

US must aid Taiwan's WHO entry

Written by Peter Chen 陳彼得
Friday, 03 March 2017 07:52

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) this week confirmed Taiwan's first human fatality from the H7N9 avian flu virus. Earlier, a Chiayi poultry farm and a turkey farm in Tainan tested positive for a highly pathogenic avian flu virus strain. Poultry farms in Hualien and Yilan counties were confirmed to have infected birds as well.

The world is fortunate that Taiwan has superb animal health and infectious disease control talent, data collection, quarantine and treatment facilities. Taiwan remains far superior to China in disease control in general and the containment of avian flu in particular.

The Taiwanese-American community is proud of the effort Washington has made to cooperate with Taiwan in containing the spread of avian flu to the US.

It was this cooperative relationship that helped the US CDC stem the spread of SARS 14 years ago, unlike China, which for four months failed to report an outbreak of the extremely contagious disease, resulting in more than 7,000 cases and 648 deaths. Taiwan, though, acted quickly and provided valuable treatment information to the international health community.

Taiwan's SARS experience was bitter. Although its health infrastructure was world class and it kept every identified case in quarantine, China refused to authorize the WHO to interact with Taiwan's health officials. Most of what was reported to the WHO from Taiwan was conveyed through the US CDC — and even then, the WHO reported it as if it were Chinese data.

Thus far, the international community, and especially the WHO, has been ill-served by China's disgraceful "state-secret" management of its own epidemiological data. Taiwan's data are barred from WHO books because China refuses to let the government participate, even as an "observer."

In light of two Hong Kong citizens' deaths who were infected with the H7N9 bird flu virus after visiting Shenzhen in 2014, US Senator Sherrod Brown wrote a letter dated Feb. 6, 2014, to then-US secretary of state John Kerry.

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Brown called for full WHO membership for Taiwan in the letter, writing: "Taiwan's exclusion not only creates a dangerous gap in the exchange of information between countries, but puts global health monitoring and security at risk due to Taiwan's proximity to China during this time of virulent birdflu outbreak."

It is critical that the international community has full access to Taiwan's highest quality health information through the WHO, enabling global health services to effectively battle diseases.

It has been three years since the letter and nothing has changed. Taiwan is still shunned by the WHO due to pressure from China, and miscellaneous strains of the bird flu virus are still virulent in the region. China continues to block Taiwan from becoming a full WHO member, plays politics with Taiwan's participation in the week-long World Health Assembly (WHA) summit in Geneva and last year also blocked Taiwan's participation in other international organizations, such as the International Civil Aviation Organization and Interpol.

It is likely that China will block Taiwan's bid to join the WHA from May 22 to May 31 as well.

China's belligerence toward Taiwan's bids to join international organizations have not gone unnoticed in the US Congress.

US Representative Scott Garrett wrote in the Congressional Record in 2013: "I have grave concern about China's veto power over Taiwan's role on the international stage. Chinese approval should not be a prerequisite for Taiwanese participation in United Nations organizations, or any other international organization. Taiwan should not have to rely upon the goodwill of China to voice beyond its borders. Allowing this to become the international norm will undermine its current status as an independent, sovereign state."

Brown concurred: "Taiwan's participation in the annual week-long WHA meeting as an observer, and not a WHO full member, is a Pyrrhic victory with limited benefits. The bottom line is that China continues to play politics with the lives of the people of Taiwan by blocking Taiwan's full access to the WHO."

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It therefore behooves the US to tell Beijing that if it does not let Taiwan attend the WHA meeting, Washington will send US Secretary of Health and Human Services Tom Price to Taiwan to experience first-hand how it is battling its perennial challenge of avian flu outbreaks.

It seems obvious that Taiwan's full membership in the WHO is not simply in the interests of the 23 million people of Taiwan; it is of critical importance to the US and to the rest of the world, too.

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