

Preparing for a virtual WTC 2020 as plan C

20 Aug 2020

TunnelTalk reporting

No-one could have foreseen the impact of a global pandemic. As the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded, plans for the World Tunnel Congress (WTC) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in May were caught in a perfect storm.

In February, when the decision was taken to postpone the May WTC to September, the pandemic had yet to spread beyond Asia to Europe, North America and elsewhere. The five months of extra time seemed realistic for holding a physical conference in Kuala Lumpur in September. By May, when the pandemic made it clear that a physical gathering in Kuala Lumpur would be impossible, most of the world was in lockdown with all offices closed and staff working from home. When it came to managing the WTC in Kuala Lumpur, many in the organising team were unprepared for working from home. With no access to work computers or the necessary data, communications to handle queries from delegates, exhibitors, sponsors and others were delayed for weeks.

The difficulty of the situation was explained in a telephone interview with Olivier Vion, Executive Director of the ITA (International Tunnelling and Underground Space Association). Vion made it clear that the ITA Executive Council, an ExCo of 17 members, in different parts of the world, and across a 17-hour time difference, has worked tirelessly behind the scenes to represent the international tunnelling community and all of those associated with staging a WTC in Kuala Lumpur, which is now to be a virtual alternative in September. It was also made clear that the ITA is not directly responsible as a stakeholder in the organisation of the WTC, that its management and staging is entirely the responsibility of the Institution of Engineers Malaysia (IEM) and its professional conference organiser.

In an email statement, Jenny Yan, President of the ITA, said: "The WTC2020 organising committee is now working for the virtual event. Even though the virtual conference is different from a physical one, it is a solution for this difficult situation. I do hope the virtual WTC will benefit the ITA family and the industry, especially in the developing countries."

When it came to claims for refunds, Vion pointed out that the IEM registration forms and exhibition contracts noted that there would be no refunds. "Initially there was to be no refunds for registrations, exhibitors or sponsors," said Vion, "but we worked with the IEM to secure some refund under the circumstances. To start, this was a very low offer, but ExCo managed to negotiate with the IEM to raise it to a 70% refund." He explained that most of the money paid to IEM for the WTC was from exhibitors and sponsors with some registrations from authors, once they knew their papers were accepted for aural presentations, and from earlier-bird delegate registrations. Vion reported that IEM had collected about MYR 7 million before shutdown from delegates, exhibitors and sponsors. A 70% refund of this, amounts to about €1 million with the remaining 30% amounting to about €400,000. "This is a substantial refund responsibility for the non-profit IEM when much of that amount has been paid in securing the venues, engaging services and paying salaries," said Vion. "ITA is also a non-profit organisation and it could not offer to pay the 30% for a 100% refund. It was a very difficult situation."

In explaining the situation, Vion said that the refund is not conditional on participating in the virtual WTC in September. "If those claiming a refund, sign the form and agree the 70% refund, IEM is obliged to make the refund. It is unconditional," he said. The ITA ExCo wrote to the IEM to clarify that the 70% refund is unconditional and that those claiming a refund can join the virtual congress if they choose to, and at no additional cost, or they can decide not to attend. That is their choice but that the refund, if accepted, is unconditional. Efforts to connect with representatives of the WTC 2020 organising committee via telephone and email have been repeatedly unsuccessful.



Last communication from ITA about WTC 2020 refunds

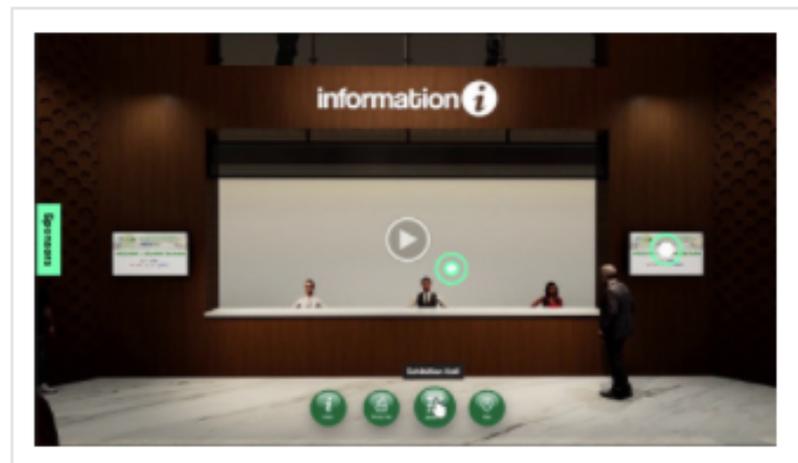


Virtual WTC 2020 - visit the website for details

WTC Kuala Lumpur to 2022 and WTC Cancun to 2024. Other options were to move WTC 2020 to 2021 or 2024 but all these options had different drawbacks. The exhibitors and sponsors were not willing to leave the paid funds with Kuala Lumpur until 2022 or 2024, preferring to have a refund and reconsider for Kuala Lumpur in 2022 or 2024. Authors had also written papers in 2019 for 2020 and might not want to present the same paper in 2022 or 2024, preferring to withdraw the paper and prepare a new paper for a later date. Options to move all WTCs forward by one year were complicated in that Copenhagen, Denmark, had already advanced well into its preparations for WTC 2021. Cancellation would be expensive. Another complication was that venues had no space in future months or years to accommodate a WTC for five days.

Many of these points, explained Vion, are being considered for changes in the way the ITA runs the competition for hosting the annual WTCs. Refund policies, management of WTCs from year to year, control of the processes by ITA, and review of the rules for preparing proposals to host a WTC are all under consideration for amendment and revision.

For preparing the virtual WTC in September, it was explained that the IEM has decided to manage all by itself. The ITA is managing its General Assembly in September as a virtual event and the virtual WTC is prepared as a separate event managed by IEM. A review of the WTC2020.com website reveals that preparation of the virtual WTC is underway with a programme based largely on the original physical programme and timetable. A video on the website provides details of how the virtual conference platform will operate.



Video of how the virtual WTC 2020 will be staged

With the virtual WTC Kuala Lumpur congress less than three weeks away, it is a pity that there was not more communication about the situation and the methods being presented to find a solution that was feasible and acceptable to the majority, if not all. It seems much time was lost in maintaining the support and goodwill within the industry while so much was at stake.

References

- Partial refund for rearranged online WTC2020 – *TunnelTalk*, July 2020
- Virtual WTC alternative mired in refund dispute – *TunnelTalk*, July 2020
- WTC2020 postponed to September 2020 – *TunnelTalk*, February 2020

For those who have had 100% refunds from credit card companies, the thought was that the credit card company can take those refunds back if their investigations show that original registration, exhibition and sponsorship contracts stated clearly that no refunds would be permitted and that a 70% refund had been offered.

On the point of insurance, the thought was that no insurance policy would have covered losses due to a pandemic situation.

In the discussion about the cancellation of the May event, Vion said that many options were considered, including the offer from Mexico to move