

WHO experts to wade into tricky territory in hunt for virus origins

5 January 2021, by Jing Xuan Teng



A WHO team is due to visit China for a highly politicised trip exploring the origins of the coronavirus, which first emerged in the city of Wuhan in December 2019

A year after the outbreak started, WHO experts are due in China for a highly politicised visit to explore the origins of the coronavirus, in a trip trailed by accusations of cover-ups, conspiracy and fears of a whitewash.

The WHO says China has granted permission for a visit by its experts, with a 10-person team expected to arrive shortly—but before most could even begin their journeys they faced roadblocks, with Beijing yet to grant them entry.

The WHO's emergencies director Michael Ryan said Tuesday that the problem was a lack of visa clearances, adding that he hoped it was a "logistic and bureaucratic issue that can be resolved very quickly."

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that some of the experts had already set off for China.

"I am very disappointed with this news, given that two members had already begun their journeys

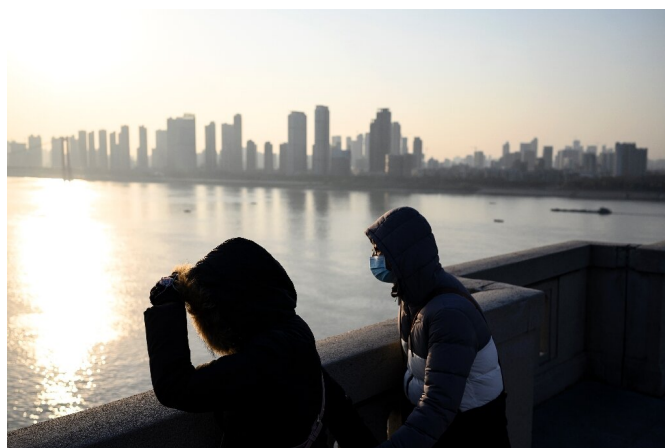
and others were not able to travel at the last minute," Tedros told reporters in Geneva, in a rare rebuke of Beijing from the UN body.

Earlier this week Chinese authorities had refused to confirm the exact dates and details of the visit, a sign of the enduring sensitivity of their mission.

COVID-19 was first detected in the central city of Wuhan in late 2019, before seeping beyond China's borders to wreak global havoc, costing over 1.8 million lives and eviscerating economies.

But its origins remain bitterly contested, lost in a fog of recriminations and conjecture from the international community—as well as obfuscation from Chinese authorities determined to keep control of its virus narrative.

The WHO team has promised to focus on the science, specifically how the coronavirus jumped from animals—believed to be bats—to humans.



Life in Wuhan, once the epicenter of the virus, has largely returned to normal as much of the world battles the virus

"This is not about finding a guilty country or a guilty

authority," Fabian Leendertz from the Robert Koch Institute, Germany's central disease control body who will be among the team to visit, told AFP in late December.

"This is about understanding what happened to avoid that in the future, to reduce the risk."

But doubt has been cast over what the WHO mission can reasonably expect to achieve and the state pressure they will face, raising fears that the mission will serve to rubber stamp China's official story, not challenge it.

Geopolitics trump health

The upcoming visit will not be the first time COVID-19 has brought WHO teams to China. A mission last year looked at the response by authorities rather than the virus origins, with another in the summer laying the groundwork for the upcoming probe.

But this time the WHO will wade into a swamp of competing interests, stuck between accusatory Western nations and a Chinese leadership determined to show that its secretive and hierarchical political system served to stem, not spread, the outbreak.

It is unclear who the experts will be able to meet when they arrive in Wuhan to retrace the initial days and weeks of the pandemic.

Inside China, whistleblowers have been silenced and citizen journalists jailed, including a 37-year-old woman imprisoned last week for four years over video reports from the city during its prolonged lockdown.

Outside, responsibility for the virus has been weaponised.



China has sought to reframe the narrative, hailing its "extraordinary success" in curbing the pandemic within its borders and rebooting its economy

From the outset, US President Donald Trump used the virus as political bludgeon against big power rival China.

He accused Beijing of trying to hide the outbreak of what he dubbed the "China virus" and repeated unsubstantiated rumours it leaked from a Wuhan lab.

Trump then pulled the US out of the WHO, accusing it of going soft on China, a nation with which he was also engaged in a bitter trade war.

Critics say that blizzard of accusations sought to divert attention from Washington's bungled response to a crisis which has so far killed more than 355,000 Americans.

Without them, said one, "a lot of these situations that we had in January 2020 would not have played out the way it did."

"It is the geopolitics that... put the world in this situation," Ilona Kickbusch, of the Global Health Centre at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, told AFP.

China has since deftly reframed its version of events, hailing its "extraordinary success" in curbing the pandemic within its borders and

rebooting its economy.

Beijing now says it will ride to the rescue of poorer nations, promising cheap vaccines and seeding doubt that the virus even originated in China.

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