

# WHO ACCUSES CHINA OF WITHHOLDING INFORMATION ON ORIGIN OF COVID-19

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The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, sits closed in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province on January 21, 2020. International scientists have examined previously unavailable genetic data from samples collected at a market in China close to where the first human cases of COVID-19 were detected and said they have found suggestions the pandemic originated from animals, not a lab. | Photo Credit: AP

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has accused China of withholding information and data that may throw light on the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, and has asked why such information was not shared three years ago.

"Last Sunday, WHO was made aware of data published on the Global Initiative on Sharing Avian Influenza Data (GISAID) database in late January, and taken down again recently. The data, from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], relates to samples taken at the Huanan market in Wuhan, in 2020," WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, earlier this week.

GISAID is a global science initiative and primary source established in 2008 that provides open access to genomic data of influenza viruses and the coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic

"While it was online, scientists from a number of countries downloaded the data and analysed it. As soon as we became aware of this data, we contacted the Chinese CDC and urged them to share it with WHO and the international scientific community so it can be analysed," said Dr. Ghebreyesus.

He added that a meeting of WHO's Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO) was convened, and researchers from the Chinese CDC and the international group of scientists were asked to present their analyses of the data to SAGO.

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"Every piece of data relating to studying the origins of COVID-19 needs to be shared with the international community immediately. These data could have – and should have – been shared three years ago," WHO maintained. "We continue to call on China to be transparent in sharing

data, and to conduct the necessary investigations and share the results. Understanding how the pandemic began remains both a moral and scientific imperative,” it added.

WHO has noted that available data does not provide “a definitive answer” to the question of how the pandemic began”, even while stating that this year, the world may be “able to say that COVID-19 is over as a public health emergency of international concern.”

Meanwhile, the world’s apex health body has also updated its tracking system and working definitions for variants of SARS-CoV-2, “to better correspond to the current global variant landscape, to independently evaluate Omicron sublineages in circulation, and classify new variants more clearly when required.”

Stating that SARS-CoV-2 continues to evolve, WHO has said that it is also updating the working definitions for variants of concern (VOCs) and variants of interest (VOIs).

“The main update consists in making the VOC definition more specific, to include major SARS-CoV-2 evolutionary steps that require major public health interventions. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple variants of concern and variants of interest have been designated by WHO based on their assessed potential for expansion and replacement of prior variants, for causing new waves with increased circulation, and for the need for adjustments to public health actions,” it said.

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