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country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva

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Geneva Telegram

**Weekly overview of developments in multilateral Geneva on COVID-19
(30 April - 13 May)**

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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.

Various multilateral initiatives to combat the pandemic and its consequences are beginning to bear fruit. Yet it is also becoming clear that more commitment is needed in political, humanitarian and financial spheres. The World Health Assembly (WHA) held on 18-19 May may portend a more politicised discussion than usual.

The WHO – a strong emphasis on global initiatives, uncertainties in respect of WHA

The EU Commission organised a conference of international donors on 4 May as part of the global initiative.¹ launched by the WHO and other partners to speed up the development, production and fair distribution of vaccines, diagnostics and therapies for COVID-19. To date, 46 states² and international donors have pledged 7.4 billion Euro towards the target of 7.5 billion Euro. The opportunity of making a pledge is open to all countries and institutions up to the end of May.

Alongside this financial support, all participating countries are assuring the ability of everyone worldwide to be able to benefit from the results of the scheme. The next big challenge will be the fair distribution of vaccines for COVID-19 as well as diagnostics and therapies. Above all, development and fair distribution are vital, since we must now accept the fact that we are going to have to live with the virus. During the WHO conference on 13

May, Mike Ryan said: “We may have a shot at eliminating this virus but that vaccine will have to be highly effective, it will have to be made available to everyone and it will have to be used.”

Despite generous pledges of money, the aid will cover only part of the necessary measures. The demand for protective equipment, oxygen and other medical supplies will continue to grow. To date, over 4 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported to the WHO. Even if figures in Western Europe begin to fall, more cases are being reported on a daily basis by some eastern European countries, many African countries, South-east Asia, the Near East and North and South America. The WHO has forecast funds for the “Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan” and stated that in respect of the 1.7 billion US dollars required up to the end of 2020 alone, there is a 1.3 billion shortfall.

Beyond that, the WHO signed a memorandum on 1 May with the European Investment Bank (EIB) which will concentrate above all on support for the already existing worldwide burden of disease and risk such as malaria, resistance to antibiotics and basic medical needs. As a result of COVID-19, these issues have not only been receding into the background, but the pandemic is also threatening to reverse the results so far achieved. Resistance to antibiotics is one of the most urgent health problems of today. Providing basic medical care

¹ COVID-19 ACT Accelerator ACT ('Access to COVID-19 Tools')

² Please find more information [here](#).

and resilient health systems has been the focus of international cooperation for many decades. It is during a pandemic that the need to support countries with weak health systems becomes most apparent. Initially, the programme will concentrate on investment in health infrastructure and personnel in ten countries in Africa and the Near East.

Exactly three months after the WHO announced a global health emergency on 30 January, the Emergency Committee met on 30 April under the International Health Regulations to assess the status of the pandemic and to advise the WHO. The Committee consists of independent international experts from all regions of the world, and is headed by Professor Didier Houssin. The main statement coming out of the meeting is the continued designation of the pandemic as a 'PHEIC', a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The Committee gave the WHO and member states over 20 recommendations. They include comprehensive support for fragile states and high risk countries and reducing potential disruptions to the food supply in these countries. Further recommendations relate to international air traffic, the interruption of which poses a risk to worldwide food supplies. The normalisation of international flights is a question of trust between states and requires strategic guidance. NB: Houssin also mentioned the necessity of revisiting recommendations for suitable travel measures, especially with a view to effects on the transmission of COVID-19 and taking into account the balance between uses and unintentional consequences. The WHO will furthermore pursue the animal origin of the virus with the help of international scientific missions, together with the World Organisation for Animal Health and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The Committee also calls on all member states to support the leadership role of the WHO. The next meeting is scheduled to take place in 90 days.

Over recent weeks several countries have begun to ease lockdown measures. Many countries have put strict measures in place to slow down rapid transmission and use the time thus gained to expand their capacities for testing, isolating and treating patients.

The WHO recommends a step-by-step easing of measures, not least because of socio-economic costs. Such an approach will not only save lives but also secure livelihoods. The United Nations has

published a framework directive on the socio-economic response to COVID-19, which includes a recovery roadmap for countries, so that the economy can be reset as quickly as possible. But health is the foremost concern³. A step-by-step easing is important in ensuring that it is possible, should a renewal of infections occur, to respond rapidly with the appropriate control measures. Easing should only take place if the epidemic is under control in the country in question and its health system is able to cope with a renewed rise in cases and can quickly and reliably implement tracking⁴. It is essential that enhanced rules for hygiene and distancing remain in place. In respect of the reopening of workplaces, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) and the WHO have published new guidelines⁵. These recommend, among other things, that the employer perform a specific risk evaluation for each employee.

The 73rd assembly of the World Health Assembly, (WHA) the highest decision-making body of the WHO – held for the first time as a virtual meeting on 18-19 May – was a taste of things to come. This time, the fight against COVID-19 will be in the foreground.

It will also be the occasion for re-elections and new elections to the Executive Council.

More technical matters will be addressed at the end of the year.

Discussions on a Resolution on COVID-19 handed to the EU and supported by Australia, New Zealand, Zambia and the United Kingdom, among others, were controversial. The desired deadline of Wednesday evening had to be postponed because the US was bothered by several formulations. Among other things, they felt that demands for general, rapid and equal access to vaccines went too far, as did the call for patents to be bundled. The text also mentions the fact that international patent rules may be overruled. The most recent status was the fairly ambitious version backed by the majority of states. Previously, 140 VIPs, including numerous former heads of state and government had spoken out in favour of free access to a vaccine.

The Resolution also tries to reinforce the signalling of unity on handling the pandemic and lending (political) support to the WHO. At the same time, it mentions the weaknesses of the framework order

³ The UN Framework on Socio-economic Response to COVID-19 can be found [here](#).

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

⁵ The guidelines can be downloaded [here](#).

for international pandemics. Furthermore, it foresees revision of the 2005 International Health Provisions and an independent review in the wake of the pandemic. This type of review is quite normal, and therefore does not come as a surprise.

The Resolution also asks that together with other organisations the WHO investigate the origin of the virus and the exact way in which transmission from animal to man occurred. Some passages of the Resolution include US demands.

The WHA is becoming very political – not least after the controversy about the role of the WHO in past weeks. One application by mostly small member states is explosive in its suggestion that Taiwan be allowed to attend the Health Assembly as an observer. This happened last in 2016 when the Kuomintang was still in charge of the government and Margret Chan was Director General of the WHO.

Human rights – not a luxury, post-crisis

After the first virtual meeting of the Human Rights Council with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, at the beginning of April, the Council held its first virtual meeting with members of the Special Procedures on the consequences of COVID-19. The special rapporteurs and independent experts had contributed significantly to the follow-up of measures worldwide and developed important tools for states to help them cope with the crisis, said Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger, the Austrian chairwoman of the Council⁶. Special attention was to be given to discrimination, structural inequalities and the misuse of emergency measures. Government representatives were expressly asked to be in closer contact with the special rapporteurs when implementing recommendations.

On World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, Bachelet expressed firm solidarity with all journalists who had disappeared, been arrested or been threatened in connection with their reporting on COVID-19. She said that in view of the current increase in conspiracy theories and the “tsunami of hate”, as UN Secretary General António Guterres phrased it, their work was more important than ever⁷.

Humanitarian financial needs rising; momentum for a global ceasefire is absent

Seven weeks ago saw the presentation of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) on fighting COVID-19 in the most endangered low and middle income countries. It comprises the requirements outlined by the WHO and other humanitarian UN organisations such as OCHA, IOM and UNHCR.

However, the amount originally suggested of 2 billion US dollars has already had to be revised upwards to 6.7 billion US dollars⁸. This was due to the inclusion of nine other countries and increasing uncertainty about food security. The plan now involves 63 countries. Whereas in Africa in particular, the peak of the pandemic is expected to occur only in three to six months' time, it looks as if the global recession and national measures to contain the effects of the virus might have more deadly effects than the virus itself: national economies are shrinking and export income, money transfers (which the World Bank estimates at 110 billion US dollars in 2020) and tourism are failing to materialise. At the current time, millions are losing their livelihoods and falling into a poverty trap – tinder with which the pandemic may explode, said Michael Ryan of the WHO. The threat of “hunger pandemics” in several countries, of conflicts and an increase in a wide variety of diseases was apparent. The development gains made over several decades are about to be lost. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, believes that this would lead to additional migration movements. The situation was in need of urgent attention at the highest level of security policy. The heads of agencies point in particular to the dwindling chances of a global ceasefire, which Guterres had called for on 23 March and 3 April⁹. In the meantime, armed groups are taking advantage of the diminished attention on conflicts and the disunity of the international community to regroup. This, according to the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR), can be seen in Syria and Myanmar.

⁶ All publications and guidelines as well as best practice recommendations are available on the [COVID-19 Homepage](#).

⁷ The [report](#) of the Special Rapporteur gives an overview of current developments

⁸ The updated GHRP is available [here](#).

⁹ Despite the initial quite surprising response of 16 armed groups, the UN Security Council did not feel able to underpin the Secretary General's appeal by making a decisive resolution. More information in the KAS country report [New York](#).

Trade – initiatives to prevent a global snowballing in protectionism

A major problem – and one that is partly hidden amidst the crisis – is export limitations on medical equipment and, increasingly, on food: these may induce a snowballing of protectionist measures and significantly hamper efforts to fight the pandemic in countries dependent on imports. This trend is being countered by several initiatives being launched now by WTO members. A declaration by New Zealand and Singapore, supported by five other members, proclaims an open markets policy. On Canada's initiative nearly 50 countries (this includes EU Member States) are undertaking not to endanger food supply chains. Switzerland and a further 41 countries also promised to lift restrictions on exports as soon as possible. Again, experts warned of a boomerang effect of protectionist measures in relation to medical equipment which could moreover lead to a decline in global production.

Digital trade is attracting more attention within the framework of the crisis. It is true that the opportunities of this sector have become clear, but so too have the vast differences between countries' ability to exploit them. At the same time, it is to be hoped that the experience gained from the crisis will encourage current WTO discussions on common rules for the area.

The social sphere – the ILO believes that two billion people are at risk

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is increasingly turning its attention to the many people employed in the informal sector, who are particularly vulnerable to economic as well as health risks due to the crisis. Two billion people are at risk of losing their livelihoods. Relative poverty could increase by up to 21% in developed countries and by up to 56% in low- and middle-income countries. Immediate aid must be allocated in a targeted and flexible way to workers and above all to small and medium-sized companies in the unregulated economic sphere. Besides social protective measures

and economic aid, the ILO suggests that access to health institutions be made easier and income support and food aid made available. In the long term, a transition into the formal economy should be facilitated.¹⁰.

Comment and outlook

The coming World Health Assembly may be subject to political positioning and controversy. For example, the polarity between the US and China might be an issue. A particularly difficult situation would arise if the admission of Taiwan as an observer were on the agenda. The discussion on Taiwan's observer status is not new. This time however, the renewed efforts of the 13 countries will be boosted by heavyweights like the US, Canada, New Zealand and Japan. In the end it is up to the WHO's General Committee to decide on the agenda. In past years, the Resolution came to a stalemate on this matter. It is not certain whether the same thing will happen this time. In view of Taiwan's early warnings about the virus and its successes combating the crisis, Taiwan's supporters are equipped with very strong arguments.

Some observers nonetheless fear that a disagreement would result in chaos in a WHA that has been truncated – to the detriment of the discussion of urgent matters.

Despite polarisation and politicisation, multilateral initiatives are possible. The notable commitment of the EU to the global initiative to fight the pandemic, through for instance the donor conference at the beginning of May, is one example. Efforts to counter protectionist practices by some medium-sized countries like Switzerland, Singapore, New Zealand and Canada within the framework of the WTO should be commended.

¹⁰ ILO analysis and recommendations can be found [here](#).

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