

Taiwan is needed for world health

Written by Mike Kuo 柯建銘
Sunday, 29 April 2018 05:22

An outbreak of measles in Japan has resulted in more than 3,500 people in the southern Taiwanese harbor of Kaohsiung being quarantined. They are being monitored by Taiwan's health authorities. Two dozen people have been confirmed to have the highly contagious disease. Measles causes a high fever and rash and can be fatal to infants.

Also, in February last year, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) confirmed Taiwan's first human fatality from the H7N9 avian flu virus. Earlier, a poultry farm and a turkey farm in southern Taiwan tested positive for a highly pathogenic avian flu virus.

Fifteen years ago, a close cooperative relationship between Taiwan and the US helped the CDC stem the spread of SARS in Taiwan, unlike China, which for months failed to report an outbreak of the extremely contagious disease, resulting in more than 7,000 cases and 648 deaths.

Taiwan acted quickly and provided valuable treatment information to the international health community.

The world is indeed fortunate that Taiwan has such excellent human and animal health talent, data collection, quarantine and treatment facilities.

It is critical that the international community has full access to Taiwan's high-quality health information through the WHO, which would enable global health services to effectively battle diseases.

Diseases do not stop at borders and health knows no boundaries, so it is critical to the US and to the rest of the world that Taiwan join the WHO as a full member.

It is an outrage that China prevents Taiwan from joining the WHO as a full member, let alone that China prevents Taiwan from participating in the World Health Assembly (WHA) meeting in Geneva.

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What if someone carrying measles or SARS gets on a plane in Taipei and disembarks in my hometown of Houston, Texas, or in New York, Atlanta, Washington or Shanghai? It would spell human disaster.

What it boils down to is that China effectively plays politics with the lives of the people of Taiwan and with the lives of the people in the rest of the world.

It is likely that China will again block Taiwan's bid to join the WHA in Geneva from May 21 to May 26.

We at the Formosan Association for Public Affairs have suggested to the US Department of State that it should tell China that if it does not let Taiwan join the WHA summit in Geneva next month, US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar will visit Taiwan to study Taiwan's excellent healthcare system.

Let the Chinese pick one.

There is unanimous support for Taiwan's WHO campaign in the US House of Representatives and the US Senate. A "WHO for Taiwan" law has passed the House and has been introduced in the Senate. Yet there is only so much that the US can do. After all, it is not up to the US to let Taiwan join the WHO.

Ironically, it seems it is not up to the WHO either. More than a decade ago, we asked then-WHO director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland why she did not let Taiwan join the WHO. She told us we were knocking at the wrong door; that Taiwan would need to work it out with China.

Taiwan needs to continue to apply for participation in the WHA year after year, for it needs to continue to educate the world that it is unconscionable that its 23 million people are left out of this important international organization.

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Being a WHO member is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It is a necessity for Taiwan and for the rest of the world.

Taiwan should do right by building a “Coalition of the Willing” to get Taiwan into the WHO — a coalition of friends and allies, such as the US, Japan, Canada and Australia — and get it to stand up against China.

Taiwan should not just apply this strategy to its WHO campaign, but also to its campaigns to join the International Civil Aviation Organization and Interpol.

After being shunned by these organizations for decades, it is time the 23 million people of Taiwan join them. They deserve it.

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