

## Travel restrictions violate international law

From China's lockdown of the city of Wuhan (1) to U.S. restrictions on travelers from Europe (2) to border closures across a widening range of countries (3), governments are increasingly seeking to limit freedom of movement in response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). These travel restrictions have slowed, but not halted, the spread of the pandemic ("The effect of travel restrictions on the spread of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak," M. Chinazzi *et al.*, Research Articles, published online 6 March, p. eaba9757). However, the necessity and benefits of this public health response are outweighed by its violation of international law. Under the International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR), binding on all World Health Organization (WHO) member states, health measures "shall not be more restrictive of international traffic and not more invasive or intrusive to persons than reasonably available alternatives" [(4), art. 43]. Given the effectiveness of community-based public health measures such as social distancing (5) and contact

tracing (6), the necessity of travel bans must be weighed against less restrictive alternatives, increased global divisions, and violated IHR obligations (7).

The IHR seeks to govern how states can come together to address collective public health threats, whereas national travel bans drive nations apart through unnecessary economic isolation and rights violations. Although the IHR demands that health measures be implemented "with full respect for the dignity, human rights, and fundamental freedoms of persons" [(4), art. 3], travel restrictions unnecessarily infringe a range of basic rights related to the freedom of movement. In the COVID-19 response, systematic social distancing interventions recommended by WHO were bypassed in the rush toward emergency travel bans, limiting individual freedoms while stoking nationalist responses.

WHO has repeatedly praised the "aggressive" measures taken by governments (8), but forced restrictions on travel undercut the global solidarity that WHO seeks in responding to this common threat. Travel bans during past outbreaks have been found to have limited public health effectiveness (9), as the prevention of disease is inextricably linked to international cooperation and rights protections (10). Rather than implementing coercive travel restrictions, governments should follow WHO recommendations in realizing transparent governance, expanding testing capacity, and implementing social distancing to protect public health. The COVID-19 pandemic will test national systems, but the world is more secure when all national responses comply with both public health necessities and global health law.

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