

# WHO Director-General's remarks at the Member State Briefing on the report of the international team studying the origins of SARS-CoV-2

30 March 2021

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## OPENING REMARKS

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

At the World Health Assembly last year, Member States requested that I, as Director-General, carry out a vital and specific task.

In resolution 73.1, you asked me, I quote, “to work closely with the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and countries, as part of the One Health approach, to identify the zoonotic source of the virus and the route of introduction to the human population, including the possible role of intermediate hosts, including through efforts such as scientific and collaborative field missions, which will enable targeted interventions and a research agenda to reduce the risk of similar events occurring.”

As you know, an international scientific and collaborative field mission travelled to China in January of this year, and worked with scientists there for four weeks.

The team has now completed its initial studies, and the report was made available to both the WHO Secretariat and Member States over the weekend.

The team of scientists came from around the world: Australia, China, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Kenya, Netherlands, Qatar, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Viet Nam.

I offer my gratitude to this group of experts from all over the world, who worked tirelessly on this report, under intense pressure. And I would like to thank them for their dedication and commitment.

Now, I would like to invite the co-leads of the international team, Dr Peter Ben Embarek and Professor Liang Wannian, to present their key findings.

Dr Ben Embarek and Professor Liang, thank you so much once again for your collaboration and hard work.

You have the floor.

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*Dr Peter Ben Embarek and Prof Liang Wannian present their findings.*

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## **CLOSING REMARKS**

Thank you, Dr Peter Ben Embarek, Professor Liang and the whole team for sharing your report and presenting your findings.

I welcome your report, which advances our understanding in important ways.

It also raises further questions that will need to be addressed by further studies, as the team itself notes in the report.

As Member States have heard, the report presents a comprehensive review of available data, suggesting that there was unrecognized transmission in December 2019, and possibly earlier.

The team reports that the first detected case had symptom onset on the 8th of December 2019. But to understand the earliest cases, scientists would benefit from full access to data including biological samples from at least September 2019.

In my discussions with the team, they expressed the difficulties they encountered in accessing raw data. I expect future collaborative studies to include more timely and comprehensive data sharing.

I welcome the recommendations for further studies to understand the earliest human cases and clusters, to trace the animals sold at markets in and around Wuhan, and to better understand the range of potential animal hosts and intermediaries.

The role of animal markets is still unclear.

The team has confirmed that there was widespread contamination with SARS-CoV-2 in the Huanan market in Wuhan, but could not determine the source of this contamination.

Again, I welcome the recommendations for further research, including a full analysis of the trade in animals and products in markets across Wuhan, particularly those linked to early human cases.

I concur with the team's conclusion that farmers, suppliers and their contacts will need to be interviewed.

The team also addressed the possibility that the virus was introduced to humans through the food chain.

Further study will be important to identify what role farmed wild animals may have played in introducing the virus to markets in Wuhan and beyond.

The team also visited several laboratories in Wuhan and considered the possibility that the virus entered the human population as a result of a laboratory incident.

However, I do not believe that this assessment was extensive enough. Further data and studies will be needed to reach more robust conclusions.

Although the team has concluded that a laboratory leak is the least likely hypothesis, this requires further investigation, potentially with additional missions involving specialist experts, which I am ready to deploy.

We will keep you informed as plans progress, and as always, we very much welcome your input.

Let me say clearly that as far as WHO is concerned all hypotheses remain on the table.

This report is a very important beginning, but it is not the end. We have not yet found the source of the virus, and we must continue to follow the science and leave no stone unturned as we do.

Finding the origin of a virus takes time and we owe it to the world to find the source so we can collectively take steps to reduce the risk of this happening again. No single research trip can provide all the answers.

It is clear that we need more research across a range of areas, which will entail further field visits.

Before I conclude I want to express my thanks to the experts from around the world and China who participated in the report, and look forward to continuing this important work.

Excellencies, as always, we are grateful for your continuing engagement, and we look forward to your questions and comments.

I thank you.

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