

US concerned about WHO restrictions on Taiwan

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The US has renewed concerns over restrictions that the WHO imposes on Taiwan's participation in the organization and reiterated its support for Taiwan's inclusion as an observer at the WHO's governing body, the World Health Assembly (WHA), and at WHO technical bodies.

A report by the US Department of State to Congress describes Taiwan's participation in the WHO as "sporadic" and "intermittent."

The situation "inherently limits Taiwan's ability" to deal with future public health emergencies due to "a lack of timely information and accessible resources," according to the report, a copy of which the Taipei Times obtained yesterday.

Taiwan began to participate in the WHA as an observer under the name "Chinese Taipei" in 2009, an arrangement subject to annual renewal with China's consent.

On April 8, the Department of Health said Minister Chiu Wen-ta (邱文達) would attend the 66th WHA, to be held from May 20 to May 28 in Geneva, Switzerland, as in previous years, after receiving an invitation from WHO Director-General Margaret Chan (陳Margaret Chan) on April 3.

Despite recognizing the presence of Taiwan at WHA meetings from 2009 to last year, the US said that the overall situation with regard to Taiwan's engagement in relevant working groups and technical activities of the Geneva-based WHO remains "unsatisfactory."

"To date, the improvement in cross-strait relations [including a bilateral agreement on health cooperation], coupled with WHA observer status, has not resulted in greater technical involvement of Taiwan experts and officials in relevant meetings," it said.

The US said the WHO has not replied to requests by Taiwan to participate in its organizations, including the STOP TB Partnership, the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS), the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office and its annual Regional Committee, the

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International Food Safety Authorities Network, and the Pandemic Influenza Preparedness (PIP) Framework.

Taiwan had hoped to join the PIP Framework by having vaccine manufacturer, Adimmune Corp (亞德免疫), make a partnership contribution and sign a material transfer agreement with the WHO to receive PIP biological materials from the GISRS, but the firm was only recently invited to attend the latest industry segment of the PIP Advisory Group meeting, the US said.

The progress was facilitated through the US Mission in Geneva, the report said.

The Department of State presents the report to the US Congress annually to explain its policy on Taiwan's participation in the WHO.

The US has helped Taiwanese experts attend WHA meetings in Geneva, where members of the public with Republic of China passports have been harassed and sometimes turned away if they could not produce a second form of photo identification for UN security, according to the report.

"In 2011, Taiwan experts and participants had extreme difficulties accessing the WHA, particularly at the Palais des Nations ... In 2012, in part through diplomatic efforts by the United States, a solution on entry to the Palais des Nations emerged so that there were no incidents regarding participation by Taiwan experts last year," the report said.

The solution has carried over into dealings with WHO headquarters as well, the US said.

The US again voiced its opposition to the "non-transparent" manner in which the WHO issued an internal memorandum in 2010 to limit Taiwan's participation in the International Health Regulations (IHR), the WHO's regulatory framework to prevent epidemics, and in which it refers to the nation as "Taiwan, Province of China."

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The US said that the “unresolved issue” of nomenclature for Taiwan at the WHO hampers efforts to further involve Taipei in effective implementation of IHRs.

As of last year, all Taiwanese ports on the IHR Authorized Ports list were identified as belonging to China, the US said.

“The nomenclature issue likely is one factor causing delayed communications with experts with Taiwan. Some WHO communications continue to be incorrectly routed through Beijing or through China’s Mission in Geneva,” the US said.

The US said that the issue of nomenclature is “so closely linked to Taiwan’s participation in IHRs,” and thus “we believe Taiwan should be referred to as ‘Chinese Taipei’ in both internal and external WHO communications.”

The US continues to object to the usage of the phrase “Taiwan, Province of China,” “Taiwan, China,” and “other closely related nomenclature” in WHO/WHA internal documents, as well as in all other international organizations in which Taiwan is a meaningful participant, the department said.

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