

WHO's Role in the Covid-19 Outbreak must be Strengthened

BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN



WHO is the main coordinating agency in the UN system for health matters. Prime Minister Modi has rightly called for strengthening it, especially in the wake of the recent Covid-19 global pandemic. However, there has been some criticism of WHO's handling of the Covid-19 outbreak and even calls for the resignation of the Director General. This criticism is not justified and at this critical time, it is necessary for member states to actively strengthen WHO's role.

Over the past years some countries especially the US and UK have been critical of WHO. One reason is that the WHO (reacting to the needs of developing countries and demands of some

NGOs) has been advocating initiatives such as (a) Essential Drugs and Medicines (b) phase out of breast milk substitutes, (c) campaign against Tobacco and Alcohol abuse, etc . These initiatives are seen as adversely affecting the interests of big pharma companies and some major lobbies and industries. This battle has also intensified in the domestic agenda of some countries such as the US. The attacks on WHO have taken the form of budget and programme cuts, incessant calls for reforms, threats of withdrawal or withholding contributions, etc. In response, WHO has set up an Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee (IOAC), and member states have adopted a WHO Transformation Agenda which they monitor progress.

Science Diplomacy Fellow, RIS.

It is true that China has become an influential player in the WHO. The immediate past Director General was from China (Hong Kong) who led the organisation during 2006-2017. China's assessed contribution to the WHO's regular budget has increased to 12 percent for 2019 -21second only to the US (with 22 per cent). This gives China a huge influence in the entire UN system, a fact that is further underlined by its ability to get its candidates elected to head UN agencies such as FAO, UNIDO, ICAO, and ITU. Its bid to capture the post of head of WIPO was defeated due to a vigorous campaign led by the US. China leverages its increasing clout in the UN system to achieve its foreign policy objectives, such as promoting the Belt and Road initiative, keeping Taiwan out of the system, etc. In this it is only following what many other large contributors to the UN budget do.

The WHO Executive Board¹ which met during 3-8 February 2020 received a briefing from the Director General and his team on the Covid19 outbreak on 7 February. A detailed discussion of WHO's emergency preparedness took place on 7 February, and many participants praised WHO's response to the Covid-19 outbreak. The Director General warned of the threat of a serious global outbreak, shortages of medical equipment and PPEs, and the need for transparency in sharing of data. At that point the outbreak was largely confined to China, Hubei province, with only 24 other countries reporting cases. The Board members adopted a draft resolution for the forthcoming World Health Assembly in May 2020. Surprisingly this draft resolution does not mention the Covid-19 outbreak but deals in general with WHO's preparedness for health emergency situations. Board members seemed unwilling to go beyond the International Health Regulations as far as international air travel was concerned. In retrospect, one should conclude that early declaration of a pandemic situation, and suspension of international air travel should not be delayed.

On 11-12 February WHO, in collaboration with GLoPID-R (the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness) held a Global research and innovation forum to mobilise

international action in response to the novel coronavirus emergency. More than 300 scientists and researchers participated in person and online and agreed on a set of global research priorities in a 8- point action plan. Subsequently, on 4 March, a 96 page detailed research road plan document was issued by WHO. This provides an important framework for global coordinated research.

The 73rd World Health Assembly² is scheduled for 17-23 May 2020. Holding the WHA as planned in May 2020, involves getting all the Health Ministers and senior officials to Geneva at a time when they are dealing with the outbreak of Covid-19. Perhaps the Assembly should be postponed and the Health Ministers should focus on dealing with the situation at home. Switzerland is itself fighting a battle against Covid-19 and the travel of some 3000 participants to Geneva seems to be an avoidable risk. An alternative option would be to have a virtual online meeting of the Assembly, for the first time. Moreover, the postponed session of the WHA should strongly support global coordinated responses to the Covid 19 outbreak, including global long term campaign to tackle any resurgence of the disease and eliminate it. A special declaration on Covid-19 would be appropriate, given the unprecedented nature of the outbreak.

At this point, attacks on the leadership of WHO, and in particular the Director General, would only weaken the global fight against Covid-19. The focus of international efforts should be on containing and limiting the outbreak, and in the long term to support R & D to produce affordable and effective vaccines and treatment for it. It is quite likely that the disease will remain with us and resurface again in future, this should be a priority objective.

Endnotes

¹ The Board consists of 34 members who are experts in health dominated by 34 countries for 3 year terms. The members come from the 6 regions of WHO - Africa(7), Americas(6), Europe(8), Western Pacific(5), Eastern Mediterranean(5), SE Asia(3). India comes under the SE Asia region and hosts the SE Regional Office of WHO.

² The World Health Assembly meets annually in May, with 194 member states and some 3000 participants.