

WHO faces virus probe

● **Trump said he was taking hydroxychloroquine, a pill every day**

● **Daily death count in the United States has also slowed in recent days**

● **Trump had already suspended US funding to the UN body**

AFP | Washington



Trump has been locked in a bitter spat with Beijing, alleging it covered up the initial outbreak in central China late last year

World Health Organisation member states agreed yesterday to launch an investigation into its coronavirus response, after US President Donald Trump threatened to quit the UN agency and branded it a “puppet of China”.

Trump has been locked in a bitter spat with Beijing, alleging it covered up the initial COVID-19 outbreak in central China late last year before the disease unleashed death and economic devastation across the planet.

Under pressure at home in the United States, which has far more deaths and cases than any other country, Trump has also targeted the WHO with accusations that it failed to do enough to combat the initial spread of the disease.

“They’re a puppet of China, they’re China-centric to put it nicer,” he said at the White House on Monday, before threatening to make permanent a temporary freeze on US funding to the body.

Beijing, in turn, accused Trump of trying to “smear” China and shirking American responsibilities to the WHO.

With the row threatening the global response to the pandemic, WHO countries adopted a resolution calling for an “impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation” of the international response and the measures taken by the agency.

Both the United States and China voted for the resolution tabled by the European Union at the WHO’s annual assembly, despite earlier fears that the tensions might make a full consensus impossible.

More than 318,000 people have died of COVID-19 out of over 4.8 million infections worldwide since its emergence, and governments are scrambling to contain the virus while seeking ways to resuscitate their economies.

‘A pill every day’

Trump turned the screws on the WHO on Monday -- first in a press conference and then in a letter to the head of the organisation --

giving it 30 days to show “substantive improvements” that demonstrated its “independence” from Beijing.

The letter to Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus threatened to permanently freeze US funding. The US is by far the biggest contributor.

As he launched his latest attack, Trump also dropped a bombshell saying he was taking hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug that his own government’s experts have said is not suitable for fighting the coronavirus.

“I take a pill every day,” said the president, adding that he is using it because he has “heard a lot of good stories”.

Beijing has furiously denied the US allegations that it played down the threat, and hit back at Washington on Tuesday.

“The US tries to use China as an issue to shirk responsibility and bargain over its international obligations to the WHO. This is a miscalculation and the US has picked the wrong target,” foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said.

The EU also backed the WHO, putting Brussels once again in opposition to Washington when it comes to Trump’s treatment of international organisations.

“This is the time for solidarity, not the time for finger pointing or for undermining multilateral cooperation,” EU foreign affairs spokeswoman Virginie Battu-Henriksson told reporters



WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

continues on its destructive path, with many poorer nations now seeing a dramatic rise in infections even as the hotspot in Europe eases.

In Russia, the number of coronavirus cases hit nearly 300,000 on Tuesday after Moscow said the virus situation had stabilised. The Kremlin also said Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin is returning to his duties after fighting off the coronavirus.

Meanwhile the economic impact of the virus was further entrenched with fresh data showing the number of unemployed in Britain soared nearly 70 percent to 1.3 million in three months to March.

US home-building meanwhile plunged by 30 percent.

The vast economic damage caused by the virus has led to unprecedented emergency stimulus measures by governments and central banks, and the latest came from Europe where France and Germany proposed a fund worth 500 billion euros.

‘Test from God’

But other parts of the world -- especially developing countries -- are only just starting to feel the full force of the virus.

Already, Brazil has overtaken Britain, recording the third-highest number of infections in the world with around 255,000 confirmed cases.

Maria Nunes Sinimbu, a retired teacher from Manaus, the biggest city in the Brazilian Amazon, said COVID-19 had killed five of her family members, including three of her 12 children.

“People should be more careful with this disease. It’s silent,” said the 76-year-old.

And in Indonesia, gravediggers at a cemetery earmarked for COVID-19 victims in the capital Jakarta are struggling to keep up with the number of corpses arriving every day.

“This is probably a test from God,” said gravedigger Minar.

Vaccine hopes

While the political row rages, countries around the world are trying to find a balance between restoring normal life and risking a second wave of the disease.

Experts have warned that the social distancing measures that have affected more than half of humanity will remain necessary until a vaccine or viable treatment is found.

The global race to find a vaccine got a boost Monday when results from a trial by US biotech firm Moderna sparked optimism.

Early clinical results suggested that recipients showed an immune response similar to people recovering from COVID-19. It will begin a larger second-phase trial soon.

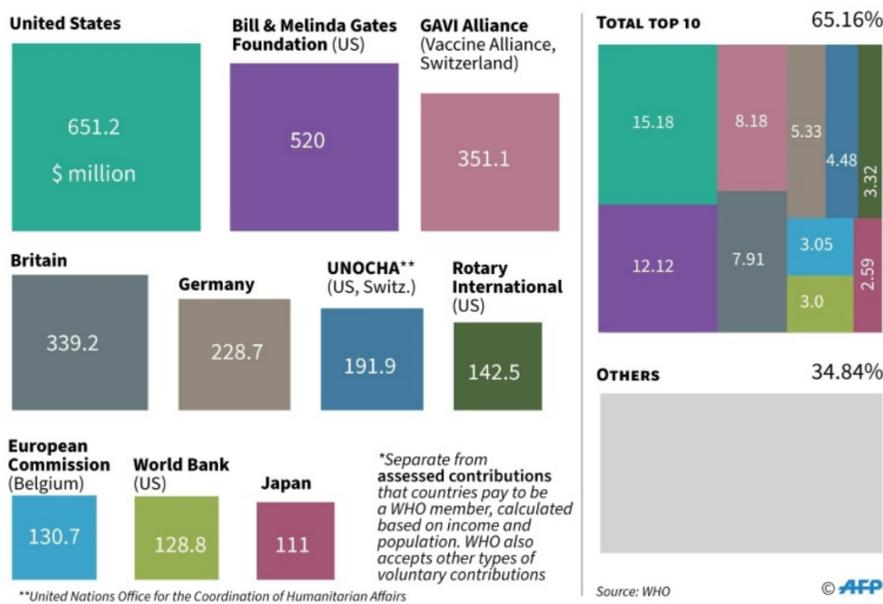
In China, meanwhile, scientists at Peking University have said they are developing a drug that can help stop the pandemic by using antibodies that can neutralise the virus.

They are planning clinical trials for the treatment, and are hoping to have the drug available later this year and in time for any potential winter outbreak.

The virus

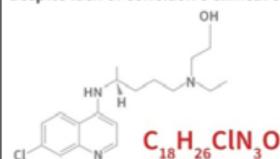
Top financial contributors to the World Health Organization

Funds the top 10 countries and organizations have fully distributed as specified voluntary contributions* For 2018-2019 cycle in millions of dollars, updated as of May 19



Hydroxychloroquine

Antimalarial that has gained interest in the coronavirus pandemic, despite lack of conclusive clinical evidence of its benefits



NO PROOF AGAINST COVID-19

♦ Treating COVID-19 patients with hydroxychloroquine had no positive effect and caused other health complications, two new studies showed on May 15

♦ French drug agency ANSM has repeatedly warned doctors about using the drug in the fight against COVID-19 due to worrying side effects

ORIGINAL USE

To treat and prevent malaria
Became less effective as the malaria parasite developed resistance

ALSO USED IN

Autoimmune diseases such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis
Some types of sun allergies

There are ongoing, but as yet, inconclusive clinical trials on patients with COVID-19

RISKS

Recent reported serious, sometimes fatal, heart rhythm problems, particularly at high doses. Also potential liver and kidney problems, and nerve cell damage

Sources: ec.europa.eu/pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/fact-sheet/date.com/ANSM/BMJ



A passenger wears a protective suit against the spread of the COVID-19, queues at El Dorado international airport in Bogota, Colombia



Scientists at Peking University have said they are developing a drug that can help stop the pandemic without a vaccine

In Russia, the number of coronavirus cases hit nearly 300,000 on Tuesday

