



Trump Is Wrong, but China Cannot Escape Blame for the Pandemic

By Rasna Warah



Let me say at the outset that I think that the decision by United States President Donald Trump to withdraw funding to the tune of \$400,000,000 a year from the World Health Organization (WHO) is a childish and despicable move, especially at a time when the world should be pooling its resources to fight the deadly coronavirus. As is so typical of the decisions the US president makes, this one was clearly made to deflect attention from Trump's own failure to contain the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the United States by heaping the blame on another country - in this case, China. Trump claims that WHO failed to criticise China when COVID-19 first emerged, and that it is "China-centric" in the way it approaches the pandemic. Hence the cut in funding.

This latest directive is part of an ongoing rivalry between the US and China that escalated in March when China deported American foreign correspondents working for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* after Trump designated five Chinese media organisations based in the US as "foreign missions". President Trump retaliated by expelling from the US some 60 employees of Chinese state-owned media.

In addition to scoring points through journalists, both the US and China have resorted to spreading rumours about the origins of the coronavirus. On 12 March, a spokesperson for China's foreign ministry said that the US army might have brought the virus to Wuhan, the place where the

pandemic originated. Some US officials have suggested that the virus emerged from a research lab near the city.

This war is now being played out at WHO

The irony is that neither Xi Jinping nor Donald Trump care much for press freedom. As the *Economist* noted, "Like many Chinese officials, he [Trump] dismisses unwelcome reporting as 'fake news'. To him, journalists are collateral damage in a struggle with China that is about something bigger: ensuring that America retains its pre-eminence".

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China, a country with superpower ambitions, is also not known for its tolerance of a free media. The Communist Party of China monitors the media with a heavy hand and China is consistently ranked as one of the countries with among the [worst records](#) when it comes to press freedom. (Reporters Without Borders ranks China as a country with the least press freedom, along with Eritrea, Turkmenistan and North Korea.)

Is WHO to blame?

However, some of Trump's allegations might not be completely off base. Questions linger about whether WHO played politics when the epidemic in China became a global pandemic. Why, for example, did WHO's director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, go out of his way to congratulate China for its "extraordinary" efforts to contain COVID-19? (Many argue that if China had successfully contained the disease, a local epidemic in Wuhan would not have spread around the world.) And why did the WHO director-general discourage countries from issuing travel bans when it was clear that the virus was travelling through planes, especially those departing from China?

WHO's director-general has come under fire especially for playing down the severity of the outbreak of COVID-19 when it was first detected late last year, at around the same time that the US was planning to sign a trade deal with China to end a trade war that began in 2018. WHO only declared COVID-19 a "pandemic" in March.

Two US-based China experts have written a scathing article on Tedros's response, in which they claim that the WHO director-general defended China despite its "gross mismanagement of the highly contagious disease". Lianchao Han, the vice president of Citizen Power Initiatives for China, and Bradley A. Thayer, a professor of political science at the University of Texas, accuse Tedros of heaping praise on China's efforts to contain the virus even as China was detaining and arresting doctors and researchers who first raised the alarm on the disease. "China has misinformed and misled the world, and Tedros joined this effort by publicly praising China's "transparency" in battling the spread of the disease," they [wrote](#) in the 17 March edition of *The Hill*.

There is also the question of why WHO did not send independent experts to China to assess the extent of the disease, and depends almost entirely on the Chinese government for data on rates of infection and number of fatalities. Can a government that is known to whitewash negative or damaging information about itself be relied on to disseminate accurate figures? And should WHO be held accountable for not holding China accountable?

In the organisation's defence, WHO's special envoy, David Nabarro, admitted to BBC Hardtalk's Stephen Sackur that WHO cannot act or make decisions without the cooperation and approval of its

member states. (China, a member state with significant clout within WHO, recently donated \$20 million to the organisation towards its fight against COVID-19.) He told Sackur that the most WHO can do is “advise and guide” countries, not instruct them, a clear admission that rather than being the world’s health watchdog, WHO is really a vehicle through which countries can evade criticism by exerting pressure on the organisation’s leadership either directly or indirectly through donations.

Organisations that monitor global health policies say that WHO’s dual mandate of being both a technical agency with health expertise and a political body where states debate and negotiate on sometimes divisive health crises weakens the organisation’s ability to take tough or critical stands on the way individual countries handle health issues. This is a problem that is pervasive throughout the United Nations system (of which WHO is a part), where UN agencies with a mandate to provide technical support to countries often have to succumb to the political interests of the most powerful or influential member states, and therefore end up making decisions based on politics, rather than on scientific evidence.

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It is significant to note that the UN Security Council has not held a single open meeting to discuss its response to COVID-19, even though it is becoming increasingly clear that the pandemic and the resultant lockdowns could become a security crisis that has the potential to destabilise countries politically and economically. (China is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council with veto powers.)

Moreover, UN agencies like WHO have been losing credibility in recent years. Tedros, a former minister in the Ethiopian government, was elected as WHO director-general in 2017 at a time when the organisation’s management was being criticised internally. Last year, emails addressed to WHO directors (which were leaked to the [Associated Press](#)) complained of rampant racism at the organisation and theft of funds intended for Ebola victims. At WHO’s headquarters in Geneva, stated one email, African staff members suffer “systematic racial discrimination”.

The emails also spoke of widespread corruption and mismanagement of funds. One whistleblower claimed that logistics and procurement officers at WHO are known to be corrupt and that during one Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a plane was hired to transport three vehicles from a warehouse in Dubai at the highly inflated cost of one million dollars. Tedros promised to look into the matter.

Suppressing bad news

Sometimes influential member states can have their names deleted from UN reports that mention them adversely. In 2016, for example, after a leaked UN report on children’s rights violations became public, the then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon admitted to removing Saudi Arabia from a list of countries that had violated children’s rights. (Saudi Arabia has recently been donating large sums of money to the UN.)

Countries like China, which are particularly sensitive to negative publicity, are keen on such reports not becoming public. A recent [CNN report](#) claims that China has imposed strict restrictions on academic research on the origins of the coronavirus. Under the new policy, all academic papers on COVID-19 will be “subject to extra vetting before being submitted for publication”. This suggests that the Chinese government might doctor research findings to evade blame for the pandemic.

However, the Chinese government is not helping to improve its own image either. Recent reports of Africans being mistreated by Chinese authorities in Wuhan and other Chinese cities have created the impression that the Chinese are racist and anti-African. Yet, China has been actively wooing African countries with promises of “investments”, which in reality are usually large and highly opaque loan agreements. Many believe that China is not the friend of Africa that it purports to be, as these loans are likely to negatively affect African economies and lead to even more hardship.

The social media campaign by Africans against the mistreatment of Africans by Chinese authorities has soured relations between the African and Chinese people. Hostility towards Chinese nationals living and working in African countries where China has a visible presence is likely to increase as a result.

Yet, African governments, especially those that have taken out huge Chinese loans, like Kenya and Ethiopia, are reluctant to call out China. The Kenyan government made a feeble attempt to denounce the racist attacks against Africans, but has not condemned the actions of the Chinese authorities. In a scathing [column](#) published in the *Sunday Nation* recently, Prof. Makau Mutua described the predicament of Kenya vis-à-vis China as “unconscionable enslavement”.

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China’s role in allowing an epidemic to become a pandemic that is likely to be the cause of a global recession and untold suffering needs to be examined when this nightmare is over. It is alarming to note that the wet markets in southern China that are believed to have been the source of the coronavirus are still operating. In an authoritarian regime like China, it would be fairly easy to shut down these markets overnight. No one is asking the hard questions about why China still has a demand for wildlife meat, and what this may be doing to wildlife conservation efforts worldwide. By not shutting down these markets and continuing in the wildlife trade (some of which is illegal), China is endangering human life and creating conditions for the possibility of a coronavirus-like pandemic resurfacing in the future.

Much as I believe that Trump’s retaliation against WHO and China is based on a primitive tit-for-tat instinct, and on the US president’s unique ability to blame everyone but himself when things don’t go the way he expected, I also believe that China still has a lot of explaining to do. The world needs to know how this pandemic started, what went wrong and at what stage, if only to ensure that no such catastrophe occurs again.

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