



World leaders adopt resolution to study WHO's response to covid-19

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The World Health Assembly has adopted a resolution sponsored by the European Union aimed at defusing a confrontation with US President Donald Trump, who has sought to cast blame on the World Health Organization and China as criticism has mounted of his own administration's chaotic response to the virus.

The resolution¹ was passed by consensus without a formal vote at the meeting on 19 May, which was attended mostly virtually by the health ministers of 194 countries. It instructs WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus "at the earliest appropriate moment . . . to review experience gained and lessons learned from the WHO coordinated international health response to covid-19."

The review will include, but not be limited to, WHO's own role in the response and whether its powers under international law were equal to the challenge. WHO has routinely conducted such retrospective analyses after facing international health crises.

The resolution's tone was strongly supportive of the agency, acknowledging "the key leadership role of WHO and the fundamental role of the United Nations system in catalysing and coordinating the comprehensive global response to the covid-19 pandemic." More than 100 countries supported the EU in bringing the resolution, including the United Kingdom, Japan, Russia, China, and Australia, which had previously joined the US in calling for an investigation of China. The resolution did not single out any country for extra scrutiny.

The United States did not attempt to obstruct the resolution, despite having in recent weeks blocked detailed consensus statements on covid-19 from both the G7 and the G20, over their refusal to condemn China and WHO, respectively. But the US "disassociated" itself from two paragraphs, one committing to uninterrupted provision of sexual and reproductive health services for women and one guaranteeing universal access to vaccines and asserting the right of poor countries to ignore intellectual property rights in medical emergencies. The first paragraph contradicts the US's official antiabortion stance, said an American "explanation of position" statement, and the second paragraph sends "the wrong message to innovators who will be essential to the solutions the whole world needs."

The WHO resolution came just hours after Trump threatened to quit the organisation in an error strewn letter tweeted to its director general. The letter falsely claimed that Taiwan notified WHO of human transmission in China on 31 December, when

in reality Taiwan's message to WHO made no mention of human transmission.

Trump's letter also claimed that "credible reports" in December 2019 should have alerted WHO to the situation, "including reports from the *Lancet* medical journal." Trump's claim was "factually incorrect," said the *Lancet* in a statement. "The *Lancet* published no report in December 2019, referring to a virus or outbreak in Wuhan or anywhere else in China." WHO had already said that human transmission was definitely occurring when the first US case was declared on 21 January.

Trump also accused WHO of being too deferential to China, telling the director general that, on 28 January 2020, "after meeting with President Xi in Beijing, you praised the Chinese government for its 'transparency' with respect to the coronavirus." Trump himself, however, tweeted on 24 January: "China has been working very hard to contain the coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!"²

The letter threatening to quit WHO follows an announcement by Trump on 14 April that he was putting a "temporary hold" on US funding of the organisation, because of its "China-centric" stance.³ WHO is accustomed to seeing its US funding delayed under Republican administrations. Trump's budgets have routinely requested large cuts to the US contribution—53% this year—though these cuts have been stopped by Congress. The administration of George W Bush, heavily sponsored by the sugar industry, withheld money from WHO over its anti-sugar public health campaigns.⁴

Trump has repeatedly labelled the pathogen the "Chinese virus," in a public relations campaign which has coincided with a rise in attacks and harassment on Asian-American medical staff in the United States.⁵ White House trade adviser Peter Navarro told ABC's *This Week* on 17 May that "the Chinese hid the virus from the world and then sent hundreds of thousands of Chinese on aircraft to Milan, New York, and around the world to seed that."

Devi Sridhar, professor of global public health at the University of Edinburgh, said: "President Trump doesn't understand what WHO can and cannot do. It is a normative, technical agency, which needs to keep member states at the table. If he thinks they need more power, then member states should agree and delegate it more."

Trump's letter, said Sridhar, "is written for his base and to deflect blame. China and the US are fighting it out like divorced parents, while WHO is the child caught in the middle trying not to pick sides."

- 1 World Health Organization. Covid-19 response. 73rd World Health Assembly. 18 May 2020. https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA73/A73_CONF1Rev1-en.pdf
- 2 Donald Trump. Twitter. 24 Jan 2020. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1220818115354923009?lang=en>

- 3 Mahase E. Covid-19: Trump halts WHO funding in move labelled "petulant" and "short sighted". *BMJ* 2020;369:m1502. 10.1136/bmj.m1502.32295763
- 4 Dyer O. US government rejects WHO's attempts to improve diet. *BMJ* 2004;328:185. 10.1136/bmj.328.7433.185.14739173
- 5 Jan T. Asian American doctors and nurses are fighting racism and the coronavirus. *Washington Post* 19 May 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/19/asian-american-discrimination/>

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