

WHO members agree to start drafting global pandemic convention



The World Health Assembly, the WHO's decision-making body, is holding an emergency meeting for the second time since its establishment in 1948 [Francois Walschaerts/AP]

Geneva, December 1 (RHC)-- Member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) have agreed to start drafting a global agreement to prevent and tackle the next global pandemic. Countries adopted a resolution on Wednesday at a special meeting in Geneva, launching the process that it is hoped should result in a new agreement on pandemics.

The decision was welcomed by the head of the UN health agency, Tedros Ghebreyesus, who hailed the move as historic. "The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the many flaws in the global system to protect people from pandemics: the most vulnerable people going without vaccines; health workers without needed equipment to perform their life-saving work; and 'me-first' approaches that stymie the global solidarity needed to deal with a global threat," Tedros said.

"But at the same time, we have seen inspiring demonstrations of scientific and political collaboration, from the rapid development of vaccines to today's commitment by countries to negotiate a global accord that will help to keep future generations safer from the impacts of pandemics," he added.

In the meantime, countries should continue to abide by the WHO's 2005 International Health Regulations, Tedros said. The decision, entitled The World Together, was adopted by consensus at the special assembly, drawing applause at the end of a three-day meeting.

"The text before us is the product of extensive discussions, of frank exchanges and of compromises," said Australia's ambassador Sally Mansfield, who co-chaired the working group.

The European Union (EU) had pushed for agreement on an international legally binding treaty, along with about 70 countries, but Brazil, India and the United States were among those reluctant to commit to a treaty, the Reuters news agency reported, citing diplomats.

"We call for an ambitious process in developing this treaty – let us all demonstrate our multilateral commitment and engagement towards a binding instrument," Ambassador Lotte Knudsen, head of the EU delegation to the United Nations in Geneva, said in a statement.

The United States welcomed the decision saying in a statement: "This momentous step represents our collective responsibility to work together to advance health security and to make the global health system stronger and more responsive."

Such an agreement to beef up measures against pandemics is expected to be ready in May 2024, covering issues from data sharing and genome sequencing of emerging viruses to equitable distribution of vaccines and drugs derived from research.

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