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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

April 23, 2020

His Excellency António Guterres
Secretary General of the United Nations
New York, New York 10017

Your Excellency:

We write to request the United Nations immediately convene an independent panel of experts to conduct a thorough review of the World Health Organization's (WHO) response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, to include an interim assessment of the WHO's performance to date and recommendations for short, medium, and long-term course corrections or reforms, as necessary and appropriate.

That the outbreak of COVID-19 began in Wuhan, Hubei Province, People's Republic of China (PRC) is beyond dispute. Despite this fact – and despite obligations under the International Health Regulations (IHR) – the Communist Party of China (CCP) went to great lengths to obscure the nature and extent of the threat posed by this novel virus. According to credible independent sources, CCP authorities, including at the national level, ordered research labs to destroy virus samples, arrested and punished doctors who raised the alarm, disappeared multiple journalists, and silenced its citizens. There is evidence to suggest that the CCP delayed releasing the genome sequence. The Chinese government appears to have under-reported cases by failing to include asymptomatic infections in its official counts, misled the international community about transmissibility, and delayed WHO experts access to affected regions for weeks. This concerted effort ultimately contributed to the international spread of a contagion that has now sickened over 2.7 million people and claimed over 186,000 lives as of April 23, 2020.

The United States and countries around the world depend upon the WHO as a source of reliable, independent, and scientifically-based information about public health challenges. While we recognize that the WHO itself is highly dependent upon the cooperation of its member states to provide such data, the organization does have both the authority and technical capacity to conduct independent analysis and utilize third-party data, particularly in cases where transparency is in doubt.

Despite this authority, the WHO appears to have shown remarkable deference to the Chinese government throughout this pandemic. It took the Chinese government's false reporting at face value at the outset, overlooked obvious efforts by the CCP to silence parties with data that conflicted with the official line, advanced the CCP's false narrative about transmissibility, and praised the CCP's alleged commitment to transparency, long after evidence of the CCP's cover-up emerged.

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The United States is the single largest donor to the WHO. We strongly support the work of the WHO's front-line health workers in the field and do not want the review to impede their important efforts. We respect the agency's convening authority, and appreciate its work to enable countries around the globe to coalesce around shared global health challenges and best practices. Yet, the faith of the American people and the U.S. Congress in the WHO has been deeply shaken.

To restore that faith, we believe it is critically important that an independent panel of experts conduct an immediate, interim assessment of the WHO's response to this pandemic. In particular, the expert panel should evaluate the WHO's interactions with the Chinese government at the outset of the outbreak, up to and following the WHO's acknowledgement of human-to-human transmission, the declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and during and following the WHO mission that traveled to the PRC beginning on February 16, 2020. Through this analysis, we expect the panel to weigh both the diplomatic and structural challenges that may have negatively impacted the WHO's performance.

In keeping with past practice, including the Interim Assessment Panel that was convened in 2015 to review the WHO's response to the Ebola epidemic that plagued West Africa between 2013 and 2016, it is important that this interim assessment be professional, independent, and unbiased. Similarly, we would also expect this panel to provide recommendations for immediate course corrections that would enhance the WHO's ability to help contain the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as any medium-to-long-term reforms necessary to enable the WHO to more effectively detect, deter, and respond to future infectious disease outbreaks with pandemic potential.

Restoring confidence in the WHO as the premier United Nations global health agency committed to sound, scientifically-based global health principles and practices will require greater transparency, accountability, and reform. We want the best for the frontline WHO workers, and this means we need to know all of the facts. Given the unprecedented nature of this pandemic, getting this right is now more important than ever. We look forward to working with you to ensure that this is achieved before the next major global health crisis emerges, and more lives are lost.

Sincerely,



JAMES E. RISCH
Chairman



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United States Senator



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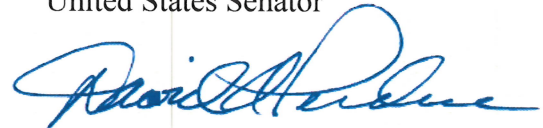
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