

Pandemic accord talks heading for extra time

March 28 2024, by Robin MILLARD



The talks had been due to conclude Thursday.

Two years of talks aimed at striking a landmark global agreement on how to handle the next pandemics were headed for overtime Thursday, with a breakthrough still elusive.

Scarred by COVID-19, which shredded economies, overturned societies,

crippled health systems and killed millions, countries decided to craft an international accord on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

But with a hard deadline looming, some NGOs are warning that nations may agree to a weak text that does little to make the world safer than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Countries remain sharply at odds over what they are prepared to do for each other when the next pandemic strikes.

The current talks in Geneva were meant to be the ninth and final round of efforts to sculpt an international accord toward pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

The talks had been scheduled to conclude Thursday, but after 13-hour days of negotiations at the WHO headquarters, diplomats seemed set to agree only on another session of talks in April.

"An agreement for sure will not be reached today, so there will be extended negotiations," Yuanqiong Hu, from the medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF), told AFP.

One Western ambassador said a result by the May deadline was still possible but it would take a huge push and a major change to how the talks are being managed.

"The will is there, and I would even say the will is way more there than in any other process lately. It's more despair and frustration about not getting the process right," the diplomat told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Campaigners' fears

There has not yet been an official decision to extend the talks.

But member states are considering a proposal to pause and resume the current session between April 29 and May 10, according to a document seen by AFP.

However, some European countries are not prepared to go beyond May 3 in order to square any agreement with their respective capitals.

If more talks go ahead, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB) bureau conducting the talks would draw up a new draft text by April 18, with the hope of finally securing a consensus.

The current draft has ballooned from 30 pages to nearly 100. Some quarters are suggesting the INB boil it down to around 20.

"It's just too long. It's too detailed and too broad. Agreeing on 30 pages with such a level of uncertainty in such a short time is impossible," the Western diplomat said.

"It's about having the courage to be short. That is more ambitious than 100 pages of text with a lot of elements that don't make a real difference."

Campaign groups have warned that the pressure to secure a deal could lead to a watered-down text.

"There is of course concern that major divides in substantive issues... could leave us with the lowest common denominator," said Rachael Crockett of the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi).

K.M. Gopakumar, senior researcher with the Third World Network NGO, told AFP the new text would likely be a lighter document, which

could be added to at a later stage.

"It's a face-saving exercise as of now, because they are so desperate to finish everything by May—but they know realistically that's not possible," he said.

Rich and poor divide

The main issues of contention include shared access to emerging pathogens, better prevention and monitoring of disease outbreaks, reliable financing and transferring pandemic-fighting technology to poorer countries.

Ultimately, the talks have come to the crunch over the balance between richer and poorer nations.

Wealthier states want immediate information-sharing on new and emerging pathogens with pandemic potential, and strict—and pricy—preparedness obligations for all countries.

In return, developing countries are demanding water-tight language on technology transfer and equitable access to vaccines, tests and treatments.

"We really still hope to see a meaningful outcome that could change the status quo for the next pandemic," said Hu at MSF, saying the group was keen to see firm protection for health workers in an eventual agreement.

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