

Carnivals, cars, concerts: Swiss crack down on virus

February 28 2020, by Dario Thuburn



The Geneva auto show usually draws hundreds of thousands of visitors

Switzerland on Friday cancelled football matches, carnival celebrations, concerts and the Geneva International Motor Show in a drastic bid to stem the country's new coronavirus outbreak in its early stages.

The government announced it was suspending all public and private events with more than 1,000 participants until at least March 15, invoking emergency powers to do so.

The ban will even include a Catholic mass due to be held for the first time in 500 years on Saturday at the Geneva cathedral—a bastion of the Protestant Reformation.

In Zurich, concerts by US shock rock pioneer Alice Cooper and guitarist Carlos Santana also had to be cancelled.

And the World Anti-Doping Agency cancelled its annual symposium and related athlete session scheduled for March 17-19 in Lausanne.

Google confirmed that an employee in Zurich has been diagnosed with novel coronavirus but its office there remains open.

"They were in the Zurich office for a limited time, before they had any symptoms," a Google spokesperson said.

"We have taken, and will continue to take, all necessary precautionary measures, following the advice of public health officials, as we prioritise everyone's health and safety."

Meanwhile, popular carnival feasts in Basel and the town of Payerne in western Switzerland will not go ahead.

"Large-scale events involving more than 1,000 people are to be banned. The ban comes into immediate effect and will apply at least until 15 March," the government said in a statement, after the country registered 15 cases.

The government said that even for gatherings of fewer than 1,000 people

"event organisers must carry out a risk assessment in conjunction with the competent cantonal authorities to decide whether or not the event can be held".



Visitors to the Geneva auto show are to be reimbursed, but not exhibitors

'Tremendous loss'

The annual Geneva motor show, a major item on the global auto industry calendar, had been due to start on March 5 and organisers said that stands were nearly completed.

The show is usually attended by hundreds of thousands of people and planned to have some 160 exhibitors this year.

"We regret this situation, but the health of all participants is our and our exhibitors' top priority," said Maurice Turrettini, Chairman of the Foundation Board.

"This is a case of force majeure and a tremendous loss for the manufacturers who have invested massively in their presence in Geneva. However, we are convinced that they will understand this decision," he said.

Olivier Rihs, director of the auto show, said losses for organisers and exhibitors would be "in the millions".

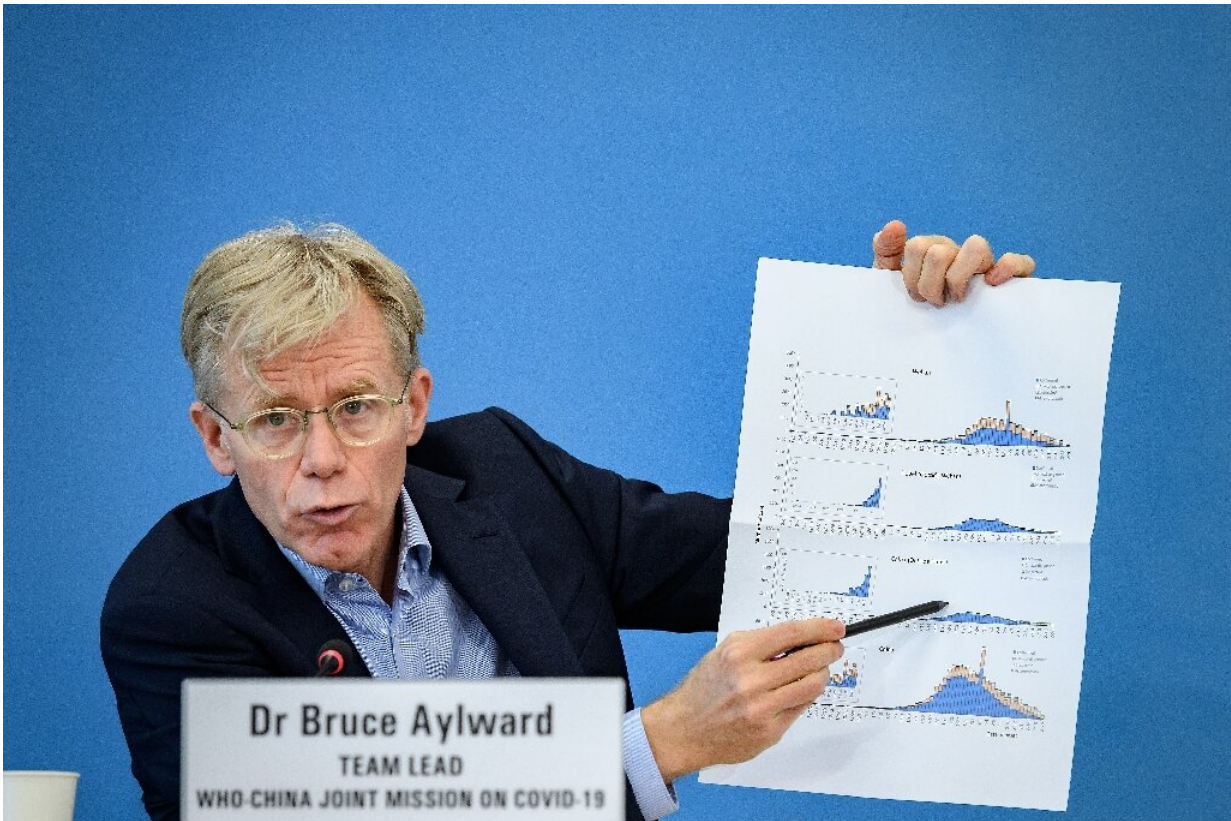
While visitors would get tickets reimbursed, he said exhibitors would not be refunded because the cancellation was an exceptional event caused by the government's decision.

Switzerland's famous watchmaking industry, which looks in particular to Asian buyers, also took a hit.

Baselworld, one of the world's biggest watch fairs, on Friday announced it was delaying until next year the planned show which was due to start on April 30.

'Expect an increase'

The government conceded in its statement that the ban would "have a significant impact on public life in Switzerland", but added that "it should prevent or delay the spread of the disease, thus reducing its momentum".



The World Health Organization, at the forefront of the global fight against COVID-19, has its headquarters in Geneva

The federal government said the scale of the outbreak allowed it to invoke special powers to order measures that are normally the responsibility of Switzerland's cantons.

Health Minister Alain Berset told reporters that similar measures had proved "effective" in other countries.

At a press conference, he said the number of cases in Switzerland was "not a surprise for us".

"We have to expect an increase in cases in the next few days," said Berset.

Switzerland's parliament also announced containment measures on Friday, cancelling public tours and banning MPs from receiving visitors until further notice.

Football postponed

The ban will also affect the Swiss sporting world.

The Swiss Football League said it was postponing all football matches over the weekend and warned some would have to be held in empty stadiums at a later date.

Switzerland's ice hockey league said games planned in the coming days would be held without the public and security guards would be posted outside stadiums to enforce the ban.

The United Nations, which has its second biggest office after New York in Geneva was also "assessing the situation" and "will follow the host-country position", according to spokeswoman Alessandra Vellucci.

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