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FEATURED Q&A

Is the United States Right to Withdraw From the WHO?



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo earlier this month said the United States was withdrawing from the World Health Organization, whose headquarters in Geneva is pictured above. // File Photo: World Health Organization.

Q The Trump administration has notified the U.S. Congress and the United Nations that the United States is formally withdrawing from the World Health Organization, citing its handling of the coronavirus pandemic. The move, which has drawn criticism from legislators, medical associations and U.S. allies, goes into effect next July. Does the WHO have “a long history of corruption and politicization” as U.S. Secretary Mike Pompeo said in announcing the withdrawal, and will the move change the way the organization operates? What are the most significant implications of the withdrawal both for the United States and for future efforts in fighting diseases and improving global health outcomes? In what ways will Latin American countries and the Pan American Health Organization, the WHO’s regional office, be affected by the decision?

A Andrew Rudman, managing director at Monarch Global Strategies: “Based on the handling of the coronavirus pandemic, perhaps the WHO should have expelled the United States? Sarcasm aside, the U.S. decision is shortsighted, politically motivated and petty. Substantive benefits from the decision are unclear while the negatives are easy to identify. Many analysts point to the loss of important collaboration between the WHO and CDC, including data sharing to prevent pandemics. Consider the outcome if the United States were forced to wait for a future coronavirus to infect American citizens before the CDC had access to virus samples or other evidence and experience needed to develop a response. U.S. innovative industries may be exposed to potentially serious, if less dramatic, consequences as well.

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Prosecutor to Probe Allegations Against Puerto Rico Governor

Puerto Rico’s Special Independent Prosecutor’s Office will investigate corruption allegations against Gov. Wanda Vázquez. The development follows the firing of one justice secretary and the resignation of another.

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ECONOMIC

Cuba Opens Stores That Accept Only Foreign Currency

Under the new system, shoppers at the stores will make purchases using cards that are backed by currencies including U.S. dollars.

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BUSINESS

Brazil to Begin Testing Sinovac’s Covid-19 Vaccine

Advanced testing of Chinese pharmaceutical firm Sinovac’s Covid-19 vaccine will begin in Brazil. São Paulo Gov. João Doria said testing will begin at the Clinical Hospital of São Paulo.

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Doria // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Prosecutor to Probe Allegations Against Puerto Rico Governor

Puerto Rico's Special Independent Prosecutor's Panel has agreed to investigate corruption allegations against Gov. Wanda Vázquez and others, the Associated Press reported Monday. Earlier this month, former Justice Secretary Dennise Longo said Vázquez and others had been targeted in an investigation that the department had opened earlier this year over the alleged mismanagement of supplies meant

Vázquez denied that she fired Longo in retribution for the investigation.

for Puerto Ricans who had been affected by earthquakes. Longo was fired the same day she referred the matter to the special panel. Longo's successor as justice minister, Wandymar Burgos, then resigned after a week in the position after she identified herself as the person who recalled six files that were about to be delivered to the independent prosecutor's panel, saying she needed to examine them. One of the files named Vázquez, according to Longo, the AP reported. Burgos stepped down after several top members of the governor's party called for her resignation. Vázquez denied that she fired Longo in retribution for the investigation, saying she asked the former justice secretary to step down because of alleged interference in an unrelated federal investigation involving potential Medicaid fraud. The prosecutor's panel now has 90 days to investigate the allegations and determine whether they have enough merit to file charges. The move to investigate Vázquez comes just weeks ahead of the primary election for Puerto Rico's New Progressive Party, in which Vázquez is running to be the party's candidate in the November gubernatorial election.

Killings of Women Soar 9.2% in Mexico During Pandemic

The number of homicides in Mexico, particularly of women, has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, according to government figures released Monday, the Associated Press reported. Overall, the homicide rate increased 1.9 percent in the first six months of the year, to 17,982, as compared to 17,653 for the same period last year. However, the number of killings of women increased 9.2 percent, to 489 in the first half of this year, as compared to 448 in the first six months of 2019. Activists have long been concerned that home confinement of families during the pandemic would increase the homicide rate of women in Mexico. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Feb. 27 issue of the Advisor.]

ECONOMIC NEWS

Cuba Opens Stores That Accept Only Foreign Currency

Cuba on Monday opened shops that only accept foreign currencies and scrapped a special tax on the U.S. dollar, expanding a process of collecting stronger currencies as the Caribbean nation struggles amid an economic crisis, the Associated Press reported. By morning, long lines formed outside a half-dozen foreign-currency-only shops selling food and toiletries in Havana. Under the new system, people make purchases using national or foreign cards backed by hard currencies, especially dollars, including Visa or Mastercard. Cash is not accepted. Additionally, such stores contain products that peso-sale stores currently lack, such as detergent, minced chicken, beef and canned goods, the AP reported. "It looks to me like at this critical time, when the country is going without food, there is everything" in the shop, Lenon Fernández, a 32-year-old entrepre-

NEWS BRIEFS

Two More Members of Bolsonaro's Cabinet Test Positive for Covid-19

Two more members of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's cabinet said Monday that they had tested positive for Covid-19, the Associated Press reported. The minister of citizenship, Onyx Lorenzoni, said his symptoms began last Thursday and that he is now feeling better and working from home. The new minister of education, Milton Ribeiro, on Monday said he had also contracted the novel coronavirus. In total, four Brazilian cabinet ministers, as well as Bolsonaro, have tested positive for the virus.

Man Charged in Killing of Seven Young People in Panama

Prosecutors in Panama said Monday they had charged a man with murder in connection with the killing of seven young people whose bodies were found near Gatún Lake, which is part of the Panama Canal, the Associated Press reported. Prosecutors did not provide details about the suspect, who was arrested Sunday, but said there is evidence that other people may have been involved. The rare mass killing of four men and three women has shocked the Central American country, in part due to the victims' young age, between 17 and 22.

Brazil Will Let WhatsApp Payments Operate if Rules Are Followed: Official

Brazil's central bank will allow Facebook's WhatsApp messaging platform to operate a payments service if all rules are followed, central bank director João Manoel Pinho de Mello said Monday, Reuters reported. "We will allow it, no problem," as long as rules are followed, he said during an online event. The central bank suspended the payments service last month, saying it needed to examine whether it can operate safely and allow competition.

neur who visited a market known as 70, told the AP. Cuba last had to open dollar stores for basic goods in the 1990s, when the fall of the Soviet Union hit the Communist-run island into a sharp economic depression, Reuters reported. Currently, Cuba is facing a serious shortage of tradable currency to purchase goods abroad, especially as tourism has plunged amid the coronavirus pandemic and usual allies, particularly Venezuela, face their own economic woes. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the June 3 issue of the Advisor.]

BUSINESS NEWS

Brazil to Begin Testing Sinovac's Covid-19 Vaccine

Brazil will begin advanced clinical testing of a Chinese-manufactured vaccine against the novel coronavirus today, issuing the first doses to approximately 900 volunteers, official said, Agence France-Presse reported. Chinese pharmaceutical firm Sinovac developed the vaccine, which is the third in the world to enter Phase 3 trials, in which large-scale testing on humans is carried out. It is the last step before regulatory approval. The vaccine will be administered to doctors and other health workers across six states in Brazil who volunteered for the program. "Trials of CoronaVac, one of the vaccines that has advanced the furthest in testing in the world, will begin at the Clinical Hospital of São Paulo," the state's governor, João Doria, said during a news conference. Initial results are expected within 90 days, Doria added, Reuters reported. He also said that, if successful, local research center Instituto Butantan could begin manufacturing the vaccine in 2021. Under the deal, the institute has the right to produce 120 million doses. Brazil has seen the second-highest number of coronavirus cases and deaths worldwide, after only the United States. The South American nation has approximately 2.1 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 and, on Monday, the death toll surpassed 81,000, AFP reported.

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The WHO and PAHO have at times issued statements, made recommendations or advocated for policies regarding intellectual property and price controls that are inimical to the interests of these industries. Without the moderating impact of the U.S. delegation during, for instance, the World Health Assembly, these outcomes will almost certainly occur more frequently. In this hemisphere, most governments hold PAHO in high regard. Many rely on its financing support funds to acquire essential medicines. Others depend on its regulatory policy guidance when they lack the capacity to develop their own regulations. Reducing PAHO's budget may well reduce the agency's ability to engage in areas generally consistent with U.S. national interests while eliminating any U.S. influence over decisions—good or bad. No doubt, the WHO and PAHO would benefit from thoughtful reform. Regrettably, rather than working to improve the WHO's pandemic response capability (among other potential reforms), the Trump administration has chosen to undermine global collaboration to distract from national mismanagement."

A Ross Marchand, vice president for policy at the Taxpayers Protection Alliance: "U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was absolutely correct in his declaration that the World Health Organization (WHO) has 'a long history of corruption and politicization.' This politicization has become hard to deny in recent months as the WHO continues to refuse Taiwan a seat at the table at the agency's emergency meetings. One might think that the WHO could learn a thing or two from Taiwan, which has seen just seven Covid-19-related deaths since the start of the pandemic. But, sadly, the agency has prioritized currying favor with the Chinese government over the impartial global pursuit of public health. WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has praised Chinese President Xi Jinping for his political 'leadership,' despite the regime covering

up the pandemic and punishing doctors who sounded the alarm. Withdrawing from this clearly lopsided organization sends a powerful message that such antics will not be tolerated. The Taxpayers Protection Alliance has suggested replacing WHO funding with direct funding for organizations doing pivotal public health work across the globe, such as Doctors Without Borders. The United States and its allies are in a unique position to cut out the corrupt middleman and directly fund promising health initiatives worldwide. In Latin America, this shift in public health funding will mean a critical realignment toward urgent priorities. Instead of misguided WHO-funded efforts to fight harm reduction products such as vapes, greater resources can be devoted toward fighting the coronavirus. Withdrawing from the WHO will be a boon for public health in Latin America and the entire world."

A Katherine Bliss, senior fellow at the CSIS Global Health Policy Center: "The Trump administration's withdrawal from the WHO, and by extension, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which has provided technical and policy guidance to health ministries in the region for more than 100 years, seems ill-advised. In the early 20th century, U.S. health officials helped establish the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, which became the WHO's regional office after 1948. The Bureau's first three leaders were U.S. public health physicians, and the U.S. government donated the land in Washington for the PAHO headquarters, which opened in 1965. A formal U.S. withdrawal from PAHO will stress an agency already facing budget deficits. In addition to funds transferred from the WHO, PAHO collects members' dues directly, and several, including the United States, as well as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela, have not fully paid their 2019 or 2020 assessments. The United States' unpaid balance of \$110 million represents 67 percent of the total in

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arrears. A U.S. withdrawal could also cancel long-standing voluntary contributions that support the hiring of technical personnel, such as immunization experts, at the country level. Even if it does withdraw from the WHO, the United States should find a way to maintain PAHO membership, pay its 2019 and 2020 assessments and contribute to a supplementary fund to provide members with critical supplies to address the coronavirus pandemic. With any return to normal tied to the effective distribution of a vaccine to prevent infection with the virus that causes Covid-19, scaling back U.S. support for regional public health collaborations now would be shortsighted."

A **Carlos Espinal, director of the Global Health Consortium at the Robert Stempel College of Public Health & Social Work at Florida International University:** "The WHO is responsible for coordinating international responses to public health issues, issuing specific guidelines for prevention, diagnosis, control and treatment of diseases, supported among others by U.S. scientists and government bodies. It's the only agency that can declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (such as the 2009 H1N1 and the present Covid-19 pandemics)—the highest level of alert in global public health, which unlocks additional financial support. The WHO and its regional offices have played a very important role in improving global health conditions. Its objectives have always been aimed at promoting the principles of human rights, universality and equity, as well as the integral development of the population under the concept of One Health, an approach to designing and implementing partnership initiatives to develop programs, health policies, research and legislation. The United States has been an instrumental member of global expert committees that

have collaborated in the identification and resolution of the most serious global and public health threats. U.S. scientists and the U.S. government's support have been extremely relevant in the resolution of the H1N1 pandemic, in the Ebola outbreak in Africa and Covid-19. U.S. scientists and the CDC have always been involved in responding to a disease outbreak or pandemic

“By withdrawing from the WHO, the United States will lose leadership, respect and trust with its international partners.”
— Carlos Espinal

situation by helping the WHO and countries in critical phases of any public health threat in the identification of the problem, surveillance, evaluation and implementation of control measures and impact evaluation. By withdrawing from the WHO, the United States will lose leadership, respect and trust with its international partners. The U.S. scientific community will forfeit its capacity to influence good practices in public health. Also, it will lose the access to the WHO Global Information System for sharing data and vaccine strains. It will also miss the chance to know since the very early stages the origin and place of potential pandemic pathogens and new health threats, making the world and the United States more vulnerable for severe outbreaks. This is not a question of money anymore; it's about trust, honor, reputation and partnership."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR is published every business day by the Inter-American Dialogue, Copyright © 2020

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Latin America Advisor is published every business day, except for major U.S. holidays, by the Inter-American Dialogue at 1155 15th Street NW, Suite 800 Washington, DC 20005

www.thedialogue.org

ISSN 2163-7962

Subscription inquiries are welcomed at ebrand@thedialogue.org

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