

Opening remarks
Member State Information Session on Origins
WHO
16 July 2021

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening to all Member States, and thank you for joining us for this special briefing on the steps that WHO is taking to identify the origins of SARS-CoV-2.

As you know, at the end of March this year, the WHO-led international scientific team delivered its report following its mission to China in January, in line with World Health Assembly resolution 73.1.

That report filled in several knowledge gaps, and identified areas for further study.

Earlier this week, Member States received a circular letter detailing the proposed next steps that the Secretariat will take to advance those studies, in several areas:

First, integrated studies of humans, wildlife, captive and farmed animals, and environment, as part of a One Health approach.

Second, studies prioritizing geographic areas with the earliest indication of circulation of SARS-CoV-2, and neighbouring areas where other SARS-related coronaviruses have been found in non-human reservoirs;

Third, studies of animal markets in and around Wuhan, including continuing studies on animals sold at the Huanan wholesale market;

Fourth, studies related to animal trace-back activities, with additional epidemiology and molecular epidemiology work, including early sequences of the virus;

And fifth, audits of relevant laboratories and research institutions operating in the area of the initial human cases identified in December 2019.

The Secretariat will continue to develop operational plans and terms of reference for the next series of studies, in collaboration and consultation with Member States and the international scientific community.

I thank China and the other Member States who wrote to me yesterday, and I agree that finding the origins of this virus is a scientific exercise that must be kept free from politics.

For that to happen, we expect China to support this next phase of the scientific process by sharing all relevant data in a spirit of transparency. Equally, we expect all Member States to support the scientific process by refraining from politicising it.

Finding where this virus came from is essential not just for understanding how the pandemic started and preventing future outbreaks, but it's also important as an obligation to the families of the 4 million people who have lost someone they love, and the millions who have suffered.

But we also know that SARS-CoV-2 will not be the last new pathogen with pandemic potential. There will be more, and we will need to understand the origins of those pathogens too.

It is therefore our view that the world needs a more stable and predictable framework for studying the origins of new pathogens with epidemic or pandemic potential.

Accordingly, I am pleased to announce that the Secretariat is establishing a permanent International Scientific Advisory Group for Origins of Novel Pathogens, or SAGO.

SAGO will play a vital role in the next phase of studies into the origins of SARS-CoV-2, as well as the origins of future new pathogens.

Members of this new advisory group will be selected based on their technical expertise, taking into account geographical representation and gender balance.

We will soon be launching an open call for nominations, including from Member States, for highly-qualified experts to join SAGO. As required, the Secretariat will also appoint technical advisors to SAGO.

Dr Mike Ryan and Dr Maria Van Kerkhove will say more about this new approach shortly.

As always, we are grateful for your engagement, and we look forward to your questions, comments, input and guidance.

I thank you.

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