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**AACC organizes a webinar on the economic challenges
in light of Corona Pandemic**

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The economic obstacles that the world is facing due to the widespread of Coronavirus, the tremendous medical efforts exerted to find a cure for it, and the challenges facing economic ties and trade relations between Arab and European countries in times of Corona were the main topics that the AACC webinar revolved around.

On June 3rd 2020, the Austro-Arab Chamber of Commerce (AACC) held a webinar, which brought together many high-level Arab and European experts and participants from the economic and medical fields and featured **Prof. Dr. Josef Penninger**, world-leading geneticist & molecular immunologist who developed SARS treatment and is currently working with his team on developing a cure for Coronavirus; **H.E. Senator Dr. Richard Schenz**, AACC President & Vice President of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKO); **H.E. Dr. Christoph Leitl**, President of EUROCHAMBRES; **H.E. Dr. Khaled Hanafy**, Secretary-General of the Union of Arab Chambers (UAC); and **Dr. Bassel Al-Khatib**, representative of United Nations Organization for Industrial Development (UNIDO) Director General **H.E. Mr. Li Yong**.

This virtual meeting was commenced by discussing the medical efforts and progress achieved so far by **Prof. Penninger** and his team of researchers and doctors in Canada and Austria as they strive to deliver a treatment for Coronavirus before the end of this year. Penninger also stressed that the virus is not to be underestimated, given its widespread among human beings and its mutation and subsequent transmission from an animal, revealing also that many patients suffered from a relapse after having recovered earlier. Moreover, Prof. Penninger highlighted the importance of international solidarity and cooperation in the field of scientific research and transcending its current levels, because what the world is witnessing will not come to an end by defeating Corona; new viruses are likely to emerge, and this requires a drastic scientific-medical armament so the world can face and combat any similar challenges in the future.

AACC President Senator Dr. Schenz praised the precautionary measures which the Austrian government implemented at an early stage, which helped in containing the widespread of the virus among the population and reducing the number of infections and deaths. He also commended the efforts of the government reflected through the various economic assistance measures and aid packages that were rapidly designed and implemented to support the private and public sectors, pumping billions of Euros to inject liquidity into companies, institutions and individuals, applying tax deferral schemes, and preserving the labour market and assisting employers by reducing working hours and covering up to 90% of the employees' initial salaries. Such measures are aimed at aiding an estimate of 40% of Austrian companies affected by Corona pandemic.

As for the negative repercussions of Corona pandemic on the world economy, **Dr. Christoph Leitl**, President of Eurochambres, saw that the world has been subject to a lot of division rather than unity during this pandemic. He reiterated that the service sector has been hardly hit and completely paralyzed due to the fact that many countries closed its borders and halted the activities of restaurants and hotels, causing touristic influx to become null. Dr. Leitl also expressed his appreciation for the precautionary measures enforced worldwide, of which many remain in place although to varying extents, adding that the world trade requires freedom and removal of barriers and hindrances to ensure that the international markets are open to each other once again and capable of recovering. Leitl also commended the Euro-Arab economic ties, referring to the Arab countries as a direct neighbor to the European Union and highlighting the mutual benefit of strengthening means of cooperation between both

sides especially in light of the challenges the world economy is facing. Leitl also elaborated on the impact of the pandemic on Europe's economy, whereby around 140 million employees have suffered from the measures imposed across the EU member states. However, the recommendations presented by the Austrian Federal Chamber of Commerce have significantly served to alleviate the consequences of the crisis on the Austrian economy.

Union of Arab Chambers' Secretary General **Dr. Khaled Hanafy** explained and analyzed the impact of Corona pandemic on the Arab countries, whose way of dealing with it varied according to various internal factors. He also stated that this novel virus continues to pose a huge challenge for Arab economies just like the rest of the world. On top of that, there is the unprecedented decline in oil prices worldwide, which led many Arab countries to take prompt action to limit the negative consequences of the crisis and at the same time offer various facilitations to preserve the economic activity. Dr. Hanafy also stated that Corona pandemic caused changes to the world supply chain, to which Arab countries were no exception. He emphasized the strategic geographic location of the Arab region on the world map as a crucial focal point among Europe, Africa, and Asia and the experience that the Arab countries have in dealing with their respective African or Asian environment, and thus urged the European countries to exhibit more openness towards the Arab region and benefit from what the latter has to offer.

According to UNIDO representative and Chief of Regional Division for Arab Region **Dr. Bassel Al-Khatib**, the corona pandemic revealed the extent of dependence between countries to fill its own gaps and that the crisis caused by this pandemic happens to be between 2020-2030, the timeframe during which the United Nations and most countries worldwide had planned to commit themselves to achieve sustainable development goals worldwide. However, the widespread of the virus has imposed a reconsideration of setting priorities, in a way that allows for tackling the crisis from all its health, social and economic aspects. Al-Khatib also reiterated the commitment of all the United Nations organizations including UNIDO to assisting member states in overcoming and recovering from the consequences of this pandemic, which goes beyond being merely a health crisis to include social and economic repercussions.

AACC Secretary General Eng. Mouddar Khouja highlighted the change of the definition and the development of the concept of national security in light of the current Corona pandemic. Priorities of national economy have been reshuffled in a way that scientific and medical research has transcended racing towards military armament. The Secretary General added that talking about national security has become analogous with supply of medical equipment, and confronting an invisible enemy necessitates being armed by science and knowledge. He also reiterated the key messages of the speakers on mutual openness, trust, hope and solidarity between governments and societies for the world to overcome the Corona crisis. Secretary General Khouja shed light on the role chambers play in this regard, namely through networking and establishing numerous connections between various nations, continents, and organizations and calling for re-evaluating and easing the legal guidelines of the General Data Protection Regulations for well-established and accredited institutions, allowing for professional data exchange so as to boost economic activities.

Various views and ideas pertaining to the current situation were discussed and exchanged during the web conference, including the current situation in Lebanon and Iraq in light of the pandemic. Dr. Al-Khatib stated that the difficult financial circumstances that Lebanon has been suffering from before the pandemic constitute even a bigger challenge amidst the Corona crisis, and yet the Lebanese government seeks to lessen from the burdens on the economy and provide the necessary liquidity to ensure the continuity of economic activity within the society. Dr. Hanafy mentioned that reconstruction in Iraq has been negatively impacted by the repercussions of the Corona pandemic and the severe drop in oil prices, and yet reconstruction remains a priority for Iraq. In this regard, Secretary General Khouja added that the Iraqi government led by Mustapha Al-Qathemi has gained the parliament's approval to become the first government appointed with a number of sovereign ministries in a short time, which indicates the government's willingness to fulfill various achievements during the upcoming period.

Links:

- [AACC Webinar –Video Link](#)