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country report

Multilateral Dialogue Geneva



Geneva Telegram

Weekly overview of developments in multilateral Geneva on COVID-19 (9 March - 12 March)

Olaf Wientzek

The WHO has classified the coronavirus illness COVID-19 as a pandemic - and is asking member states to take an aggressive and offensive approach in order to stop its spread. Other Geneva based organisations are publishing reports on the initial economic consequences of the crisis. In the meantime, high-profile multilateral meetings in Geneva have been cancelled.

The World Health Organisation designates COVID-19 a pandemic and asks for decisiveness rather than passivity

On March 11, the World Health Organisation (WHO) classified the coronavirus illness COVID-19 as a pandemic. There are no official criteria governing such a classification, nor are specific measures instigated from it, in contrast to a 'public health emergency of international concern' (PHEIC). The classification should be understood as an appeal by the WHO to governments, asking them to be much more decisive in preventing the spread of the coronavirus. At the same time, the WHO's Director General, Tedros Ghebreyesus, and Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director of the Health Emergencies programme, emphasised that this was a pandemic that could be controlled if decisive measures were taken. On March 12, 117 countries had been affected and the total number of cases was more than 125,000.¹

Once again, the WHO appealed to member states to act aggressively and offensively against the virus. At the same time there is a free admission that economic, public and health considerations need to be weighed up.

WHO leaders were very worried about the extent of inaction of many member states. Some examples: there was criticism of the low rate of testing, since more widespread monitoring of the spread

of the virus was needed; more measures to protect health workers and hospital workers needed to be put in place. Furthermore, many member states were too quick to abandon tracing of the chains of transmission; and there were also failures in isolating cases. On top of this, populations were often insufficiently or wrongly informed. There was much criticism about communication on the origin, risks of infection and the extent of the crisis. Experts in Geneva shared the WHO's criticisms. In view of the very diverse strategies being adopted by neighbouring states, some observers asked the WHO for clearer instructions as to when and for how long measures (such as school closures, travel restrictions, etc.) should be adopted. It is notable that the WHO continues in its policy of not naming those states whose reactions have been inadequate. On the other hand, Tedros praised China and the Republic of Korea for their handling of the crisis, which led to a reduction in numbers of cases and to a flattening of the infection curve.

Korea's drive-in-testing centres were mentioned as a positive example that enabled a much higher coverage of the population. Ryan did however make it clear that we were perhaps only in the first stages of the epidemic and that it was likely that the number of cases could grow rapidly. Now, even more emphasis was given to measures for treating older people and those with existing illnesses; it is possible that there will soon be separate recommendations on how to handle these population groups. For March 13, information

¹ A daily situation report may be downloaded [here](#).

from the WHO's clinical unit is planned. It will provide more clarity on the approach for patients with mild to severe symptoms, small children and pregnant women. Initial WHO reports suggest that the mortality rate for people aged over 80 is more than 20% and for those with heart conditions, 13%.

In general, the designation as a pandemic can be seen as both an urgent appeal to member states to handle the crisis in a more decisive way, and an acknowledgement that the spread and transmission of the disease are expanding faster than expected. The WHO hesitated for a long time before taking this step, no doubt because this is discursively the last possible level of escalation in motivating states to take more far-reaching measures. Notable: the WHO urgently warns of and advises against passivity: it is still possible to control the crisis; the focus of measures should be on containment and not on mitigation alone².

Some further observations: The WHO's legal, financial and political means (of exerting pressure) are limited. The organisation depends on the goodwill of member states.

Yet, the crisis brings something invaluable home to us, whether as a sober warning, as a call for support and education or for the need for coordination – not least because many countries tend towards short-sightedness or a national 'tunnel view'. It also prompted the declaration of an international health emergency at the end of January – a pivotal measure, which at the time was taken despite resistance from China.

It is notable that, following justified criticism of China for significant failures in fighting the virus, the country is now committing serious political, material and financial resources towards fighting the coronavirus in other countries, including through a generous financial contribution to the WHO. Additionally, it is said that scientific cooperation with China has improved; experts nonetheless believe that there continue to be problems in the exchange of information³. The praise accorded to China and Korea by the Director General

allows that specific measures are quite assessable. Yet, it is still not possible to determine which countries' strategies are most worthy of being emulated when dealing with the epidemic. An evaluation of this kind should take into account not only the reduction in (official) cases, but also the overall health, social, human rights-related and economic costs. For this reason, it is still too early to pass a concluding judgement.

First economic consequences emerge according to the WTO and UNCTAD

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) does not rule out the possibility of a deep recession as a result of the spread of the virus. At global level it could lead to a slowing down of growth by more than 2.5%.

In absolute figures, losses may differ from original projections by roughly one billion. Nor can more severe losses be ruled out, should there be a withdrawal of confidence by consumers or investors. UNCTAD furthermore predicts a significant reduction in foreign direct investment of between 5 and 15% for 2020⁴. The trade barometer issued by the WTO on 11 March already shows a noticeable slowing down of growth in the services sector. It is assumed that the full effect on trade in services will only become apparent in the upcoming months⁵.

High-profile multilateral meetings cancelled – Human Rights Council, IPU, WTO Ministerial Conference

In the meantime, COVID-19 is having an enormous impact on the core work of international organisations in Geneva. Some examples: On 10 March, after it was made known that there was a case of COVID-19 within the World Trade Organisation (WTO), all meetings in the WTO were immediately up to 20 March were cancelled immediately. On the evening of 12 March, after consultation with the Kazakh government, it was announced that the Ministerial Conference on 8 to 11 June in the Kazakh capital, Nur-Sultan, would not take place

² The WHO differentiates between four different scenarios and recommends responses accordingly, more [here](#).

³ Read an interview with the Geneva-based Co-Director of the Global Health Centre, Suerie Moon [here](#).

⁴ Please find more information [here](#).

⁵ Please find more information [here](#).

as planned. A meeting of the General Council will no doubt have to take place in order to decide on a date for the postponed conference, which in view of the many urgent dossiers is much anticipated. On 12 March the UN Human Rights Council suspended its 43rd session until further notice that was planned to take place until the end of March. Also the General Assembly of the Interparliamentary Union (IPU) scheduled for 16-20 April, attended by national Members of Parliament from around the world, was cancelled.

The “Geneva Telegram” is a briefing on current developments in Geneva’s multilateral organisations on a topical theme. In the coming weeks the impact of COVID-19 and the coronavirus will be the focus of these briefings.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Dr. Olaf Wientzek
Director of Multilateral Dialogue Geneva
European and International Cooperation
olaf.wientzek@kas.de



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