Chile’s experience in the implementation of the COVID-19 protocol for control and monitoring

English version provided by the author

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Information Paper submitted by Chile

Background

Since the beginning of the SAR COV2/COVID-19 Pandemic, Chile saw the need to coordinate all antarctic operators around a procedure to safely enter Antarctica via Punta Arenas that allowed an effective commitment to a general framework.

Accordingly, since March 2020, the Chilean antarctic state operators (Chilean Army, Chilean Navy, Chilean Air Force, and Chilean Antarctic Institute, INACH) and the Antarctic Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they agreed to develop the "COVID-19 Protocol for control and monitoring passengers and cargo transit between Punta Arenas and the Antarctic Peninsula". Additionally, this working group involved the participation of Magellan Region and Chilean Antarctica authorities, including the health authorities responsible for the public health planning and the regional pandemic control.

Subsequently, on 3 August 2020, the Protocol, approved and agreed at the national level, was communicated internationally through the Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs (COMNAP) and the Antarctic Treaty Parties through “Circular Number 15” of the Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty[[1]](#footnote-1).

Therefore, National Antarctic operators and National Antarctic Programs (NAP), using Punta Arenas and other Chilean cities as their gateway to Antarctica, had an early protocol validated by the competent authorities in Chile, as well as internationally. As COMNAP pointed out in their communication before the massification of vaccines, the full respect of the Protocols appeared to be the only effective tool to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Antarctica.

The Protocol seeks to reduce the possibilities of a person traveling to Antarctica carrying the virus, based on three essential aspects that are indispensable to comply with:

1. Personal protection and prevention measures.
2. Strict and individual quarantine in special facilities located in Punta Arenas (or the last port before Antarctica)
3. Two negative PCR tests, at the beginning and the end of quarantine.

At the same time, the preventive isolation of all Antarctic bases was agreed upon, including the adjacent bases.

INACH, in close collaboration with the Regional Ministerial Secretariat of Health of the Magellan Region and Chilean Antarctica, and under strict application of the protocol, has coordinated the sampling and analysis for PCR tests of all individuals in quarantine, including the scientific and logistic personal of other NAP’s operating via Punta Arenas.

According to the Protocol, the isolation is strict, in single rooms, with food provided to the rooms, and an absolute prohibition of using common spaces. Each PCR test is taken 72-48 hours before the quarantine ends, and the departure to Antarctica begins to ensure the individuals' health status before their departure. In addition, Sanitary corridors are coordinated to transport the passengers from the quarantine facilities to the airport or pier.

All staff participating in the Chilean Antarctic Scientific Expedition (SAE) had to quarantine at the facilities chosen for this purpose, including Punta Arenas-based staff. Additionally, all contact in the sanitary corridor was prohibited, such as family farewells or transporting packages to Antarctica which have not gone through the transporting cargo protocol.

To keep the information on the protocol updated, INACH uploaded Spanish and English versions of the simplified protocol to their website (https://www.inach.cl/inach/?page\_id=29086), as well as all the documentation that each NAP must send to the Antarctic Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and INACH, 30 days before the trip.

On December 17, 2020, through Circular of the Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty No. 25, Chile informed the States Parties the following: "On December 16, 2020, the Chilean Antarctic Institute (INACH) has been informed of positive Covid-19 cases in people who would have disembarked in the ports of Punta Arenas and Talcahuano from the vessel "Sargento Aldea" from de Chilean Navy, which had operations in the O'Higgins Antarctic Station in the Antarctic Peninsula. For this reason, the Chilean Antarctic Program has decided to monitor the health status of those at its stations and perform PCR tests for COVID-19, in coordination with Chile's Health Authorities".

As shown above, Chile immediately notified the Antarctic Treaty Parties about the situation. Moreover, rapid detection and contact tracing of the cases were possible thanks to the travel of health professionals from Punta Arenas to King George Island on December 18, 2020, evacuating all the confirmed and probable cases to the city of Punta Arenas in the following days. In March 2021, a vaccination process was carried out for all Chilean personnel in Antarctica. The respective investigations at local level are currently underway to determine how the outbreak occurred and identify possible gaps in the Protocol.

Final Considerations

Chile organized a Protocol of entry to Antarctica through the national territory and informed the Parties. The National Antarctic Programs were informed of these measures and restrictions adopted to prevent Covid-19 from entering into the Antarctic Peninsula area, which has been updated according to the global and national pandemic evolution. The Protocol allowed the entry to Antarctica through Chile of about ten NAP during the last summer without any significant drawbacks. Furthermore, the Chilean experience, including the detection of COVID-19 cases and the possible gaps detected in the program, will improve the coordination mechanisms of the different entities involved in the implementation and supervision of this Protocol and the exchange of experiences with other gateways cities.

Through the communication channels established, Chile will continue reporting to the National Antarctic Programs and parties the developments in the implementation of this Protocol for the next Antarctic campaign.

1. COMNAP formed an international committee to address the emergency, supported by specialists from various National Antarctic Programs. The suggestions from this committee are based on pre-deployment isolation (quarantine) and testing procedures for all personnel of the National Antarctic Program, stating: "The isolation managed if taken seriously by all involved and carried out appropriately, is the best defense we have against the spread of coronavirus at this time." Continuing with the isolation period of "... at least 14 days..." before deployment to Antarctica. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)