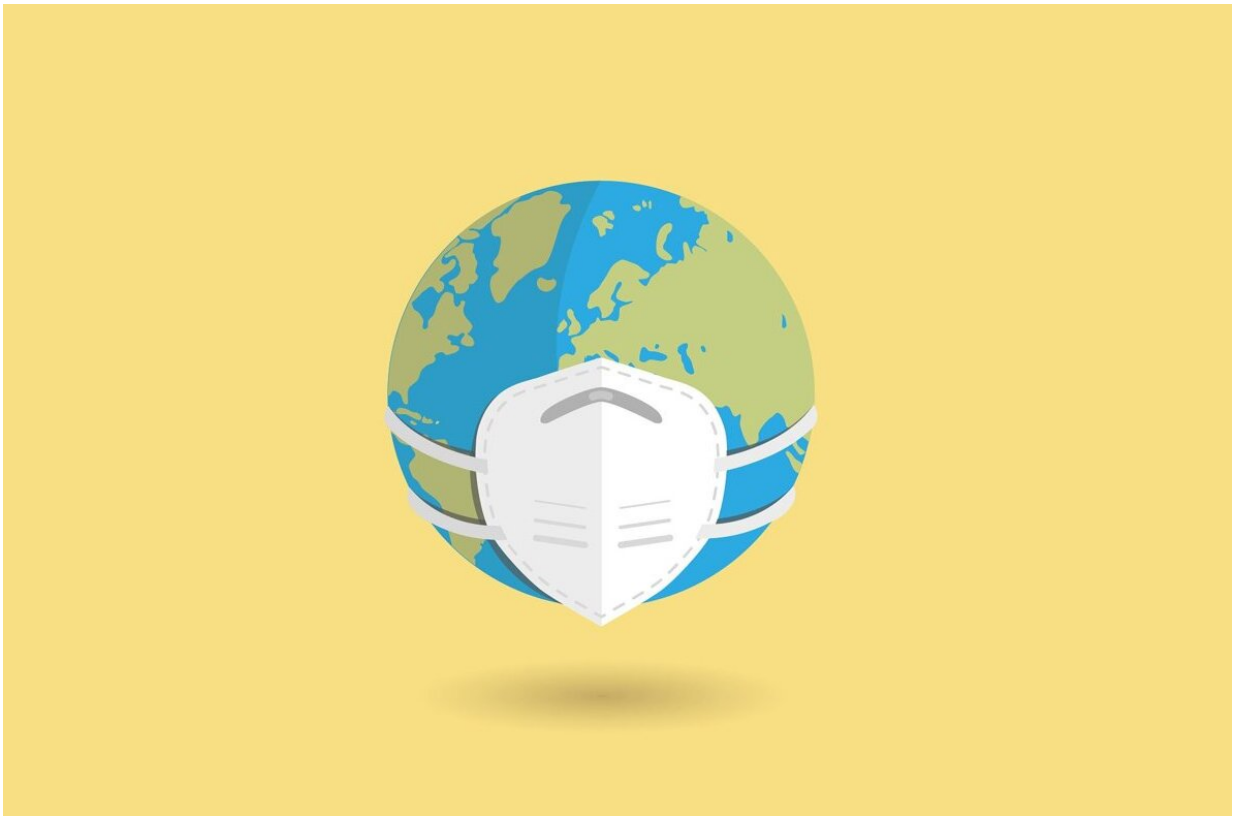


# 'Get this done', WHO chief urges pandemic accord talks

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The WHO chief on Friday begged countries negotiating a global agreement on handling future pandemics to "get this done", as they prepare for one final week of last-ditch talks.

World Health Organization member states have spent the last two years drafting an international accord on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

However, negotiations have gone into overtime—and even that is now running out.

Countries decided to return Monday to the WHO headquarters in Geneva for a fortnight of do-or-die extra talks, to try to break the deadlock over issues such as equitable access to vaccines, and how to share data on emerging pathogens.

Five days in, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus acknowledged that for some, the agreement is either too specific, not specific enough, too strong, or too weak.

But he urged naysayers not to block everyone else from coming to a deal.

"I have one simple request: please, get this done," Tedros said, in a direct appeal in the negotiating room.

"I appreciate that it has been a difficult and sometimes painful process, and that it's not over. I appreciate that all of you are making compromises you did not want to make.

"I recognize that there may be delegations who despite their good faith efforts, may not be in a position to join a consensus, but they have a choice: they can choose not to block consensus."

## **'Window of opportunity'**

Each of the draft agreement's 37 articles is being thrashed out in turn,

with country negotiators breaking off into working groups to try to figure out a consensus.

A first article was finalized on Friday evening: Article 18, a short provision on strengthening communication and public awareness.

"Countries are beginning to find each other," talks co-chair Precious Matsoso told a press conference soon afterwards.

"There are some articles that have progressed significantly. I think we will see more of those early next week."

But she warned: "The window of opportunity is closing."

The goal of the talks, which are lasting 12 hours a day and run until May 10, is to get an agreement ready for adoption at the WHO's annual assembly of member states, which starts on May 27.

In December 2021, the raw sting of COVID-19—which killed millions, shredded economies and crippled health systems—motivated countries to seek a binding framework of commitments aimed at preventing another such disaster.

But big differences quickly emerged on how to go about it.

The main disputes revolve around access and equity: access to pathogens detected within countries and to pandemic-fighting products such as vaccines produced from that knowledge; and equitable distribution of not only counter-pandemic tests, treatments and jabs but the means to produce them.

## **'Unanswered questions'**

Talks co-chair Roland Drice said, "Nothing is agreed yet—but nothing has been taken out yet.

"It's a very delicate construction that we're trying to set up and we have a success only if everybody is on board on everything—and that's the biggest challenge."

However, he voiced optimism that a deal could be reached by May 10.

"We are pretty confident that by the end of the week we will have a good result," the Dutch health diplomat insisted.

However, non-governmental organizations following the talks at the WHO presented a less upbeat picture.

"We have seen the optimism of the co-chairs; on the other side, we have heard skepticism from various countries," K. M. Gopakumar, senior researcher with the Third World Network, told AFP.

"There are still unanswered questions. On equitable access, it's still not offering anything concrete. On financing means? Silence," he said.

He urged developing countries to ask how much the text before them would move the unsatisfactory status quo on equal access to vaccines, tests and medicines.

Yuanqiong Hu, from Doctors Without Borders (MSF), said many of the topics that the medical charity is concerned about—such as health workers, research and development, and technology transfer to developing countries—were still in deep discussion in working groups.

"It seems some of the key contentious issues remain contentious," she told AFP.

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