

REFORM THE WHO BUT DO NOT UNDERMINE IT

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The US decision to quit the world's top public health organization reflects poor judgement. The WHO has been woefully behind the corona curve, but reforms should be the way ahead.

Nearly three months after the US halted its funding of the World Health Organization (WHO), and more than a month after saying it would quit membership of the international public health body, US President Donald Trump's administration has formally notified the United Nations of its withdrawal. Unless this decision is reversed by a new occupant of the White House after the US presidential election in late 2020, America will no longer be a member of the WHO by this time next year. This is a highly unfortunate turn of events, especially at a time the world needs global cooperation at its best to fight a pandemic that threatens us all. Covid-19 rages on, and efforts to snuff it out must not fall victim to political mud-slinging across the globe. The US is the world's hardest hit country, and its leader has been pointing fingers at others for its misfortune. Along with China, where the disease first emerged, the WHO has been at the receiving end of Trump's fury. Among other things, the US president has accused the organization of helping China cover up the origins of the virus that causes covid-19. He has also called for WHO reforms. While the body has denied the US allegations, it has also been woefully behind the corona curve. Regardless of the politics at play, there seems a clear case for changes that could help turn the health body more effective in keeping the planet's population as healthy as possible.

The WHO got off to a poor start by taking inordinately long to declare the covid outbreak a pandemic. Verifiable signs had emerged not just of its highly contagious nature by mid-January, but also of its spread beyond China. But the WHO dithered in raising a global alarm until it was too late; it could have advised a closure of borders, for example, but did not. Given its stature and authority on such matters, charitable critics put that down to an inherent sense of caution. It did not want to exceed the evidence it had, they said. The WHO's failure that is currently in the news is its apparent playing down of the danger of airborne viral infections. All along, its safety guidelines had laid emphasis on contact as a mode of corona transmission for people to guard against. Sneezes and coughs, the WHO had warned against, but it was only this week that it partially acknowledged the peril of virus particles staying suspended in the air for prolonged periods, especially in spaces with poor ventilation. This came after an open letter from some 200 scientists urged it to widen its warnings.

Yet, none of that justifies abandoning the WHO. It has a vital role in gathering information from across the world and advising health authorities on covid-19. Its rejection by the world's richest and most powerful country should worry us. If authoritarian governments appear to wield undue influence over the organization, there must be a way for democracies to fix such a problem. For one, executive authority at the WHO needs to shift from political appointees to healthcare technocrats who command global respect for their work. For another, the WHO's operations need greater scrutiny. As of now, Ethiopia's former health and foreign minister Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus heads the body, and WHO critics have hinted of Addis Ababa being beholden to Beijing for investment inflows. Whatever the truth of these charges, the WHO ought to be restructured. If this will take broader UN reforms, we should embark on these too.

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