



**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR **Europe**

**Twenty-seventh Standing Committee of the
Regional Committee for Europe**

Special Session

Virtual meeting, 29 June 2020

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Report of the second special session

Introduction

1. In accordance with Rule 5.3 of the Rules of Procedure of the Standing Committee of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (SCRC), on Monday 29 June 2020, the Twenty-seventh SCRC held its second special session, by means of a virtual meeting, to assess the conditions for organizing the 70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC70), due to take place in September 2020, and to decide on the arrangements for the session. Owing to the extraordinary circumstances and logistics of a virtual session, the meeting was conducted in English only.

Opening of the session

2. Opening the meeting, the Chairperson of the SCRC, Dr Søren Brostrøm (Denmark), welcomed participants to the special session, which had been convened to consider and decide on the logistical and procedural arrangements for RC70 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on working and travel arrangements.

Adoption of the agenda

3. The agenda was adopted.

Outcome of the written silence procedure

4. The WHO Regional Director for Europe recalled that, at its fourth regular session on 15 May 2020, the 27th SCRC had agreed to launch a written silence procedure to alter the arrangements for RC70, which had been due to be held in Tel Aviv, Israel. Through that procedure, a draft decision had been circulated to all 53 Member States in the WHO European Region, according to which the SCRC would agree to host RC70 at UN City in Copenhagen, Denmark, with a reduced agenda and programme of 2.5 days' duration, while also making provision for a virtual de minimis session in the event that conditions would not allow for a physical meeting. The decision also provided that the Standing Committee would agree that RC71 would take place in Tel Aviv, Israel.

5. Since no objections had been received to the draft decision within the stipulated two-week deadline (ending 12 June 2020), the decision could be considered adopted and would be referred to RC70 for information.

6. With regard to holding RC71 in Tel Aviv, Israel, the Israeli authorities had meanwhile informed the WHO Regional Office for Europe that the proposed dates of the session coincided with the peak holy days of the Jewish calendar. It was therefore proposed that RC71 should take place at the Regional Office in Copenhagen, as originally planned, and that Israel should host RC72 in Tel Aviv in 2022. A draft resolution to that effect would be submitted to the Regional Committee; the draft resolution would also contain proposed amendments to the dates of RC71, RC72 and RC73, in line with a previous request by the Standing Committee to reduce the duration of Regional Committee sessions.

7. Pursuant to the decision, the SCRC was required to assess whether a physical RC70 in Copenhagen or a de minimis virtual session would be most appropriate in the circumstances.

Feedback from the SCRC subgroup on governance

8. The Chairperson of the SCRC subgroup on governance informed the SCRC that the subgroup, which had met on Monday 22 June 2020, had discussed the outcome of the written silence procedure and the proposed agenda of a de minimis virtual RC70, along with the special rules and procedures to be implemented were a virtual session deemed necessary. The subgroup had felt that a virtual session would indeed be most appropriate, although the SCRC might wish to consider further information on the epidemiological situation of COVID-19 across the European Region, travel restrictions and border management, and regulations on mass gatherings, as well as other ethical and political considerations, before making a definitive decision. It would also be useful to know the measures and approaches being taken in other regions.

9. The subgroup had also discussed the draft agenda for a potential de minimis virtual session of the Regional Committee and had recommended that governance matters and strategic and technical topics should be separated. The launch of the European Programme of Work (EPW) should be kept separate from the Regional Director's address, for example. The Programme budget was a particularly important topic, given the recent decision of the United States of America to withdraw funding from WHO. Member States needed a clear explanation of the implications of that decision. Although the subgroup agreed with the proposed special rules of procedure for a virtual session of the Regional Committee, a clear modus operandi was required for the incorporation of pre-prepared written statements and video messages into the proceedings.

Evolution of the pandemic situation

10. The Chairperson said that assessing the practicability of a physical meeting in Copenhagen in September 2020 would require a projection of the pandemic situation and the related measures with regard to travel restrictions and physical distancing, as well as consideration of the conditions required to organize a safe meeting of the size of the Regional Committee and the feasibility of national delegations from 53 countries travelling to Denmark to participate in the meeting and subsequently returning home. Consideration must also be given to whether it would be morally and politically justifiable for WHO to request delegations to be away from their countries if acute situations of community transmission of COVID-19 were still ongoing in some countries.

11. Updating the SCRC on the situation in Denmark, the Chairperson said that public gatherings were currently restricted to a maximum of 50 people, and although those restrictions were expected to be eased, it was anticipated that the lighter measures planned to take effect on 8 August 2020 would still only allow gatherings of up to 200 people and would be contingent on continued low levels of community transmission. Border controls had been eased for arrivals from European Union countries and those in the Schengen area, except Portugal and Sweden. The situation would be assessed by the epidemiological authorities on a weekly basis, with the possibility of re-imposing travel restrictions if necessary. Allowances

were being made for business travel from outside Europe, with measures in place for testing and quarantining where necessary.

12. The Regional Emergency Director said that the epidemiological situation in the European Region remained diverse: incidence rates were increasing in some countries and decreasing in others, while in some instances resurgences were beginning to occur. Although the situation required further monitoring, many people were currently unable to travel and health ministry representatives could not leave their duty stations or cross borders. Strong control measures, taken systematically across the Region could improve the scenario in time for RC70, but current trends were not promising, and it was therefore impossible to predict how the situation would look later in the year. Although WHO had issued strong guidance on mass gatherings, more than half of Member States in the Region were not implementing it.

13. The Regional Director added that since the Regional Office was committed to leaving no one behind, a physical meeting could only be held if representatives of all 53 Member States in the Region were able to attend. A mixed meeting, with some delegations attending in person and others attending virtually, would be difficult to manage from a procedural perspective. WHO must be seen to lead by example and must therefore not take any disproportionate risk with regard to the safety of delegations. Furthermore, since the Regional Office was still fully mobilized to support countries in their COVID-19 responses and preparations for a possible resurgence of the virus, it might not have capacity to organize a full programme for RC70. Other regions had decided to hold their Regional Committee sessions virtually, in most cases de minimis with an abridged agenda.

14. In light of the foregoing, the SCRC agreed that it would be logical and practical to hold a de minimis virtual RC70, which would guarantee that no Member State would be left behind.

Revised annotated programme for the 70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe

15. The Chairperson informed the Standing Committee that the draft programme for a de minimis, virtual RC70 had been circulated to all 53 Member States in the Region and no objections had been received. It had subsequently been revised in light of the experiences of the Seventy-third World Health Assembly, and the further comments and suggestions of the SCRC subgroup on governance.

16. The Regional Director recalled that the SCRC's previous comments and concerns regarding the need to make the programme of the Regional Committee more attractive and effective had been taken into account; the political, technical and governance items on the agenda for RC70 had been separated, and the programme had been restructured in line with the four strategic pillars of the Thirteenth General Programme of Work. The decision to hold a virtual and abridged session, however, meant that only agenda items related to governance continuity and strategic orientation could be addressed. Despite a significant reduction in the agenda and programme, virtual governing bodies sessions could afford an important opportunity to show unity, solidarity and political resolve, as demonstrated by the Seventy-third World Health Assembly, which had taken place virtually in May 2020. The abridged RC70 programme allowed for a two-day session, the first day focusing on political agenda items and the second on matters of governance. The Regional Director's address and the

presentation of the EPW had been separated, as requested. A draft decision on special rules and procedures would be presented for adoption at the start of the session to amend the Rules of Procedure to accommodate the specificities of a virtual session. The programme included progress reports and healthy breaks. To mitigate the omission from the programme of important technical topics planned for discussion at RC70, regular intersessional technical briefings would be organized between RC70 and RC71.

17. In the ensuing discussion, members of the SCRC welcomed the revised programme for the abridged RC70. One delegation, which had previously proposed submitting the SCRC declaration on COVID-19 to RC70 as a draft resolution, withdrew that proposal. An observer, participating as the link between the Standing Committee and the Executive Board, while welcoming the efforts made to prepare the draft programme, expressed concern regarding its intensity; there was considerable fatigue associated with long virtual meetings, which made the lack of provision for lunchbreaks a cause of concern. Due account must be taken of potential time lost owing to technical difficulties and connection failures. To optimize the time available, responses to the Regional Director and Director-General's addresses should be submitted as prerecorded video messages, with a time limit. Time allocations for some agenda items appeared to have been underestimated, while seeming too generous for others. Further efforts could be made to reduce the agenda to guarantee sufficient time for the most crucial discussions, in particular on the EPW, the Programme budget and the role of certain Member States in that regard, as well as on how COVID-19 had impacted the work of the Organization. The SCRC report could perhaps be submitted in writing and adopted electronically before the session. Less time could perhaps be allocated to the Regional Director and Director-General's addresses to make sufficient space in the programme for discussion.

18. The Team Leader, Regional Governance, said that in preparing the proposed programme, account had indeed been taken of the need to allow extra time to accommodate connectivity issues and technical problems. Efforts would be made to incorporate more breaks to avoid fatigue. Member States would certainly need time to discuss the transformation process and the Programme budget. The item on matters arising from the World Health Assembly and the Executive Board could be minimized. Any comments on progress reports would be required to be submitted in writing. The Director, Business Operations, added that the Regional Office was still awaiting a headquarters report on the Programme budget, which would be used to draft the report on the Regional perspective. That report would be linked to the presentation of the EPW. The Regional perspective on transformation would be incorporated into the Regional Director's address.

19. The SCRC agreed that the Secretariat would continue planning on the basis of the proposed programme for RC70 and that any outstanding items from the original agenda would be postponed to RC71.

Proposed special rules and procedures for a virtual session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe

20. The Team Leader, Regional Governance, introduced the proposed special rules and procedures for a de minimis session of the Regional Committee, which had been based on those adopted for the virtual World Health Assembly and had been reviewed by the SCRC subgroup on governance; they would be presented to RC70 in a decision to be adopted at the

opening of the session. The agenda would be limited to essential items only; virtual attendance would be considered a valid presence from the perspective of the quorum. The session would be broadcast, open and public, with the same stakeholders invited to attend as would attend a normal session. Accredited non-State actors, while in attendance, would not be given the floor owing to time constraints but, rather, would be invited to submit written or prerecorded statements. Oral statements would be restricted to three minutes, with the possibility of submitting two-minute prerecorded video statements or statements in writing to replace or complement live interventions. The registration procedure would take place as usual, with credentials submitted electronically and reviewed by three members of the SCRC. With regard to decision-making, neither secret ballots nor votes by show of hands would be possible owing to the lack of an appropriate IT platform. In the event that an election was required, a postal vote would be organized after the closure of the session. The procedures did not provide for a written silence procedure as a resumed physical session was not foreseen.

21. The Special Legal Advisor to the Regional Director added that the provision to allow the submission of written statements had been intended to encourage delegations to do so instead of making live interventions. In practice, during the virtual Health Assembly, the result had been that delegations had chosen to provide both. It might therefore be advisable to limit the time for spoken interventions and allow for the submission of additional information in writing. He also recalled that a precedent had been set for the use of a postal secret ballot for the election of the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean in the early 1980s.

22. The SCRC approved the proposed special procedures and agreed to forward the draft decision to RC70 for adoption at the opening of the session. It also agreed to hold its next session virtually, on Friday 11 September 2020, following which it would report to the President and Executive President of the Regional Committee on elections and nominations at a special session convened virtually on Sunday 13 September 2020, prior to the commencement of RC70.

Conclusion and closure

23. In closing, the Regional Director thanked the members of the Standing Committee for having attended the two ad hoc meetings, which had been significant in upholding the Regional Office's commitment to transparency and accountability; the SCRC's guidance was particularly important in times of change. In the spirit of the EPW, which focused on the importance of direct contact with Member States, including through subregional arrangements, he had held a particularly constructive interactive meeting with health ministry representatives from 11 small countries in the Region on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. He was also due to participate in a meeting of the Council of Health Cooperation of the Commonwealth of Independent States and would meet the European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety to discuss synergies between the European Union's new health programme and the EPW. Meetings were also taking place at the country level, and he would resume duty travel in the coming week to conclude the financial agreement on the establishment of the geographically dispersed office on emergency preparedness in Istanbul, Turkey. He would also visit migrant camps close to the Turkish-Syrian border. Finally, he informed the SCRC that Professor Mario Monti, President of Bocconi University and former Prime Minister of Italy and European Commissioner, has agreed to chair an international commission of visionary thinkers from different disciplines and who are not politically active,

to reflect on the role and resilience of health and social care for economic and social development in a post-COVID society. This idea has the full support of the WHO Director-General and the reflections from the commission will contribute to the work of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response that is being established by WHO headquarters.

24. Thanking all participants for their attendance and their contributions, the Chairperson declared the ad hoc session of the 27th SCRC closed.

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