numbers of new COVID-19 cases had been seen; this was also true for parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Yet, in several countries, positive developments were evident. In those countries, the worst threat is complacency, said Tedros. The WHO continues to press for active monitoring of numbers of cases in order to ensure that the virus does not spread again, particularly in view of the fact that mass gatherings were again taking place in some countries.

Given the news that millions of people are taking to the streets to protest against racism, the WHO emphasises that it is vital that distancing and hygiene rules be observed by those taking part³.

Recommendations for wearing masks

Meanwhile, on 5 June, the WHO announced in a separate press conference updated guidelines for the use of masks⁴ to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 in public and in the healthcare sector. In the updated guidelines the WHO advised governments in areas with widespread COVID-19 transmission to insist on the use of non-medical masks on public transport, in businesses and other places where physical distancing is difficult. For the first time, the WHO also published instructions

¹ Key elements of the initiative and the list of 37 supporting countries can be found [here](#).

² More information is available [here](#).

³ Recommended procedures at mass gatherings can be downloaded [here](#).

⁴ You can find questions and answers on masks and COVID-19 [here](#). For information on the [use](#) of masks visit [this link](#).

for making fabric masks for general use. These would provide reasonable protection against onward transmission of the virus. However, the WHO continues to say that masks should be part of a comprehensive strategy of measures to suppress transmission and save lives. The use of a mask is not in itself enough to provide adequate protection against COVID-19, they say. Physical distancing from other people of at least one metre was also needed, as well as frequent hand washing and avoiding touching one's face or mask. More comprehensive measures in the public health area, including following up contacts ('test and trace'), quarantine and treatment of cases as well as isolation of suspected cases cannot be abandoned.

Global vaccine summit

The global vaccine summit organised by Great Britain on 4 June yielded 8.8 billion US dollars from 32 donor regions and 12 foundations, companies or organisations, clearly exceeding the goal of 7.4 billion US dollars. The summit is the third conference of donors for the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, GAVI and follows the successful Berlin Summit in January 2015. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, world heads of state and government are showing remarkable commitment to fair vaccination campaigns and global health security. Besides promoting the routine vaccination of hundreds of millions of children in lower-income countries against infections like measles, polio and diphtheria, the new support scheme should also serve to help lower income countries overcome the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic through stronger health systems and the distribution of vaccines.

Human rights

After the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council in mid-March had to be suspended because of COVID-19, its resumption – in physical and virtual forms – has been set for 15 June and will continue until 22 June, to tie in with the 44th session of the Council. In past weeks Special Procedures had published up to 90 statements and the Council it-

self had held three virtual sittings. Recently a declaration on COVID-19⁵ was passed, which commends the comprehensive guidelines⁶ of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, and charges her with investigating the effects of the pandemic on Human Rights worldwide. Again with a view to current worldwide protests against racism, around 30 experts from the Human Rights Council have demanded systemic reforms and justice; COVID-19 has made clearer the way in which people of African descent are disproportionately affected. Since ethnic minorities in Brazil, France and Great Britain as well as in the US have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, Bachelet challenged governments to gather data according to ethnic affiliation and gender and to enter into dialogue with these groups.

Humanitarian affairs – Yemen at the edge of the cliff

"Is the world prepared to watch Yemen fall off the cliff?", asked Mark Lowcock, Director General of the Office of the United Nations for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at this year's donor conference for Yemen on 2 June, which traditionally takes place in Geneva and this year for the first time met virtually — at the invitation of the UN and Saudi Arabia(!). For years Yemen has been the scene of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world; 24 million people, roughly 80% of the population, are dependent on life-saving assistance. The current coronavirus outbreak only adds to the internationalised civil war raging since 2015, to outbreaks of cholera, malaria, dengue fever, mass expulsions and devastating floods. With a health system in breakdown and its people suffering from illnesses, death rates in the country are already amongst the highest in the world. Over 30 of 41 UN-sponsored programmes were threatened with closure, according to Lowcock. Never before had so little money been available so late in the year, he said. To meet an actual need of 2.41 billion US dollars by the end of the year (at the very least 2.3 billion, the same amount as last year), in the end only 1.35 billion US dollars were pledged, of which Saudi Arabia contributed over half, followed by the US, Great Britain and Germany⁷.

⁵ The full presidential statement can be found [here](#).

⁶ The guidelines of the UN High Commissioner can be found [here](#).

⁷ An overview of pledges can be found [here](#).

Saudi Arabia's role as coordinator of the conference and active participant in a war that has involved crimes against humanity and war crimes – including starvation and bombings of civil infrastructure, such as hospitals.⁸ – attracted criticism before the conference. OCHA defended this, saying that the Kingdom was the largest humanitarian donor for Yemen.

A new economic beginning in Davos?

Recently the World Economic Forum (WEF) announced a twin summit on the topic of "The Great Reset" for January 2021, i.e., on the 51st annual meeting of the forum in Davos. The intention was for personal and virtual dialogues and exchanges to take place between leading politicians and economists, with representatives of the public and young people in particular among the audience. The format should be much freer. The discussion will cover the formulation of new economic and social systems that could pave the way for a more just, more sustainable and more resilient future. A new social contract was required, at the centre of which would be human dignity and social justice. In advance of the meeting, initial virtual dialogues have already been planned.

Trade – concern for sustainability and food supply chains

Following the announcement that Director General Roberto Azevêdo would resign on 31 August, the WTO saw a few turbulent weeks.⁹ Whilst the search for a successor takes up resources, consideration is also given to the economic "reset" after the crisis. One instrument to strengthen sustainability in the area of trade was a possible agreement on the liberalisation of trade in environmental goods and services. Many member states, including Germany are also pressing for a continuation of the discussion on the rules for electronic trade, whose significance has become especially evident as a result of the crisis.

The WTO is still monitoring measures that limit trade in connection with the COVID-19 crisis. On 29 May, 55 countries supported a call by Canada to promote open trade in agricultural products in order to avoid food security being affected by price fluctuations and shortages of food. Those who back the plan undertake to uphold food supply chains and to distance themselves from export limitations and other barriers to trade. In addition, the aim would be to ensure that measures are targeted, time-limited, proportionate and transparent.

Besides the EU, adherents to the plan are the US, Australia, several Latin American countries and Taiwan – not, however, China. The signatory countries account for 67% of the global exports of agricultural products.

By 5 June, members had notified the WTO of 151 trade measures. Most are concerned either with technical barriers to trade (60), health or phytosanitary measures (40) or quantitative trade restrictions (27). Few were measures to make trade easier.¹⁰

A paper published by the WTO on 10 June warns that the least developed countries (LDC) may be amongst those most severely affected economically by the pandemic. One reason: these countries are heavily dependent on exports from countries that themselves have been badly hit by COVID-19.

ILO: testing and tracing helps maintain employment levels

At the end of May, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) published figures which illustrate the significant effects of the pandemic on global employment rates and on the world of work.¹¹ The number of working hours in the second quarter of 2020 fell by 10.7% in comparison to the fourth quarter of 2019 (equating to 305 million jobs).

ILO regions that are particularly affected are North America (17%) and southern Europe (17.3%), but

⁸ The report of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen can be found [here](#).

⁹ More background information can be found in the latest [Geneva Barometer](#) of KAS Geneva.

¹⁰ A full list can be downloaded [here](#).

¹¹ The full ILO report can be found [here](#).

in most other regions too, declines of between 8-14% have been seen. Young people are disproportionately affected (the ILO has spoken of a “lock-down generation”), since they are more often to be found among informal sector employees. Important: the ILO is a strong advocate of the “Test and trace”-measure proclaimed some months ago by the WHO, which involves increasing the number of tests and tracing contacts of people whose tests were positive. ILO estimates suggest that this strategy can reduce the number of lost work hours by up to 50%.

An opportunity for a new approach to migrants and refugees?

On the basis of numerous recommendations from organisations in Geneva like the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), UN Secretary General Guterres presented new guidelines.¹² on refugees and migration. He explained that COVID-19 represents an opportunity for societies to rethink their approach to migrants and refugees.

Moreover, the previous system of family remittances was at a turning point. Last year alone, 554 billion US dollars.¹³ were transferred to 800 million people in over 125 low- and middle-income countries. If the expected 20% decline in transfers (110 billion US dollars) were to materialise due to COVID-19, some ten million people could fall below the poverty threshold. In solidarity with IOM, Switzerland and Great Britain were in favour of lower transaction costs.¹⁴

Comment

In the struggle against the pandemic, but also in efforts to revitalise economies, international organisations like the WHO and the WTO can play a decisive role if they are given room for manoeuvre. Not least, the announcement of withdrawal coming from the largest contributor to the WHO is a reminder of how urgent the question of the organisation's sustainable funding and its larger independence from geopolitical barometers or the

moods of individual heads of state is. This should also form a central tenet when it comes to evaluating reactions to the crisis. It would be a dangerous step, in view of crises that will occur in the future, to downgrade international organisations to the status of Think Tanks by blockading them or reducing their finances.

¹² The Guidelines can be downloaded [here](#).

¹³ More than the sum of foreign direct investment or official development aid.

¹⁴ Other supporters of the [appeal](#) include Egypt, Ecuador, El Salvador, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan.

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