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Dear Minister,

The European Commission is observing closely developments in China regarding the alarming increases in COVID-19 cases there, and the potential impact of travel from China to the EU Member States when new Chinese travel arrangements enter into force at the beginning of January. It will be important to evaluate together the potential impact of this evolving situation and the necessity for us to be well prepared, so that the health of our citizens is protected. Perhaps sooner than we expected, we need to enact by the spirit of the recently adopted Council and Parliament Regulation on Serious Cross Border Health Threats, which was strengthened and reinforced to cope with just this type of situation. This is also why I instructed my services to convene an urgent meeting of the EU Health Security Committee (HSC) which took place today.

Based on the report I received I trust that the discussion that took place in the HSC was sufficiently rich in terms of participation, with over 100 Member States representatives on-line, with our agencies (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, and European Medicines Agency) as well as the World Health Organisation. The meeting showed that there is a wide consensus that EU countries should act in a coordinated way if we want measures to be effective. Information and transparency on measures and a science-based approach have been our guiding principles throughout the pandemic and they continue to be vital in this phase if we are to have an effective protection of the EU against international health threats of this nature. In the course of the HSC, some Member States proposed measures such random testing of travellers.

As an immediate step, I would like to invite you to assess your current national practices regarding genomic surveillance of the SARS-CoV2 virus. If this was scaled-down because of the new domestic phase, you may want to consider to scale it up again, possibly making use of the framework laboratory contract which the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control maintains for this purpose. At the same time, it would be important to continue or initiate wastewater surveillance, that would include sewage water from key airports. If a new variant of the SARS-CoV2 virus appears – be it in China or in the EU – we must detect it early in order to be prepared to react fast.

In the light of the lifting of travel restrictions announced by the Chinese government and which will take effect on 8 January next, I would call for us to remain very vigilant as reliable epidemiological data or testing data for China are quite scarce, the general vaccination coverage in China is low and there is no equivalence decision regarding Chinese vaccination or recovery certificates with the EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate.

At EU level, we are developing some key messages for EU travellers that are planning to travel to China. In addition, we will also make messages available for travellers coming from China into the EU. Messages for airline staff and airport personnel are also being developed. These messages will be available for you to use in the coming days, and we will translate them into the official languages of the EU and in Chinese in order to make them easy for you to adapt to your national circumstances.

I will also continue my efforts to reach out to the Chinese authorities to offer any support which could be useful in reducing the impacts of the current outbreak there, and to have regular contacts with their health authorities to monitor the situation and of course to inform you immediately. I have also close contacts with the World Health Organisation to request an improvement of the availability of data on the situation in China on the basis of which all our risk assessments and measures depend.

I will be calling for a continuation of the work in the Health Security Committee in the coming days and weeks and would be very grateful if you could ensure that your country is properly represented in these meetings and that we can have as our ambition the coordination of our responses and measures in the most effective and science-based manner possible.

Yours sincerely,

