

Virus Outbreak: Tsai rebuffs Tedros' racism accusation

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WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus attends a news conference in Geneva, Switzerland, on Feb. 24.

Photo: Reuters

Taiwan knows better than anyone what it feels like to be discriminated against and isolated, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) said yesterday, as she protested an accusation by WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus that Taiwan was organizing a racist campaign against him.

At a WHO news conference on Wednesday, Tedros was asked for comment on US President Donald Trump's remark that the US might cut funding to the WHO.

After calling on the US and China to jointly fight the COVID-19 pandemic, Tedros then accused Taiwan of having launched racist attacks against him three months ago, saying that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was aware of the attacks and had even engaged in slandering him.

While several African leaders voiced support for Tedros on social media, his remarks provoked angry responses from across party lines in Taiwan.

"I strongly protest the accusations today that Taiwan is instigating racist attacks in the international community. Taiwan has always opposed all forms of discrimination. For years, we have been excluded from international organizations, and we know better than anyone else what it feels like to be discriminated against and isolated," Tsai wrote on Facebook in English.

"I want to take this opportunity to invite Director-General Tedros to visit Taiwan and experience for himself how committed the Taiwanese people are to engaging with and contributing to the world, even in the face of discrimination and isolation," she said.

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Taiwan's medical workers and volunteers can be found worldwide, Tsai said.

"We have never let our inability to join international organizations lessen our support for the international community," she said.

Meanwhile, the ministry demanded that Tedros issue a correction and apologize to the Taiwanese public for his "baseless accusations."

As the most important global health body and its leader, the WHO and its director-general are subject to the supervision of the world's citizens regarding their response to the pandemic, the ministry said in a statement.

The criticism of Tedros' performance in tackling the pandemic was made online by people of unknown identity and nationality, and cannot be directed nor controlled by the ministry, it said.

The ministry again called on Tedros to put aside his political discrimination; maintain his neutrality and professionalism; invite Taiwan to fully participate in all WHO meetings and mechanisms regarding the pandemic; and restore Taiwan's observer status in the World Health Assembly (WHA).

Asked about Tedros' remarks, Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳時中), who heads the Central Epidemic Command Center, said that Tsai has invited Tedros to visit Taiwan.

The government welcomes Tedros to come and see how the mobilization of the entire nation and the character of Taiwanese have supported Taiwan's disease prevention efforts, Chen said.

Rather than scold Taiwan, Tedros could spend some time learning from it, Chen added.

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At a weekly news conference, Executive Yuan spokeswoman Kolas Yotaka said that the WHO leader's "fabrications" had left her shocked and dumbfounded.

"Even though Taiwan was long ago abandoned by the WHO, the government would never attack the WHO, nor is it at all interested in engaging in racial discrimination or personal attacks of any kind against Tedros," she said.

"We urge those in the WHO management who share Tedros' sentiments to put politics aside and renounce [Beijing's] 'one China' principle, to facilitate efforts to save lives" amid the pandemic, she added.

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Legislator Lo Chih-cheng (洛智成) said that Tedros singled out Taiwan because he does not dare answer criticism from other nations and that Taiwan's achievement in containing the disease makes him ashamed.

The criticism against Tedros is about his performance, not the color of his skin, the DPP said in a statement, also asking him to apologize to Taiwan.

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) spokeswoman Hung Yu-chien (洪玉倩) said that a WHO executive should not attribute all of the criticism they receive to Taiwan without concrete evidence, adding that the global health body should not ignore the nation's long-running appeals to rejoin the WHA.

The KMT supports any rational and flexible diplomacy that helps Taiwan return to the WHO, she said.

Additional reporting by Sean Lin, Sherry Hsiao, Shih Hsiao-kuang and Yang Chun-hui

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