

TAIWAN'S EXCLUSION FROM WHO – PRESCRIPTION FOR DISASTER

By Don Feder

Generally, China's far-reaching campaign to isolate Taiwan impacts mostly on the Taiwanese. But in keeping the island of 23 million out of the World Health Organization, it endangers all of us.

The World Health Assembly (WHO's governing body) is holding its 59th annual meeting in Geneva, now through May 27. Of primary importance is WHO's assessment of the potential for another pandemic. The influenza epidemic of 1918 killed an estimated 40-50 million worldwide – four times the number of military deaths in World War I.

The avian flu seems the most likely candidate for the next pandemic. In July, Indonesia reported the first deaths from human-to-human transmission – something epidemiologists long have dreaded.

Representatives of almost every nation on earth will be present in Geneva discussing this clear and present danger. Taiwan once again will be absent.

For 10 years, Taipei has been trying to establish an official relationship with the World Health Organization. This year, it's petitioning for observer status as a "health entity," which WHO's director general could grant at his discretion.

But, as it has in years past, Beijing will move to block even this modest affiliation for Taiwan. In so doing, it puts the world at risk.

Dr. Lee Jong-Wook, WHO director general who died this week, had observed that when it comes to combating contagious diseases, "International collaboration is essential for success." Moreover, said Lee, "We cannot afford any gap in our global surveillance and response network." Taiwan represents a gap wide enough to drive a plague through.

Taiwan is a hub of international trade and transportation. In 2004, 21 million passengers arrived and departed on 175,230 international flights.

Taiwan also has a significant number of cargo and visitor exchanges with Southeast Asia -- hot zone for the avian flu. In 2004, 1.43 million Taiwanese visited Southeast Asia, while Taiwan played host to 570,000 visitors from the region.

Finally, migratory birds – natural carriers for avian flu viruses – regularly stop in Taiwan on their travels. An estimated 1.25 million of the feathered transients (representing 351 species) pass through Taiwan annually. Most originate in Siberia or China. They fly to Taiwan from the South China coast, Japan or Korea, on their way to the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia.

All of this spells potential disaster. Viruses don't respect national boundaries – nor do they take cognizance of China's territorial claims.

The purpose of an international health regime is to share information and resources, to formulate joint strategies and to coordinate quarantines and other emergency measures. With Taiwan outside WHO, a major front will go unmanned.

It also places an unfair burden on 23 million people who are punished for being born in a place coveted by another nation.

In 2003, Taiwan was hit by SARS, which originated in mainland China. It took WHO seven weeks to respond to Taipei's pleas for help. For almost two months, Taiwan was barred from access to meetings of WHO experts, including video-conferences.

Taiwan's politically imposed isolation from the international health network helped to transform what could have been a mild SARS outbreak into a tragedy that claimed 73 lives.

In August 2005, Taiwan's Department of Health estimated that if the avian flu indeed mutates into a virus transmitted by human-to-human contact, it could infect as many 5.3 million on the island and lead to 14,000 deaths.

Worldwide, an avian flu epidemic would be catastrophic. Dr. David Nabarro, United Nations System Coordinator for Avian and Human

Influenza, estimates the death toll from the next pandemic at 5 million to 150 million.

Do we want to compromise our ability to track, respond to and contain the next global epidemic to feed Beijing's fantasies that it controls Taiwan?

In 1998, The U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution calling on the Clinton administration to support Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization. The resolution decried the fact that "Taiwan is not allowed to participate in any WHO-organized forums, and workshops concerning the latest technologies in the diagnosis, monitoring, and control of diseases." Taiwan's involvement with WHO could bring "benefits ... to the state of health not only in Taiwan, but also regionally and globally," the resolution noted.

That was 8 years ago – long before SARS, and before the very real prospect of an avian flu epidemic. We're no longer just talking about fairness for Taiwan but the health and well being of all of us.