

Call for international cooperation and collaboration to effectively tackle the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The world is facing an unprecedented challenge in every place that is affected by the spreading COVID-19 pandemic. With China recording fewer and fewer cases, Europe and the Americas have become the epicenter of the pandemic since mid-March 2020, respectively accounting for 54.8% (621,407) and 27.8% (315,714) of 1,133,758 confirmed cases globally as of April 5. Moreover, the number of confirmed cases in the US (273,808), Spain (124,736), Italy (124,632), and Germany (91,714) has exceeded the number in China (82,930) so far. International cooperation and coordination are essential to tackling this pandemic in terms of both assistance with emergency medical supplies and medical technical assistance. Coordinated global action has been called for by the World Health Organization (WHO), G7, G20, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and other bodies. More effective actions are urgently needed to protect the most vulnerable, including older people and people with an underlying medical condition, as well as healthcare workers, who are most frequently exposed and who are vital to the response.

Keywords: COVID-19, public health emergency, international cooperation, international collaboration

The world is facing an unprecedented challenge in every place that has been affected by the spreading COVID-19 pandemic. Since 28 February 2020, the global risk of the COVID-19 outbreak has been upgraded to "very high" by the World Health Organization (WHO) (1). On March 11, the WHO Director General announced that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic; this is the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus in history (2). This determination was based on a 13-fold increase in cases in the previous two weeks and the number of affected countries across the globe.

As of April 5, there were 1,133,758 cases reported globally, and 62,784 people have unfortunately lost their lives to COVID-19 (3). With China recording fewer and fewer cases, Europe and the Americas have become the epicenter of the pandemic since mid-March 2020, respectively accounting for 54.8% (621,407) and 27.8% (315,714) of 1,133,758 confirmed cases globally. Moreover, the number of confirmed cases in the US (273,808), Spain (124,736), Italy (124,632), and Germany (91,714) has exceeded the number in China (82,930) so far.

The COVID-19 pandemic calls for an "unprecedented level" of international cooperation and collaboration to tackle the crisis. A temporary shortage of protective gear was an urgent threat in the early days of the outbreak that exposed medical workers and the public to a greater risk

of infection. In China, demands for emergency medical supplies, and especially personal protective equipment such as masks and medical protective clothing, increased at an exponential rate in January and February after the initial outbreak. Given this urgent situation, the international community helped to alleviate shortages of emergency medical supplies. As of March 2, a total of 62 countries and 7 international organizations have donated masks, protective clothing, and other urgently needed emergency medical supplies to China (4). For example, on January 28, the Government of Japan decided to provide emergency relief goods through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to China. From January 27 to February 27, more than 4.8 million masks, more than 229,000 pieces of protective clothing, and more than 419,000 gloves as well as other emergency medical supplies were donated to China by governments, universities, hospitals, and civil society organizations across Japan (Figure 1). After the capacity to produce emergency medical supplies was restored in China, the Chinese Government provided assistance in the form of medical supplies to at least 89 countries and 4 international organizations (5) since the end of February. For example, more than 4.6 million masks, more than 65,000 pieces of protective clothing, more than 155,000 gloves as well as other emergency medical supplies were donated to Japan by China from February

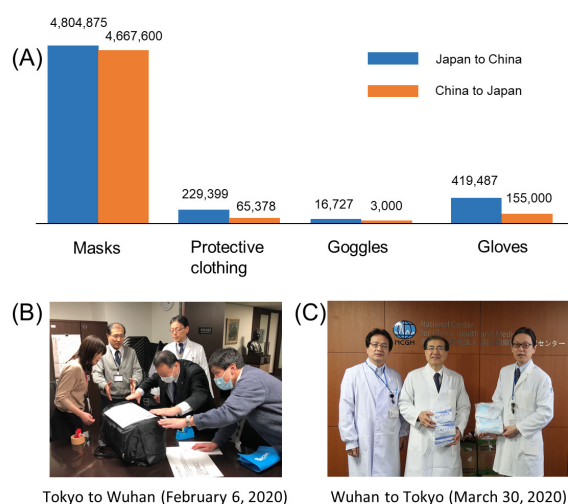


Figure 1. Japan-China mutual support related to emergency medical supplies in tackling COVID-19 pandemic. (A) Emergency medical supplies donated to China by Japan from January 27- February 27 and donated to Japan by China from February 29-March 26, 2020 (data were summarized based on reports from multiple media); (B) Masks donated to Wuhan, China by the National Center for Global health and Medicine on February 6, 2020; (C) Masks donated to the National Center for Global health and Medicine by Wuhan, China on March 30, 2020.

29 to March 26 (Figure 1).

International cooperation and collaboration are evident not only in assistance in the form of emergency medical supplies assistance but also in medical technical assistance (6-8). Upon learning about the coronavirus outbreak, the WHO gathered more than 400 world-class virologists and disease control experts via real and virtual platforms to examine the possible origins of the virus, to devise containment plans, and to identify research priorities. To date, more than 40 guidance documents has been published on the WHO's website (9), providing detailed, evidence-based recommendations for governments, hospitals, health workers, members of the public, and others. More than 1 million health workers have been trained through courses on OpenWHO.org. To help countries listen to and understand their communities and ensure that their COVID-19-related responses are relevant and actionable, WHO/Europe launched a behavioral insights tool for rapid, flexible and cost-effective monitoring of public knowledge, risk perceptions, behaviors, and trust (10).

Moreover, on March 13, the WHO, the UN Foundation, and partners launched a first-of-its-kind COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, which will go towards actions outlined in the COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan to enable all countries – and particularly those most vulnerable and at-risk, and with the weakest health systems – to prepare for and respond to the COVID-19 crisis including rapidly detecting cases, stopping transmission of the virus, and caring for those affected. Donations amounting to more than US\$ 108 million have been received from 203,000 individuals and organizations in just two weeks (11).

Only coordinated global action will be effective in tackling a threat that, by its very nature, knows no borders. On March 19, the WHO regional directors of Europe, the Western Pacific, and Africa were united in their calls for solidarity to effectively tackle the COVID-19 pandemic (12). The following actions were called for: *i*) connecting with each other and coordinating responses to ensure that measures introduced by one nation do not hamper the response in other nations; *ii*) continuing to facilitate the response with resources, acting in solidarity, include everyone, and ensuring that the most vulnerable are supported; and *iii*) encouraging communities and sectors of society to be engaged and to promote an all-of-government response.

The G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting held via video conference on March 25 emphasized the need to enhance international cooperation to combat COVID-19 and vital support for the WHO in particular, both in terms of the direct response to the crisis as well as the enhancing of health and research systems (13). A statement on COVID-19 was released at the G20 Leaders' Summit held on March 26 that called for a transparent, robust, coordinated, large-scale, and science-based global response in the spirit of solidarity to combat this pandemic. A broad convergence of views was evident, including taking all necessary health measures and seeking to ensure adequate financing to contain the pandemic and protect people, and especially the most vulnerable (14). In a virtual meeting of the Washington International Trade Association on March 26, six priorities of the World Trade Organization (WTO) were outlined to meet the challenge of COVID-19, including providing a cooperative framework for members to consider their responses, clearly indicating that members have wide latitude to take necessary positive actions to address the crisis, and helping craft coordinated responses to keep trade flows open (15).

Viruses know no borders, races, or ideologies. International cooperation and coordination are essential to tackling this pandemic, especially in effective actions to protect the most vulnerable, including older people and people with an underlying medical condition, as well as healthcare workers, who are the most frequently exposed and who are vital to the response.

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