

WHO unveils new team to investigate pandemic

Pandemic has killed over 4.85 million

GENEVA: The World Health Organization unveiled Wednesday a team of scientists it wants to investigate new pathogens and preventing future pandemics—plus reviving the stalled probe into COVID-19's origins. The group of 26 experts will be charged with producing a new global framework for studies into the origins of emerging pathogens of epidemic and pandemic potential—and their remit includes SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 disease. Besides the COVID-19 crisis, a growing number of high-risk pathogens have appeared or reappeared in recent years, including MERS, bird flu viruses, Lassa, Marburg and Ebola.

The WHO announced earlier this year that it would set up a Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO). “The emergence of new viruses with the potential to spark epidemics and pandemics is a fact of nature, and while SARS-CoV-2 is the latest such virus, it will not be the last,” said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. “Understanding where new pathogens come from is essential for

preventing future outbreaks.”

‘Rapid advice’

The 26 members that the WHO has put forward were chosen from a field of more than 700 applications and are drawn from a range of scientific disciplines. And the team the WHO has named is subject to a two-week public consultation. They include Christian Drosten, the head of Berlin's Institute of Virology; Yungui Yang of the Beijing Institute of Genomics; Jean-Claude Manuguerra of France's Institut Pasteur; and Inger Damon from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Several of the experts were on the joint WHO-China scientific mission investigating the origins of COVID-19: Vladimir Dedkov, Farag Elmoubasher, Thea Fischer, Marion Koopmans, Hung Nguyen and John Watson.

The terms of reference say the group must give the WHO an independent evaluation of all available scientific and technical findings from global studies on the origins of COVID-19. It must also advise the UN health agency on de-

veloping, monitoring and supporting the next series of studies into the origins of the virus. That could include “rapid advice” on the WHO's operational plans to implement the next series of studies into the pandemic's origins, and advice on additional studies.

Lab leak theory

The pandemic has killed more than 4.85 million people and battered the global economy since the virus was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. After much delay, a WHO team of international experts went to Wuhan in January 2021 to produce a first phase report, written in conjunction with their Chinese counterparts. Their March report drew no firm conclusions, but ranked four hypotheses. Most probable was that the virus jumped from bats to humans via an intermediate animal, it said. It judged a leak from the Wuhan virology laboratories was “extremely unlikely”. However, the investigation faced criticism for lacking transparency and access, and for not evaluating the

lab-leak theory more deeply. In August, China rejected the WHO's calls for a renewed probe on the ground into the origins of COVID-19.

No time to waste

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, said SAGO would urgently assess what was now known, what still remained unknown, and what rapidly needed to be done. “I anticipate that the SAGO... will recommend further studies in China and potentially elsewhere,” she told journalists. “There's no time to waste in this.” Michael Ryan, the WHO's emergencies director, said it may be the “last chance to understand the origins of this virus” in a collegiate manner. Earlier Wednesday, Chen Xu, China's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, told the UN correspondents' association that SAGO's work should not be “politicized”. “If we are going to send teams to any other places, I believe it's not to China because we have received international teams twice already,” he said. “It's time to send teams to other places.” — AFP



ARLINGTON: A person looks at a smart phone with a Facebook App logo displayed on the background, in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

Embattled Facebook releases new curbs on harassment

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook unveiled fresh protections Wednesday against online attacks on journalists, activists and celebrities as the social media giant battles a crisis over its platforms' potential harms. The company has faced a storm of criticism and a Senate panel hearing since a whistleblower leaked internal studies showing Facebook knew its sites could be harmful to young people's mental health. Frances Haugen, an ex-worker at the company, alleged the leading social network put profits before the safety of its users. Facebook head of safety Antigone Davis announced the new protections, writing

“we do not allow bullying and harassment on our platform, but when it does happen, we act.”

Facebook expanded its range of banned “attacks” on public figures to include a range of sexual or degrading images of their bodies. Davis, who defended the company's work in a hearing before lawmakers, said “attacks like these can weaponize a public figure's appearance.” Facebook also added journalists and human rights defenders to the list of people considered public figures because of their work.

New policies included derailing coordinated efforts to use multiple accounts to harass or intimidate people considered at heightened risk of harm in the real world, such as government dissidents and victims of violent tragedies. Davis said Facebook will also start removing state-linked and “adversarial networks” of accounts at the social network that “work together to harass or silence people” such as dissidents. “We remove content that violates our policies and disable the accounts of people who repeatedly break our rules,” she wrote. — AFP

Climate change could sink world's smallest states

ROME: Some of the world's smallest countries could “disappear” without action at an upcoming UN summit to contain climate change, the secretary general of the Commonwealth warned in a Wednesday interview. “The threat to the 42 small states in existential,” Baroness Patricia Scotland told AFP. “People say that as if it does not mean what it says - namely these small states will disappear.”

The Dominica-born lawyer and former British government minister, who leads the Commonwealth association of former countries of the British empire, was speaking during a visit to Rome that included talks with Pope Francis. She said some of the Commonwealth's smallest members, like the low-lying Pacific islands of Tuvalu and Nauru, were “looking for new places to go” because “the sea level rises are so dangerous now”. She also decried the devastating impact of more frequent hurricanes, including in her native country.

“Dominica usually looks like a Garden of Eden,” she said. But after 2017's Hurricane Maria “even the bark of trees had been stripped, there was not one green leaf left. It was like Armageddon”. UN climate talks in the Scottish city of Glasgow from October 31 to November 12 are aimed at securing a global deal on decarbonising world economies and charting humanity's path away from catastrophic global warming. Scotland insisted that humanity had “no choice” but to act, noting that poor nations exposed to climate change also need extensive debt and vaccine relief.

“We are all in the same storm, but we're definitely not all in the same boat,” she said. The Commonwealth brings together 54 countries and 2.6 billion people, and the baroness is its first female leader. Her term was supposed to end in 2020, but a summit to decide whether to reappoint her or replace her has been postponed twice due to the coronavirus pandemic. “I certainly have so much work still to do that I would very much expect to still be in my position, but it is a matter for member states to decide,” she said. — AFP