EU action against COVID-19

Almost three months after the first reported cases of Coronavirus infections in Wuhan (China), the outbreak of the new virus has taken a cross-border dimension that is seriously affecting global health security and economy. It is the time for rational and coordinated action based on science. Working in close cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) and EU Member States, the European Union is stepping up coordinated efforts to contain the virus and counter the economic fallout, both inside and outside our borders. On 11 March, the WHO declared COVID-19 as pandemic.
The rapid spread of COVID-19 in Europe in the last weeks, with thousands of cases already reported, has been followed by the cancellation of major events, flight suspensions, bans on large gatherings, massive teleworking, school closure etc. As of March 13 the number of COVID-19 cases worldwide exceeds 133,800, with more than 4,900 deaths (most of them reported from China). There are already over 28,000 confirmed cases in the EU and the UK, and the death toll has surpassed 1,100 (1,016 in Italy alone).

For a situation update, please follow the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (this link).

What is the EU doing against COVID-19 within its borders?

“We will use all the tools at our disposal to make sure the European economy weathers this storm”, said the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, after the EU leaders' videoconference on the response to the COVID-19 outbreak held on 10 March. That day, the Commission received a mandate to further step up its response on all fronts and coordinate Member State actions. As a result, the Commission has launched a “Corona Response Investment Initiative” that will mobilize €25 billion to support national health care systems, SMEs, labour markets and other vulnerable parts of economies. Besides, the EU will allocate €140 million of public and private funding for promising research projects on vaccines, diagnosis and treatment.

All efforts will be coordinated through the Coronavirus Response team launched on 2 March, which is composed of five commissioners: Janez Lenarčič, who is in charge of crisis management, Stella Kyriakides, in charge of health issues, Ylva Johansson, for border-related issues, Adina Vălean, in charge of mobility, and Paolo Gentiloni, for macroeconomic aspects.

Coordination with Member States is ensured through different platforms. In order to discuss preparedness measures, including travel advice and coordinated border control actions, the Commission has established the weekly coordination group “COVID 19/ Corona Information Group-Borders”. Health crisis such as potential shortages of personal protective equipment can be addressed in a coordinated manner via the “Cross-border Health Threat Decision”, which has at its disposal an accelerated joint procurement procedure. The European Commission will hold a daily phone conference with the Member States’ Health Ministers and the Ministers of Internal Affairs to coordinate the necessary measures.

Among other relevant measures, the Commission will assemble a team of epidemiologists and virologists from different Member States to provide guidelines on the European level; and is now taking stock of the available protective equipment and respiratory devices, as well as their production and distribution capacity.

As air traffic is expected to decline, the EU will adopt temporary measures to make it easier for airlines to keep their ‘airport slots’ even if they do not operate the flights. This will relieve pressure on the aviation industry and reduce emissions by avoiding the so-called “ghost flights” – when companies fly almost empty planes only to keep their slots.

What has been the EU external action against COVID-19 so far?

Beyond the internal management of the crisis, the EU is committed to global efforts against the
spread of the virus worldwide. On 24 February, the European Commission announced a new €232 million aid package “to boost global preparedness, prevention and containment of the virus”. The funds will be allocated to support the WHO (€114 million), take preventive measures in Africa (€15 million), search for a vaccine and fund other research projects (€100 million), and bear the costs of EU citizens’ repatriation flights from Wuhan (€3 million).

Since the activation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism at the end of January, the European Commission and the EU Member States have co-financed the delivery of 56 tonnes of aid supplies to China. The personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, protective clothing and disinfectant) sent so far was provided by France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Estonia, Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia.

In addition, 515 EU citizens have been repatriated from China and Japan. So far, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism has co-financed several repatriation flights organised by different European countries—France, Germany, UK and Italy.

To find out more on the Coronavirus response, visit the constantly updated page of the European Commission here.

See also

News from EU Delegations on Coronavirus
www.eeas.europa.eu

Source URL: