



Covid-19: Trump halts WHO funding in move labelled “petulant” and “short sighted”

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President Donald Trump has announced that the US has officially halted its funding to the World Health Organization while it undertakes an investigation into whether the UN health agency mismanaged or covered up the spread of covid-19.

Trump previously threatened to stop funding WHO,¹ claiming that it was too “China-centric” and had called “every shot wrong.”

Public health leaders called the decision “dangerous, short sighted, and politically motivated” and said that, while there may be “fair grounds for debating WHO’s positions and performance,” now was not the time.

WHO is funded through contributions from member states and private organisations. The US is the largest contributor, providing around 15% of WHO’s 2018-19 budget, equal to \$400m (£320m; €367m), although payments are reported to be \$200m in arrears.

Speaking at a press conference on 14 April, Trump said, “Today I’m instructing my administration to halt funding to the WHO while a review is conducted to assess its role in severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus.

“With the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, we have deep concerns about whether America’s generosity has been put to the best use possible. The reality is that the WHO failed to adequately obtain, vet, and share information in a timely and transparent fashion.

“The delays the WHO experienced in declaring a public health emergency cost valuable time, tremendous amounts of time. More time was lost in the delay it took to get a team of international experts in to examine the outbreak, which we wanted to do, which they should have done.”

Solidarity and coordination

Responding to the news, Peter Piot, director of the UK’s London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said, “Halting funding to the WHO is a dangerous, shortsighted, and politically motivated decision, with potential public health consequences for all countries in the world, whether they are rich or poor . . .

“This pandemic is not over anywhere until it is over everywhere. Strong support from the United States has always been key for WHO’s effectiveness and must continue.”

Robert Dingwall, professor of sociology at Nottingham Trent University, called the funding freeze “a typically petulant act against an international organisation that has sought to maintain

its integrity and impartiality rather than to bow to President Trump’s transient and volatile prejudices.”

He added that, while there were “fair grounds for debating WHO’s positions and performance, its contribution to maintaining international solidarity and coordination, within the limits of the powers granted by its members, cannot be denied.”

Much of the criticism has focused on WHO’s slowness in responding to the risks of the coronavirus spreading and its inability to get its experts into China promptly to assess the situation, eventually gaining entry to Wuhan on 22 February.

But WHO has been asking countries to prepare since early January, and it warned on 14 January that human to human transmission was a strong possibility. A week later it declared a global emergency of international concern.

Trump himself has been criticised for downplaying concerns over covid-19, especially after he repeatedly compared it to flu and suggested that public health warnings about the virus were a conspiracy against him.² In terms of numbers of people infected with covid-19 the US is the worst affected country in the world, with more than 600 000 cases and 24 000 deaths.

Lessons for the future

Gail Carson, consultant in infectious diseases at the University of Oxford and director of network development at the International Severe Acute Respiratory and Emerging Infection Consortium, said that the US reviewers “might even come out with recommendations on how WHO could be strengthened and supported more.” She added, “My plea would be to not make health political, particularly at this time.”

The importance of timing has also been emphasised by the UN secretary general, Antonio Guterres. He said, “Once we have finally turned the page on this epidemic, there must be a time to look back fully to understand how such a disease emerged and spread its devastation so quickly across the globe, and how all those involved reacted to the crisis. The lessons learned will be essential to effectively address similar challenges, as they may arise in the future.

“But now is not that time. As it is not that time, it is also not the time to reduce the resources for the operations of the WHO or any other humanitarian organisation in the fight against the virus.”

- 1 Mahase E. Covid-19: Trump threatens to stop funding WHO amid "China-centric" claims. *BMJ* 2020;369:m1438. 10.1136/bmj.m1438 32269034
- 2 Dyer O. Trump claims public health warnings on covid-19 are a conspiracy against him. *BMJ* 2020;368:m941. 10.1136/bmj.m941 32144176

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