

Covid-19: Taiwan offers masks and medical aid to foreign countries, angering Beijing

Monday 6 April 2020, by [CHUNG Lawrence](#) (Date first published: 5 April 2020).

- **Self-ruled island has been frozen out of the World Health Organisation but its strong response to Covid-19 has helped raise its profile**
- **Taipei has offered to donate 10 million face masks to countries that are battling the outbreak**

Taiwan has intensified its efforts to raise its global profile by offering to donate urgently needed face masks and medical aids to other countries – a move that has angered Beijing.

Observers said Taiwan's efforts to control the Covid-19 outbreak had highlighted the strengths of its medical system and increased its visibility on the world stage.

It has also been praised by world leaders, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen saying the EU is thankful for Taiwan's efforts and gestures of solidarity, while the US state department described Taiwan as a true friend.

But Beijing's response was less complimentary. Foreign ministry spokesman Hua Chunying said Taiwan prohibited the export of masks when the outbreak was at its height on the Chinese mainland, and said the island should not play any "political tricks" to gain accession to the World Health Organisation.

She said that Chinese companies and individuals had also donated medical supplies to the US, and questioned why there had been no official recognition of those efforts.

"It is appropriate to give mutual support and help during this pandemic. But the US and Taiwan should be reminded that if there is anyone trying to use this pandemic to play political games and hurt China's core interests, they should be very careful".

Beijing considers Taiwan part of its territory awaiting reunification with the mainland, by force if necessary.

It has warned other countries against supporting the island's efforts to join global organisations like the WHO, which does not recognise it as a sovereign state.

Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen explained that the ban on mask exports had been lifted because the island could not stand by while other countries were in dire need of help.

"I want to tell the international community that Taiwan will actively bolster our cooperation with all countries to prevent the spread of Covid-19," she said on Wednesday, adding if the pandemic were not brought under control it would never end and Taiwan would remain in danger.

“At this stage, we will donate 10 million face masks, or around one day’s production, to support medical workers in countries where the Covid-19 outbreak is particularly severe. Later on, we will provide even more support to the international community based on our domestic production capacity,” she said.

Tsai also offered to share the island’s electronic quarantine system that uses big data analytics.

Because of its geographical closeness to mainland China and the frequent exchanges of people, Taiwan had been expected to be one of the places worst hit by the Covid-19 outbreak.

But its fast response in tackling the virus, transparency in telling the public of the situation, efficiency in tracing the contact history of confirmed infections and advice for the public to use face masks in public places have been credited by health experts in keeping the disease under control.

Taiwan’s vice-president Chen Chien-jen is also an epidemiologist, known for his role as health minister during the 2003 Sars outbreak.

As of Saturday, the island had recorded 355 cases of infection and five deaths.

Taiwan’s initial success has also won recognition from at least 35 countries, which have asked for advice from the island and want to cooperate with Taiwan, according to the island’s foreign ministry.

Taiwan has promised to donate 7 million face masks to the worst hit European countries, including Italy and Spain.

It has also offered 1 million masks, thermal imaging devices and infrared thermometers to the 15 states that still maintain formal diplomatic relations with it.

The United States has also discussed ways to expand the island’s presence on the world stage. On Tuesday senior officials from both sides held a virtual forum on how to share the Taiwan model around the world, according to the American Institute in Taipei, the de facto US embassy in Taiwan.

Stephen Tan, president of the Cross-Strait Policy Association, a private think tank, said Taiwan was hoping to enlarge its participation in global affairs and show that it could do better than mainland China.

Beijing has also tried to use the outbreak to promote itself internationally by offering face masks and other medical supplies, but in some cases the equipment was found to be defective and had to be recalled.

“The relatively low infections and deaths in Taiwan have impressed many countries – especially after the pandemic spread in the US and Europe, and many of them have felt that it would be unfair not to allow Taiwan to join the WHO, given its medical strength and ability to check the pandemic,” Tan said.

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- Lawrence Chung covers major news in Taiwan, ranging from presidential and parliament elections to killer earthquakes and typhoons. Most of his reports focus on Taiwan's relations with China, specifically on the impact and possible developments of cross-strait relations under the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party and mainland-friendly Kuomintang governments. Before starting work at the South China Morning Post in 2006, he wrote for Reuters and AFP for more than 12 years.