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DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

Public health
Health security

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Health Security Committee 03/01/2023
Audio meeting on the situation of COVID-19 in China and related travel to/from the EU.
Flash Report

Chair: Director-General, European Commission, DG SANTE B2

On 3 January 2023, Ms Sandra Gallina, Director-General of DG SANTE, chaired a second meeting of the Health Security Committee on the situation of COVID-19 in China, following the one held on 29 December 2022. It aimed to discuss the implementation of a coordinated approach to the current COVID-19 situation and the Commission proposal for a draft “*Opinion of the Health Security Committee for a common EU approach in response to the COVID-19 situation in China*”. Professor Piot provided stressed notably the need to apply the principle of precaution in a situation where official figures from CN need to be taken with caution and recalled that CN still requires negative PCR tests for incoming travellers.

All Member States took the floor orally or in writing, as well as Norway and Iceland and the wide participation also included the Advisor to President von der Leyen, Professor Peter Piot, ECDC, other relevant Commission services (including HOME, JRC, MOVE, etc.), as well as WHO. The meeting was planned to take place ahead of the meeting of the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR), on Wednesday 4 January (15:00). At the ICPCR meeting, Member States will discuss the Union’s position with regards to the evolving COVID-19 situation and related travel to/from the EU.

Overall, a strong majority of Member States and EEA countries agreed with the proposal of the HSC Opinion, which serves to help prepare the Union’s health response in case of emergence of new variants. In addition, the need for transparent and open exchange of data and information regarding the SARS-CoV-2 virus was underlined as critical in order to ensure a science based approach to the situation.

The tour de table discussion demonstrated an overall convergence on the need for a common and coordinated EU approach to the situation that would serve to protect the health security of the Union and citizens. The proposal for an HSC Opinion includes measures related to a coordinated approach on personal hygiene and health measures for travellers (including recommended mask wearing on flights from China); wastewater monitoring for aircrafts; genomic surveillance at airports and increased monitoring and sequencing; increased EU vigilance on testing; increased COVID-19 vaccination

coverage, with focus on those with low coverage levels and vulnerable groups; a discussion on the need for pre-testing of passengers from China prior to departure. Based on comments received from Member States and the EEA countries, the Commission is updating the HSC Opinion on a coordinated approach to the current COVID-19 situation in order to seek final agreement with the HSC members.

In addition to the discussion on the HSC Opinion paper, epidemiological updates of the current COVID-19 situation were provided by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the World Health Organization. The HSC also exchanged information on health measures undertaken by concerned Member States, such as Spain, France and Italy. In addition, Commission services gave updates on the implementation of wastewater monitoring on airports/aircrafts. Further guidance on this point will be provided by the Commission and concerned Union agencies, again highlighting the benefits and need for a common approach.

Conclusions and the message from the Chair:

- All MS agreed on a coordinated approach to the changing COVID-19 situation in China and the implications of increased travel from China to Europe at the meeting of the Health Security Committee (HSC) today.
- The overwhelming majority of countries are in favour of pre-departure testing.
- The Commission prepared a draft HSC opinion to steer today's discussion, and this will now be revised and adopted based on the input of Member States in the meeting. A further discussion will take place in the IPCR tomorrow, taking into account the input of the HSC.
- The draft HSC opinion proposes measures on: personal hygiene and health measures for travellers (including recommended mask wearing on flights from China); wastewater monitoring for aircrafts; genomic surveillance at airports and increased monitoring and sequencing; increased EU vigilance on testing; increased COVID-19 vaccination coverage, with focus on those with low coverage levels and vulnerable groups; a discussion on the need for pre-testing of passengers from China prior to departure.
- These measures would need to be targeted at the most appropriate flights and airports and carried out in a coordinated way to ensure their effectiveness.
- The Commission will publish the Opinion once it is approved.