

COVID-19 CATASTROPHE COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED, SAYS REPORT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Keeping safe: People waiting to receive shots at a temporary vaccination site at a train station in New York City. AFP

The catastrophic scale of the COVID-19 pandemic could have been prevented, an independent global panel concluded on Wednesday, but a “toxic cocktail” of dithering and poor coordination meant the warning signs went unheeded.

The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response said institutions “failed to protect people” and science-denying leaders eroded public trust in health interventions. Early responses to the outbreak detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 “lacked urgency”, with February 2020 a costly “lost month” as countries failed to heed the alarm, said the panel in its long-awaited final report.

Requested by the World Health Organization (WHO) member states last May, the report, “COVID-19: Make it the Last Pandemic”, argued that the global alarm system needed overhauling to prevent a similar catastrophe.

“We have identified failures at every stage and we do believe that it could have been possible to prevent this pandemic,” panel co-chair and former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said. “We cannot simply point to one individual who is ultimately responsible,” she said.

The panel said the WHO could have declared the situation a Public Health Emergency of International Concern — its highest level of alarm — on January 22, 2020. Instead, it waited eight more days before doing so. It was only in March after the WHO described it as a pandemic — a term that is not officially part of its alert system — that countries were jolted into action.

As for the initial outbreak, “there were clearly delays in China — but there were delays everywhere”, said former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, the report’s other chairwoman.

To tackle the pandemic, the panel called on the richest countries to donate a billion vaccine doses to the poorest. The WHO and the World Trade Organization should also get major vaccine-producing countries and manufacturers to agree to voluntary licensing and technology transfers for vaccines. It also proposed an over-haul of the WHO to make it less cautious and give it more authority to send expert missions into countries immediately without waiting for their approval.

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