

WHO-China - COVID-19 Information Transparency

What is the issue?

- WHO (World Health Organization) seems to be at the mercy of powerful nations while obtaining relevant information.
- The independent investigations into the information sharing between China and the WHO on the COVID-19 pandemic reveal this trend.

What are the U.S.'s accusations in this regard?

- The U.S. President Trump has been accusing China of “secrecy, deception and cover-up” in the COVID-19 outbreak.
- He has also been accusing the WHO of being “China-centric”.
- While Trump could not have known this earlier, new evidences prove this true.

What is the disparity found now?

- The WHO had not been fully transparent during the early stages of the outbreak in Wuhan, China.
- Also, China had indeed been more opaque than already known.
- WHO gave an impression that on December 31, 2019 China had alerted it.
- But the June 29, 2020 revised timeline of WHO clarifies the facts to a great degree.
- WHO's country office in China had apparently been alerted by a media statement by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission.
- So, actually, China confirmed to WHO of the cluster of cases of 'viral pneumonia of unknown cause' on January 3, 2020.
- This was only after WHO twice reached out to the Chinese authorities on January 1-2.
- It got the same news from another independent source too.
- Following the confirmation, WHO on January 4, 2020 made a tweet in this regard.
- It said, “China has reported to the WHO a cluster of pneumonia cases, with no deaths, in Wuhan, Hubei Province....”
- To note, the earlier timeline had mentioned that on December 31, 2019 a “novel coronavirus was eventually identified” as the cause of pneumonia cases.

- But the revised information mentions that the cause of illness was not known till January 2, 2020.
- It also says China did not confirm novel coronavirus as the cause even on January 3 when it confirmed a cluster of pneumonia cases.

What does this reveal in terms of WHO and China?

- The WHO was often kept in the dark.
- Scientific evidence strongly suggests that the outbreak began at least by early November, 2019.
- The world knew of human-to-human transmission in China only on January 20, 2020.
- Apparently, WHO had to keep praising China so that it shared information.
- At least on three occasions, WHO had publicly praised China for its commitment to transparency.
- It also said China was “setting a new standard for outbreak response.”
- It called the quick sharing of whole genome sequence data of the virus as “very impressive.”
- However, independent investigation revealed a different situation.
- China was not very forthcoming.

What is the larger concern?

- China has evidently refused to learn lessons from the disastrous handling of the 2002 SARS outbreak.
- The current pandemic continues to infect millions, killing more than 5,30,000 (as of first week of July 2020).
- It has also destroyed livelihoods and the world economy.
- At least some of the impact could have been lessened by more proactive action on the part of China, and by less reverential attitude on the part of WHO.
- Powerful nations cannot be allowed to endanger lives around the world by failing on their responsibility.

Source: The Hindu

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