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country report

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Geneva Barometer

The 'Geneva Barometer' takes an occasional look at selected developments among international organizations based in Geneva (September to December 2024).

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Human Rights

57th UN Human Rights Council: We are at a fork in the road

„We can either wake up and turn things around or sleepwalk into a dystopian future“, warned Volker Turk looking back at the past two years since assuming the role as UN Human Rights Chief. His global update¹ to this year's September Council contained strong warnings that the „new normal“ of endless military escalation, disinformation, absolutist approaches, disregard for international law, discrediting of multilateral institutions, just to name a few, was unacceptable and that not human rights were in crisis, but the political leadership needed to make them a reality was.

Following weeks of deliberations during the 57th session, from 9 September to 11 October, the Human Rights Council finally adopted 38 texts², 28 of which by consensus (74%). Among them were several extensions of country-specific mandates, including on Afghanistan and the thematic mandate on climate change. However, the extension of some country-specific mandate holders became subject for discussion:

During the vote on the extension of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) on **Sudan**³, the experts received broader support than in the previous year, including from the African Group. Presenting their first report, the FFM stated that both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Response

Forces (RSF), and their allied militias, had committed a range of harrowing human rights violations and international crimes, including many which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The RSF in particular was found responsible for large-scale sexual violence, including gangrape and sexual slavery. Hence, they called for the expansion of both, the existing arms embargo as well as of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to all of Sudan. In addition, they recommended to establish a separate international judicial mechanism working in tandem and complementary to the ICC and to deploy an „independent and impartial force with a mandate to safeguard civilians“.

The extension of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) on **Venezuela**⁴ was also put to a vote. In their latest report, the mission stated that all peaceful opposition was being brushed in what they term „one of the most acute human rights crises in recent history“. Mandated to brief the Council on the current situation in December⁵, UN High Commissioner Türk focused on the violence during the post-electoral protests in July and August and urged authorities to investigate the killings, release the arbitrarily detained, guarantee fair trials and guarantee an open and inclusive civic space, especially ahead of the elections next year. After having been kicked out in February, his office has

¹ Find the global update of the High Commissioner [here](#).

² An overview of all texts adopted can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

³ More information on the Fact Finding Mission on Sudan as well as their latest reports can be accessed [here](#).

⁴ More information on the work of the Fact Finding Mission on Venezuela along with their latest reports can be found [here](#).

⁵ The oral update of the High Commissioner on Venezuela from 13.12.2024 can be watched [here](#) and read [here](#).

resumed operations in recent weeks and was hopeful that a full presence can be restored⁶.

The second extension of the Special Rapporteur on the **Russian Federation**⁷ was also only secured after a vote. In her second report to the Council, Mariana Katzarova highlighted the stark link between aggression abroad and repression at home. She described a complete shutdown of independent civic and political arenas, and State-driven human rights violations legalized by new or amended legislation. Thousands of Russians were arbitrarily detained due to the use of labels, such as „foreign agents“, „extremists“, „fake news“, „undesirable“ or „discrediting the army“. Already vulnerable groups were especially hard-hit. Punitive psychiatry and torture were widespread. The latter was also being systematically applied to captured members of the Ukrainian military which were not accorded prisoner of war status but were tried in military courts, facing 20 years to life imprisonment.

Other controversial country resolutions included one on technical assistance to **Georgia** which i.a. condemns „land seizures“ in Abkhazia as well as statements on „the intention to hold a so-called referendum in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia, on the matter of joining the Russian Federation“. It requests immediate and unimpeded access for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other human rights mechanisms to these regions and the High Commissioner to continue to provide technical assistance through the Office in Tbilisi.

A resolution on **Syria** was voted on as well. In their last report to the Council, the Independent Commission of Inquiry (CoI)⁸ called on all parties to uphold their obligations under international law, to cooperate fully with the Commission and the Council and stressed the need for accountability. The Commission had documented, among others torture and ill-treatment by several parties over years⁹. After the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December, they therefore urged the incoming authorities to break the cycle of violence, match their words with their deeds and usher in a new rights-respecting era.

While the resolution on technical assistance to **Yemen** was adopted by consensus, western countries and civil society organisations expressed their disappointment that no independent monitoring of human rights violations was possible after the Group of Eminent Experts (GEE) had been dissolved back in 2021¹⁰.

Disappointment was palpable also given the fact that the second anniversary of the publication of the UN report on **Xinjiang** passed without any tangible progress. Despite Volker Türk's quiet diplomacy, the office acknowledged in August that „many problematic laws and policies remain in place“, limited access and reprisals were an issue as well¹¹. Hence, the core group on Xinjiang, namely Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States called on China under item 4, which is reserved for situations that need the Councils urgent attention to meaningfully engage with the UN and implement the recommendations contained in the report¹². Countering this, Cuba on behalf of around 80 countries opposed the statement underlining that Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet related issues were China's internal affairs¹³.

Thematic resolutions concerned, among others the rights on the internet, biodiversity or the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action next year.

Composition of the Council in 2025: US is out, Swiss assume presidency

On 9 October, the UN General Assembly elected 15 new members and re-elected 3 members (Benin, Gambia, Qatar) by secret ballot to the 47-member UN Human Rights Council for the term 2025-2027. From the five regional groups, the only one that allowed for competition was the Asia-Pacific Group. With only 117 votes, Saudi Arabia came in sixth behind the Marshall Islands (124) and thus failed to be elected. All other regional groups pre-selected the exact number of candidates for the vacant seats, a so-called „clean slate“. In the group of Western European and other States Group (WEOG), the US decided not to run for a second term. Back in June 2018, Trump in his

⁶ More in a press conference from 09.12.2024, [here](#) and [here](#).

⁷ More information about Katzarova's mandate, recent statements and reports can be found [here](#).

⁸ More detailed background information on the Commission of Inquiry on Syria as well as are their reports can be found [here](#).

⁹ The report on torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic from 2020-2023 can be found [here](#).

¹⁰ For more information on the vote back in 2021, see [here](#) and more information about the GEE, [here](#)

¹¹ The update of the OHCHR on Xinjiang is [here](#), further reporting [here](#).

¹² The joint statement delivered by the US on Xinjiang is [here](#).

¹³ The joint statement delivered by Cuba in defence of China can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

first term had decided to withdraw from the Council, a decision that was reversed under Biden. Instead, Switzerland obtained the highest number of votes in the Western Group which indirectly also paved the way for Swiss Ambassador Jürg Lauber to assume the presidency of the Human Rights Council during 2025. After his election on 9 December, he recalled the active role Switzerland played in the shaping of the Council. He particularly vowed to establish the „lost diplomatic space“ to make human rights the priority they are. The ambassadors of Romania, Bangladesh and the Democratic Republic of the Congo will serve as Vice Presidents for next year. A fourth president from the Latin American and Caribbean Group has not yet been agreed on and will be elected later¹⁴.

Human Rights Day: Review of a year of conflicts

After a year of immense suffering around the world, High Commissioner Türk focused on three areas of concern ahead of Human Rights Day. Firstly, the proliferation of armed conflicts coupled with the erosion of respect for international law and the apparent indifference of powerful actors. He reminded states especially of their obligation to ensure respect and spoke up against militarised approaches to security, including the use of anti-personnel mines or the lowering of the threshold for using nuclear weapons. Instead, more investments were needed in mediation, dialogue, negotiation, confidence-building and strong alliances for peacemaking. Secondly, Türk warned that the proliferation of disinformation and non-evidence based public debates were extremely dangerous, targeting not only the messengers and eroding social cohesion, but is oftentimes linked to „othering“, scapegoating and dehumanising of entire communities. Thirdly, the focus on waging wars and disinformation distracted from some of the biggest challenges to long-term security, such as the triple planetary crisis. With a view on 2025, Türk made a strong plea for the defense of international institutions, including by tackling the liquidity crisis¹⁵.

Humanitarian Affairs

OCHA: New leadership to deal with a system at a breaking point

After a five months vacancy at the head of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Tom Fletcher took over the post as UN top humanitarian from Martin Griffith by mid-November. Griffith had unexpectedly stepped down early due to issues with long-Covid, becoming the second incumbent leaving the top-job prematurely. With political diplomacy to end conflicts declining – obliging humanitarian diplomacy to take the front seat, Griffith recalled that, the world was in a worse place now than when he had joined in 2021, citing conflicts such as the Tigray crisis, Afghanistan, Haiti, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza and the many situations that were not making the headlines. Despite skyrocketing needs, but owing to shrinking aid budgets, Griffith brought down the ask for funding to help the most vulnerable from 56 billion USD in 2023 to 49,6 billion this year. And still, when he stepped down at the end of June, only 8 billion USD had been received. Never had it been as difficult and as bad as now, according to Griffith¹⁶.

As sixth Briton in a row, the nomination of former diplomat Tom Fletcher who has limited humanitarian experience, was met with mixed feelings in the humanitarian community, especially in the South. Listening and meeting partners in the field as well as finding ways how to be more efficient and inclusive will be therefore among his priorities, he stated, being under no illusion that the system is at a breaking point, even after the „ruthless prioritisation“ that Griffith had led¹⁷.

Global Humanitarian Overview for 2025: Underfunded, overstretched, and under attack

When presenting the new Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) for 2025 in Geneva at the beginning of December, the appeal for 2024 was still only 43% funded with the US contributing 44% of the amount alone¹⁸. The appeal for next year was further reduced in its scope and ambition. It asks for 47 billion – less than 2% of the global military expenditure –, to reach nearly 190 million people out of a total of 305 million in need of urgent humanitarian assistance¹⁹. A significant increase in funding (34% of the total) will be required for the Middle East and North Africa region alone. Fearing that the new Trump administration would cut funding again, Fletcher already announced that he will „spend a lot of time in Washington“ and needs

¹⁴ More information on the election of Ambassador Lauber can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

¹⁵ More can be found [here](#) and the whole press conference ahead of Human Rights Day [here](#).

¹⁶ More information can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

¹⁷ Find more information on Fletcher [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

¹⁸ You can track the humanitarian funding via fts, see [here](#).

¹⁹ The Global Humanitarian Overview for 2025 can be found [here](#), its presentation in Geneva [here](#).

to „get into capitals“²⁰. Humanitarian aid was not only underfunded and overstretched, but also under attack. The main culprits were man-made, namely conflicts where international law was willfully neglected and the climate emergency. 2024 was not only the hottest year on record, but also the most brutal and deadliest to be a humanitarian. More than 280 humanitarians lost their lives in the line of duty – 63% of which in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian Territories alone –, 525 were subjected to major attacks²¹. Arrests and detentions were rapidly growing, aid deliveries were deliberately obstructed. More than 2,135 conflict-related assaults on medical personnel and health facilities were reported. In order to effectively deliver aid in 2025, the respect for international humanitarian law (IHL) and accountability for violations were key.

New initiatives to put compliance with IHL at centre of political prioritisation

At the margins of the 79th UN General Assembly in New York, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), custodian of the Geneva Conventions launched a new platform to address the shortcomings in the implementation of the rules of war together with an initial group of six countries that have, according to ICRC president Mirjana Spoljaric Egger influence and weight in the international scene, namely Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan and South Africa²². All High Contracting Parties to the Conventions were invited to join the 2-year process to develop concrete and practical measures for states and their leaders to better respect humanitarian law. The aim is to offer resulting recommendations for adoption by the Parties at a high-level meeting on preserving humanity in war in 2026.

Likewise, at the sideline of the UN General Assembly, but more on the monitoring and reporting side, Gloria Gaggioli, former Director of the Geneva Academy and Professor at the Law Faculty, University of Geneva introduced the „IHL in Focus“ project²³ which provides independent, thorough examination of global compliance with IHL with a view on improving respect for the body of law. The findings will be made public in an annual global report. A first spot report was published already²⁴. The event was co-hosted by the United Kingdom,

Belgium, Indonesia, Jordan, Mexico, and the European Union.

34th International Conference of Red Cross and Red Crescent

In the midst of escalating conflicts worldwide, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement with all its 191 Societies met with the 196 States Parties to the Geneva Conventions and the ICRC from 28 to 31 October in Geneva to set the direction for the next for years. A key priority was to build a culture of compliance for IHL, which Spoljaric Egger, president of the ICRC addressed head-on in her opening speech when stressing the obligation of every High Contracting Party to „respect and ensure respect“ as laid out in Art. 1 of the Geneva Convention²⁵. After intense discussions, the five resolutions that were tabled were all adopted. They focused on 1) a universal culture of compliance with IHL, on 2) digital technologies in armed conflict (first time), 3) disaster risk governance, 4) local leadership and resilience and 5) climate-related Impacts²⁶. In addition, a sixth resolution on implementing the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Magen David Adom (MDA), the Israeli National Society and the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) was adopted despite growing political pressure and the loss of six respectively 21 colleagues in the line of duty since 7 October and the following Gaza war²⁷.

Peace and Security

Sudan: Talks on world's worst humanitarian crisis in Geneva

With the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) declining numerous attempts by the US to join in-person ceasefire talks in Geneva due to unmet preconditions – such as the absence of the United Arab Emirates from the talks as observers –, hopes were dashed early on what the gathering at the end of August would bring. Despite this, the US as convener represented by special envoy and lead-negotiator Tom Perriello, together with Switzerland and Saudi Arabia as co-hosts moved ahead, largely focusing the ten-day meeting on advancing humanitarian aid efforts. The UN, the African Union, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Sudanese women groups were present as observers.

²⁰ See more information [here](#).

²¹ More information on aid workers killed, [here](#) and [here](#).

²² More information about the initiative can be found [here](#).

²³ More about the IHL in Focus project can be found [here](#).

²⁴ The first spot report can be found [here](#).

²⁵ See the speech of Mirjana Spoljaric Egger [here](#).

²⁶ All resolutions and more background information on the conference can be found [here](#).

²⁷ More information can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

With a delegation of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) present in Geneva, and the SAF available virtually, the ten-day meeting achieved the temporary opening of Adre border crossing between Chad and Darfur²⁸, obtained guarantees for Dabbah Road from Port Sudan and other openings were still under discussion²⁹. Currently, over half of the population in Sudan faces crisis or worse conditions of hunger (IPC3 or above) and 14 areas are at risk of famine (IPC5). In addition, Sudan is considered to be the world's biggest displacement crisis with more than 12 million people forcibly displaced³⁰.

Assad regime fell after 54 years: First responses from International Geneva on Syria

OHCHR: Accountability is key

Since the fall of Bashar al-Assad on 8 December, several UN agencies in Geneva shared their assessments of the situation, insights from their work and their priorities for a brighter future of the country. As one of the first, UN High Commissioner Volker Türk spoke to the press about the crucial point of **accountability**: firstly, via increased international jurisdiction which around 40 countries worldwide have established, secondly, via the referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC), either with the UN Security Council referring the situation or with Syria ratifying the Rome statute itself and thirdly, with a domestic legal system being built that allows for fair trials. In addition, he called for a reform of **the security apparatus**, addressing **the tragedy of the missing**, respect for **international humanitarian and human rights law** by all parties, for a nationally owned inclusive political process with the **human rights of all Syrians** at its core, as well as the restoration of the country's **sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity**. The Human Rights system can support this endeavour with several institutions that have documented widespread human rights violations over the past years: his own office (OHCHR), the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) on Syria³¹, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on Syria³² and the Independent Institution on Missing Persons (IIMP) in

Syria which is still being established³³. Turk drew hope also from a very active civil society which was „extremely engaged“ in human rights³⁴.

Geir Pedersen: Watershed moment, a lot of hope and enormous challenges

After trips to Geneva and Jordan for the Aqaba Joint Contact Group ministerial meeting on Syria, the Special Envoy of the Secretary General on Syria, Geir Pedersen met with the leadership of Hay'at Tahrir ash-Sham (HTS), representatives from the Syrian National Council (SNC), family of detained and missing and a whole range of actors in Damascus. He pointed to the fragile security situation with hostilities between the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) advancing in the southwest. More than 350 strikes have been recorded. Pedersen called on the cessation of settlement activities in the occupied Syrian Golan and more broadly on any attacks on the territorial integrity of Syria. Since the conflict has not yet ended, **de-escalation** and a nationwide ceasefire was key. Given the sheer scale of needs, support was needed beyond humanitarian aid, in the areas of economic development and reconstruction, but also appropriate action on designations and the reassessment and ultimately termination of sanctions. On the transitional political process, the Aqaba Joint Contact Group agreed on a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process³⁵ that produces an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative government through a transparent process based on Security Council resolution 2254, which he noted, cannot be applied mechanically. First, state institutions had to be safeguarded; second, the transition must credibly include the broader spectrum of Syrian society and parties; third, a new constitution had to be worked out and fourth, free and fair elections in accordance with international standards were key. Like Turk, Pedersen underlined the centrality of transitional justice without which Syria and Syrians will not be able to overcome the violent past. Across the UN system, there was determination to strengthen the UN presence in Syria, supporting Syrians to step forward and lead³⁶.

²⁸ After the initial three months period had passed, another three months extension has been granted.

²⁹ Please find a press statement from the US [here](#) and a Joint Statement by the ALPS Group [here](#).

³⁰ For the latest numbers on displaced and humanitarian needs, please find them [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

³¹ Find more information on the IIIM on Syria [here](#).

³² Find more information on the CoI on Syria [here](#).

³³ Find more information join the IIMP on Syria [here](#).

³⁴ The press statement can be found [here](#) and the conference can be followed [here](#).

³⁵ See the Joint Statement on Syria over [here](#).

³⁶ Latest updates on the situation from the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Syria can be found [here](#). Geir Pedersen's press conference in Geneva [here](#) and his latest briefing to the Security Council, [here](#)

ICRC: Preserving evidence and respecting obligations under IHL

With 500 staff all over the country, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was present throughout the past years and is currently scaling up, especially given the enormous work around the missing. While 35.000 people who went missing in Syria have already been registered, the ICRC is aware that this reflects only a fraction of the actual number. Witnessing firsthand how registries, records and death certificates were scattered around Sednaya prison, they called on all parties to preserve all information and evidence, burial sites and places where people have identified potential mortal remains. The ICRC has offered their support to the authorities and at the same time requested access to all remaining detention facilities. Two hotlines had been opened, one for released prisoners and one for families in search for their loved ones. Support from the organisation includes, i.a. mental health and psychological support, healthcare, economic, legal, or administrative assistance³⁷.

OCHA: More than 70% of population still in need of humanitarian support

Tom Fletcher, the new head of OCHA recalled that while the developments in recent days have been dramatic, the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Syria has not changed: more than 17 million people or 70% of the population is in need of humanitarian support. His first in-person meetings with the new caretaker government were considered as „encouraging“, receiving several commitments and assurances, including for the movement of aid personnel and supplies, the access to those in need or the issuing of visa and NGO registration documents. Given the scale of needs and the largest-ever funding gap for the Syria response, Fletcher called on the international community to support with more flexible funding. At year's end, the Syria plan is only 32,7% funded³⁸.

UNHCR: Remarkable opportunity, but continued protection and support needed

With more than 13 million people forced to flee their homes, 7 million as internally displaced and 6 million refugees living abroad, Syria still is the largest displacement crisis in the world. In addition, nearly 1 million people were newly displaced since the start of the offensive from 27 November. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has observed

two-way movements, thousands returning from Lebanon and Turkey and Jordan, but also thousands leaving into Lebanon. The situation remained fluid and far from stable. In an updated position paper on returns³⁹, the agency therefore calls on States not to forcibly return anyone to any part of Syria. The requirements for the termination of refugee status were not currently fulfilled. The agency repeatedly underlined that any return had to be voluntary, safe, and dignified. The right of civilians (newly) fleeing Syria to access asylum had to be guaranteed as well. In order to step up efforts in supporting internally displaced and refugees returning to Syria, the agency appealed for 310 million USD and urged the international community to support Syrians in dire humanitarian need, invest in reconstruction, recovery initiatives and livelihood opportunities.

IOM: Presence re-established to support return of IDPs

Amy Pope, head of the International Organization of Migration (IOM) has also reaffirmed the organization's commitment to Syria, i.a. vis-a-vis the new caretaker government during her latest trip to Damascus. The presence of IOM is currently being re-established in order to support the return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees. Pope called on the international community not only to mobilize resources for a 30 million USD appeal from her own organization, but also to beef up support for the UN system-wide scale-up in the country⁴⁰.

WHO: Health emergencies and increased demand for medical care

The World Health Organisation (WHO) was optimistic about the latest developments in Syria following the fall of al-Assad and the appointment of a transitional government by the rebels. Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasised that this brings 'new hope' for the country and hoped for a lasting peace. Despite the positive turnaround, however, major health challenges remain, as the Syrian health system has been severely weakened after almost 14 years of war. The WHO is stepping up its aid to meet the increased demand for medical care and to deal with health emergencies. Dr Tedros called on all parties to facilitate safe and unhindered humanitarian aid⁴¹.

³⁷ Information and support from the ICRC can be accessed [here](#).

³⁸ Find updates on the finding of the Syria appeal [here](#) and more information on the work of OCHA [here](#).

³⁹ The position paper is [here](#), statements [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

⁴⁰ Latest information on IOM's work, [here](#) and [here](#).

⁴¹ See more [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Trade and Digital Affairs

(Re-)electing the WTO Director-General

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the incumbent Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), was re-elected for a second term on 29 November after being unopposed during [the nomination period that closed on 8 November 2024](#). Her current term was set to expire in August 2025. The regular nomination process would have begun on 1 December 2024; nine months before the end of the term. The WTO's General Council agreed by consensus on her re-election during special meeting convened by the Chair of the General Council, Ambassador Petter Olberg from Norway, on 28-29 November. Her candidacy has garnered significant support from many WTO members, particularly African nations, citing her leadership during challenging global trade disputes and efforts to revitalize the organization's functionality.

Officially, the re-election process was accelerated at the request of African members who argued that early clarity on the leadership position would help to streamline the preparations for the WTO's next ministerial conference (MC14) which will be held in Cameroon from 26 February to 1 March 2026. It is however undeniable that the re-election of Donald Trump in the US, whose administration had previously blocked Dr. Okonjo-Iweala's nomination in 2020, and the risks tied to shifting geopolitical dynamics will have influenced the decision of an expedited nomination process for the WTO's highest office.

First signals regarding the fast-track nomination surfaced in July 2024 when a number of member states expressed support for the African Group's proposal. The Director-General (DG) of the WTO then publicly confirmed her desire for a second term in September, after which the call for nominations was opened on [8 October 2024](#). With no other candidacies having been submitted by the deadline of 8 November 2024, the Chair of the General Council later announced special meeting for the election on 28-29 November rather than including the re-election in the regularly scheduled meeting of the General Council from 16-18 December.

Notwithstanding, the excitement about fast-track process is not shared by all member states nor political observers, and some reservations about this process have emerged: The expedited timeline is seen by some, especially critics in the U.S., as a manoeuvre to preclude potential opposition from the incoming U.S. administration under President-elect Donald Trump. His previous administration

opposed Okonjo-Iweala's candidacy in 2020, labelling her as being [too China-friendly](#). The outgoing Biden-Harris administration also [cautioned against the expedited process](#), although not opposing it. As part of the worst-case scenario and in the absence of consensus, members could have moved to a vote. This would have set an unfavourable precedence that might have weakened Dr. Okonjo-Iweala ahead of her second term, as no Director-General of the WTO has been elected through a vote. As such, the deviation to an accelerated process has been criticized as potentially undermining the impartiality of the re-election process, while critics argued that it risked politicizing the organization's governance.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that the WTO remained a key forum for multilateral trade during these times of turbulent geopolitical challenges under the leadership of Dr Okonjo-Iweala. Although exceeding expectations and achieving tangible results at MC12 may have been the exception rather than the norm in recent WTO history, these successes can largely be attributed to the incumbent DG. In order for the organization to continue projecting stability and maintaining its position as the global 'House of Trade', a stalemate such as witnessed during the previous election cycle, would only serve very few WTO members and be a warning of what the alternative to the anticipated process could look like.

While Okonjo-Iweala was able to secure a second term with widespread support, the process underscored the delicate interplay of global trade governance and international politics. The WTO's attempt to balance member states' concerns against operational urgency reflects the organization's ongoing challenges in navigating its multifaceted global mandate.

Leveraging Artificial Intelligence for global trade

The WTO's recent publication, ["Trading with Intelligence: How AI Shapes and is Shaped by International Trade,"](#) explores the transformative role of artificial intelligence (AI) in reshaping global trade dynamics. Launched alongside a high-level event at the WTO headquarters in Geneva on 21 November 2024, this report highlights both the opportunities and challenges AI presents to international commerce and governance. As highlighted in the foreword of the WTO Director-General, Dr. Okonjo-Iweala, the report is a first stocktaking exercise to help understand the impacts of AI on global trade, how to anticipate and mitigate trends such as a looming AI divide, and how to position the organisation within this new reality.

The report underscores AI's potential to reduce trade costs, automate supply chains, enhance regulatory compliance, and boost trade in AI-driven goods and services. Based on simulations, the optimistic scenario of "global synergy" suggests that universal AI adoption could increase global trade growth by up to 14% by 2040. However, it warns of potential pitfalls, including an "AI divide" between high- and low-income economies, regulatory fragmentation, and issues related to data governance and intellectual property.

The report underlines the potential shortcomings of a fragmented regulatory landscape on AI governance and emphasizes the urgent need for global coordination in AI regulation. It highlights the disparity in AI readiness, with developed nations like the U.S. dominating AI investments and frameworks, while many developing countries lag behind. This gap risks exacerbating economic inequalities unless addressed through cooperative measures.

With this report and launch event, the WTO tried to position itself as a key player in bridging these divides, leveraging its platform to foster multilateral agreements that promote equitable AI benefits while mitigating risks. The report also aligns with broader discussions on the role of technology in achieving sustainable development goals, underscoring AI's potential to democratize access to global markets.

This publication is particularly timely given the global fragmentation in AI policy and the intensifying competition for technological dominance among major economies, including the U.S., EU, and China. Additionally, the report falls into a time when questions around data flows are heavily contested and the questions surrounding the imposition of custom duties on electronic transmissions have not been solved definitively and the so-called E-Commerce Moratorium might end by the end of next year. It remains to be seen how long the momentum can be upheld following this event in times of geopolitical turmoil and a declining appetite for multilateral solutions to global challenges.

Artificial intelligence also at the forefront of digital negotiations

The topic of Artificial Intelligence was also very central in most other areas of digital affairs in the past few months. As such, the WTO report, "Trading with Intelligence: How AI Shapes and is Shaped by International Trade," aligns with a broader spectrum of global discussions around AI governance, economic integration, and standards. Key related events and publications include the [WEF](#)

[White Paper on AI and Trade](#), the adoption of the [Global Digital Compact](#) during the Summit of the Future on 22 September in New York, the [World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly \(WTSA\)](#) from 15-24 October in New Delhi, and the [AI Policy Summit 2024](#) from 1-2 November 2024 in Zurich.

The adoption of the Global Digital Compact (GDC) is itself a key milestone for internet and digital governance which brought fresh impetus to internet governance-related questions. The GDC underlined some important achievements such as the recognition of the role of multistakeholder governance in digital matters and calls for shared principles around digital technologies, including AI, to ensure equitable access and ethical deployment in alignment with human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although not without controversies, particularly concerning the process of getting to the adoption of the GDC, policymakers in Geneva are now particularly looking at the implementation of the compact in light of the upcoming review of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS+20 Review). The review of WSIS is scheduled for the end of 2025 and a number of important meetings will be held until then. The Internet Governance Forum, which will take place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, between 15-19 December 2024 and the WSIS+20 Forum High-Level Event will be hosted from 27-31 May 2025 and help shape the UN's future in digital affairs.

This year's World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly (WTSA-24) in New Delhi brought attention to the technical aspects of AI standardization. After having been hosted in Geneva in 2022 instead of Hyderabad in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the [host government leveraged the event to position itself as a key player within the telecommunications and tech sector](#). This was also reflected in the number of Chair and Vice-Chair positions obtained by Indian experts; jumping from seven at WTSA-22 to 11 leadership positions for the upcoming study period.

Moreover, the Assembly sported over 20 side-events related to Artificial Intelligence, highlighting standards for AI-enabled digital networks, among other things. The assembly's outcomes underscored the critical need for consensus on equitable and inclusive standards to bridge the global digital divide, reflecting the event's importance in shaping the trajectory of international digital cooperation.

The AI Policy Summit 2024 in Zurich highlighted interdisciplinary approaches to AI governance, with contributions from global policymakers, aca-

demia, and businesses. There, policymakers emphasized the importance of harmonized AI regulations to foster international trade while mitigating risks such as technological monopolization and regulatory fragmentation. The WTO report aligns with these discussions by stressing the role of multilateral frameworks to ensure AI's benefits are equitably shared, particularly for SMEs and developing economies, echoing concerns raised in Zurich. Other often-mentioned topics emphasized trust-building in AI applications and the necessity of robust international standards.

Similarly, efforts such as the World Economic Forum's (WEF) White Paper on AI and Trade, explore how generative AI can transform supply chain logistics, optimize cross-border e-commerce, and enhance services trade. The WTO report and the WEF White Paper are therefore complementary, particularly with regards to the WTO report's findings on how AI-driven tools reduce trade costs and barriers, while adding the perspective of trade-related regulatory gaps and the pressing need for international policy convergence.

Together, these recent events and publications frame AI as both a driver of and response to globalization trends, showcasing its role in reshaping economic landscapes and governance frameworks while addressing emergent geopolitical challenges.

It will be important for the legitimacy and added value of this round that not only NATO partners meet, but also representatives from Africa, Latin America and Asia take part. In addition to working out the framework conditions for a lasting peace, a roadmap for Russia's participation in the process should also be drawn up. While the talks will initially be based primarily on Zelensky's ten-point plan, observers say they will now focus more on principles from the UN Charter, also to ensure greater support from the international community.

Global health

Multilateral cooperation for a sustainable health policy: The revised IHR

The adoption of the revised International Health Regulations (IHR) by the World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2024 was celebrated worldwide as a

success of multilateral cooperation. They are crucial as they promote and coordinate cooperation and coordination between countries in addressing global health threats, even beyond the specific case of a pandemic. The scope of application will also be extended to pandemic emergencies that have not yet been explicitly mentioned.

A key step forward is the introduction of extended consultation and reporting obligations, which draw a lesson from the information delays at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries are now obliged to report outbreaks more transparently and quickly to avoid delays in international countermeasures. It also calls for the establishment of national IHR authorities to improve implementation and regular reporting.

The IHR addresses challenges in the health infrastructure: Standards for digital health certificates are intended to reduce fragmentation in vaccination and test certificates. In addition, Article 13 obliges the WHO to ensure more equitable access to health products during health crises, even though the issue of technology transfer remained unresolved at this point and is now one of the main points of contention in the pandemic agreement.

Financing remains a challenge: Instead of new funds, a mechanism will be introduced to coordinate existing funds. But the question of how this mechanism will be designed operationally remains open. It will be crucial to synchronise the IHR with the emerging pandemic agreement in order to create a coherent and sustainable global health architecture.

The amendments to the IHR will enter into force 12 months⁴² after notification by the Director-General, i.e. on September 19, 2025.

Pandemic agreement finally on the home stretch?

While the revision of the WHO's IHR was adopted at this year's WHA, negotiations on a pandemic agreement continue in the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB) on a Pandemic agreement. Despite some progress, especially in the areas of research and local production, central issues remain controversial. The differences relate in particular to access to pathogens and benefit-sharing (PABS) as well as technology transfer. While developing countries are calling for a mandatory regu-

is subject to a 24-month period from the notification of the Director-General, i.e. until 19 September 2026.

⁴² In accordance with Art. 59 of the IHR as amended in 2022. However, four Member States (Argentina, the Netherlands, Russia, and Slovakia) had announced reservations and an examination of the amendments. This

lation for technology transfer, industrialised countries are insisting on a voluntary solution. In addition to the disagreement on the annex to PABS, the annex of prevention is also a point of contention: both are demanded by developing countries in order to establish more detailed commitments. Industrialised countries reject these detailed regulations. A planned conclusion in December 2024 and a special WHA could not come about due to these unresolved disputes.

A conclusion of the agreement is now aimed for the regular WHA in May 2025, with the ongoing negotiations considered crucial to overcome these differences. The negotiations will continue in February 2025 under new geopolitical auspices.

Health emergencies

So, while negotiations on a pandemic agreement in Geneva are progressing slowly, the current disease outbreaks around the world require urgent action. Especially in Africa and other regions, countries are confronted with the effects of Mpox, H5N1 and Marburg fever. These outbreaks require rapid international responses and show the urgency of multilateral cooperation beyond the negotiations in Geneva.

Mpox (formerly monkeypox) remains a serious threat, especially in Africa, where a health emergency was declared in August 2024.⁴³ More than 17,500 cases and 460 deaths have been reported so far - an increase compared to previous years. The WHO is working on increased surveillance and improved vaccination campaigns to contain the spread of the virus and protect vulnerable populations.⁴⁴

The risk of a zoonosis with **H5N1**, a highly pathogenic bird flu virus, also remains. The spread of H5N1 to mammals is particularly alarming, including the first detection of the virus in dairy cows in the U.S. in the spring of 2024.⁴⁵ Although transmission to humans remains rare - 61 cases have been documented in the USA so far, most of them mild, but after one case with a severe course, a state of emergency has now been declared in the US state of California.⁴⁶ The increasing adaptation of the virus to mammalian hosts is a warning signal for the

global health community. Measures such as enhanced biosecurity protocols, intensive monitoring and targeted research on transmission mechanisms are crucial to prevent wider spread.

In Rwanda, an outbreak of **Marburg virus**, a serious disease characterized by hemorrhagic fever⁴⁷, has been successfully combated. With 66 confirmed cases⁴⁸, the outbreak was one of the largest of its kind. Thanks to a rapid and coordinated response from the Rwandan government, the WHO, the African CDC and other partners, the outbreak was successfully contained. Improved surveillance systems, rapid laboratory tests, optimized treatments and intensive awareness campaigns contributed significantly to this success. On December 20, the end of the outbreak was officially celebrated in Kigali, with a mortality rate of 22.7%, unusually low for Marburg.⁴⁹

As Rwanda celebrates the end of the Marburg outbreak, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is facing another health crisis. There, deaths attributable to a mysterious illness are investigated.⁵⁰ Malaria, exacerbated by malnutrition, is suspected to be the main cause, but a hemorrhagic fever syndrome could not be ruled out. The DRC also reported 29 deaths related to Mpox (monkeypox) in the last week alone. Despite the provision of vaccines, the vaccination rate in the DRC is falling short of expectations, forcing authorities to take increased measures to contain the spread.

These acute health emergencies highlight the importance of not only speeding up negotiations on a pandemic agreement, but also taking concrete, immediate measures to contain the outbreaks.

Successful interim results of the first WHO Investment Round

The first WHO investment round, launched by the Sustainable Finance Working Group, raised USD 3.8 billion (53% of the USD 7.1 billion target) from 53 Member States and 16 philanthropic, private and multilateral actors from May to December 2024. This represents an important step towards sustainable, flexible, and predictable funding for WHO, which will contribute to meeting WHO's fi-

⁴³ The statement by WHO Director-General can be found [here](#).

⁴⁴ The relevance of this outbreak for other countries is highlighted [here](#).

⁴⁵ First reporting was found [here](#).

⁴⁶ The statement of the California governor can be found [here](#) and German media also report, e.g. [here](#).

⁴⁷ Hemorrhagic means that the disease is accompanied by bleeding, which can be caused by damage to the blood vessels.

⁴⁸ On the pages of the [Rwanda Biomedical Centre](#), the spread could currently be traced.

⁴⁹ [Health Policy Watch](#) reports on the celebrations for the official end of the outbreak.

⁵⁰ An interview with Gerard Krause on this can be found [here](#).

financial needs in addition to the assessed contributions. A total of USD 11.1 billion in funds is required for the period 2025-2028, of which USD 4 billion comes from assessed contributions. This is a significant step forward compared to 2020, when only 17% of funding was secured at the start of the previous strategy.

Although 92% of the funds pledged come from highly developed countries, it is positive that many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have also more than doubled their assessed contributions.⁵¹ Germany has been particularly committed to sustainable financing and co-led the investment round together with Brazil, France, the African Union, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Indonesia, and South Africa. The investment round represents a landmark step in WHO's long-term financial planning, but it remains important to close the remaining gap and also to reach out to Member States that have not yet made commitments beyond the assessed contributions.⁵²

G20 sets new priorities in the global health architecture

The G20 Summit 2024 under the Saudi Presidency was dedicated to strengthening the global health architecture in central parts and made remarkable progress. Particular emphasis was placed on the need to improve health financing in order to strengthen resilience to future pandemics. The pandemic fund, which is intended to benefit poorer countries in particular, received a significant financial boost through new pledges from Saudi Arabia and India. In addition, the G20 members committed to strengthening the implementation of the One Health strategy, which links human, animal, and environmental health to prevent zoonoses and other health threats. Another important outcome was the introduction of a joint programme to combat noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, which are one of the leading causes of mortality in many member countries. Germany welcomed the decisions and underlined its willingness to provide financial and organisational support to international efforts. Chancellor Olaf Scholz stressed the importance of the pandemic fund and announced additional German funds. In addition, the German delegation put forward innovative proposals for international research in the field of One Health, which met with broad interest.

COP29: Health in the Age of Climate Crisis

The 29th UN Climate Change Conference (COP29), which took place in Baku from 11 to 22 November 2024, once again focused on the link between climate change and global health. A central resolution called for the strengthening of health systems worldwide to make them more resilient to climate-related challenges such as heat waves, floods, and the spread of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue. As part of this effort, a new global fund of USD 1.2 billion was established to support particularly affected countries in expanding their health infrastructure. In addition, the WHO announced an expanded surveillance program to detect and combat climate-related health risks at an early stage. Germany played an active role, providing €200 million for this fund, while Federal Health Minister Karl Lauterbach highlighted the importance of linking climate policy and health. The German delegation also welcomed the inclusion of health issues in the reporting of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which is seen as an important step towards raising awareness of the health impacts of climate change.

A significant step in this direction was the establishment of the "Coalition of Baku COP Presidencies on Climate and Health", a coalition led by Azerbaijan, Brazil, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. This coalition, which works in partnership with WHO, aims to create a long-term framework to further promote health outcomes from past climate commitments.⁵³

Global solidarity against antibiotic resistance

2024 was a landmark year in the fight against antimicrobial resistance (AMR). At the UN General Assembly in September, member states adopted a political declaration recognizing AMR as a global threat and calling for decisive action.⁵⁴ The declaration highlights the importance of a One Health approach that combines human, animal, and environmental health. Countries committed to developing or strengthening national AMR plans, regulating the use of antimicrobials, and advancing research into new therapies.

⁵¹ A valuable analysis of the contributions to the Investment Round can be found [here](#).

⁵² For an overview see our [Map of the Month 12/2024](#).

⁵³ Further information can be found [here](#).

⁵⁴ You can find the official announcement and the explanation [here](#).

The Ministerial Conference in Jeddah, Saudi-Arabia, took up these goals, and from 15 to 16 November 2024, strategies for implementing the UN Declaration were discussed. Progress has been made in harmonizing surveillance standards and promoting public-private partnerships. Germany set an example by providing additional funding for research and global AMR initiatives.

However, the challenges remain enormous: access to new medicines, especially in low-income countries, must be improved and the financing of sustainable mechanisms must be secured. The progress made this year is a sign of global unity – implementation will be crucial.

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