

I. Health security

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Update on the Covid-19 pandemic

By the end of 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) had received reports of over 730 million cases of Covid-19 worldwide.¹ The actual number of infections is likely to be considerably higher from undiagnosed cases and generally poor Covid-19-related data.² As of 31 December 2022, the WHO reported over 270 million cases in Europe, over 186 million in the Americas, over 181 million in the western Pacific, over 60 million in south-east Asia, over 23 million in the eastern Mediterranean, and nearly 10 million in Africa. The five countries with the highest cumulative number of reported cases in 2022 were, in descending order, the United States, China, India, France and Germany.³

During 2022 nearly 7 million deaths were recorded as caused by Covid-19, with several million likely to have gone unrecorded. The WHO reported nearly 3 million Covid-related deaths in the Americas, over 2.1 million deaths in Europe, over 800 000 deaths in south-east Asia, over 300 000 deaths each in the eastern Mediterranean and in the western Pacific, and over 175 000 deaths in Africa. The five countries with the highest cumulative number of reported deaths in 2022 were, in descending order, the USA, Brazil, India, Russia and Mexico.⁴

While for much of the pandemic the main obstacle to vaccinating the world against Covid-19 was a lack of supply, in 2022 an increasing problem facing global vaccination efforts was a lack of demand. Covax, the vaccine-sharing initiative backed in part by the WHO, saw a sharp decline in dose orders, including in countries with relatively low vaccination rates.⁵ In some countries, millions of doses were thrown away unused.⁶

¹ World Health Organization (WHO), 'WHO coronavirus (Covid-19) dashboard', Status at 31 Dec. 2022, <<https://covid19.who.int>>.

² See e.g. Lentzos, F., 'The unfolding Covid-19 pandemic', *SIPRI Yearbook 2022*, pp. 474–76; and 'The pandemic's true death toll', *The Economist* ('excess death tracker').

³ WHO, 'WHO coronavirus (Covid-19) dashboard' (note 1).

⁴ WHO, 'WHO coronavirus (Covid-19) dashboard' (note 1).

⁵ Taylor, A., 'Amid low demand, global coronavirus vaccination set to slow in 2023', *Washington Post*, 4 Jan. 2023.

⁶ Ho, U., 'Binning 8.5 million Covid jabs a "shocking indictment" of vaccination campaign, says health expert', *Daily Maverick*, 14 Sep. 2022.

Studies into the origins of SARS-CoV-2

In June 2022 the WHO released the first preliminary report from the scientific advisory group for the origins of novel pathogens (SAGO).⁷ The report noted that no new data had been made available to evaluate the ‘lab leak’ hypothesis and recommended further investigations on origins.⁸ It recognized that lab leaks had happened historically with other pathogens, and that it was important to include studies to address risks of biosafety or biosecurity breaches.⁹ The report provided key recommendations ‘for further studies needed on humans, animals and the environment in China and around the world’. The SAGO emphasized the preliminary nature of the report, and that work was ongoing, but indicated that ‘currently available epidemiological and sequencing data suggest ancestral strains to SARS-CoV-2 have a zoonotic origin’. However, the SAGO also noted that it would ‘remain open to any and all scientific evidence that becomes available in the future to allow for comprehensive testing of all reasonable hypotheses’.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the lab leak theory continued to be a source of political tension. In response to the SAGO’s preliminary report, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reverted to its defensive narrative that the origins study must be conducted ‘on the basis of science and free from political interference’.¹¹ It continued:

The lab leak theory is a false claim concocted by anti-China forces for political purposes. It has nothing to do with science. The Chinese side has invited WHO experts to visit the Wuhan lab, and the joint report reached the clear conclusion that ‘a laboratory origin of the pandemic was considered to be extremely unlikely’. Since the SAGO report has called for investigation into biological laboratories ‘located worldwide where early Covid-19 cases have been retrospectively detected’ for the next phase of study, investigation should first target highly suspicious laboratories such as those at Fort Detrick and the University of North Carolina in the US.¹²

In October 2022 a US Senate committee released its own interim report on the origins of the pandemic, which concluded that ‘the Covid-19 pandemic was, more likely than not, the result of a research-related incident’.¹³ It seems

⁷ Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO), *Preliminary Report of the SAGO*, 9 June 2022 (WHO: Geneva, 2022). For a more detailed discussion of the scientific, public, and political debates on the origins of SARS-CoV-2, see Lentzos, F., ‘The unfolding Covid-19 pandemic’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 454–61; and Lentzos, ‘The unfolding Covid-19 pandemic’ (note 2), pp. 477–82.

⁸ SAGO (note 7), p. 6.

⁹ SAGO (note 7), p. 14.

¹⁰ SAGO (note 7), p. 6.

¹¹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s regular press conference on June 10, 2022, English transcript, 10 June 2022.

¹² Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (note 11).

¹³ US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Minority Oversight Staff, ‘An analysis of the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic’, Interim report, Oct. 2022, p. 26.

likely that politics will continue to plague further investigations into the pandemic's origins.

A pandemic treaty

The Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB), set up by the World Health Assembly in December 2021 to negotiate a treaty on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, and comprised of the 194 WHO member states, held several meetings in 2022 to discuss proposals for the treaty.¹⁴ There were also public consultations and two rounds of hearings on, respectively, which substantive elements to include in the treaty and what should be addressed at the international level to better protect against future pandemics.¹⁵

At its third and last meeting in 2022, at WHO headquarters in Geneva on 5–7 December, the INB agreed that its bureau would develop the 'zero draft' of a legally binding agreement in order to start negotiations at the fourth INB meeting, scheduled to start in February 2023. WHO member states called for an agreement that takes into account equity, promotes preparedness, ensures solidarity and respects sovereignty.¹⁶

An outbreak of mpox

On 7 May 2022 the WHO was informed of a confirmed case of mpox in an individual who had travelled from the United Kingdom to Nigeria and subsequently returned to the UK.¹⁷ Additional lab-confirmed cases were reported from the UK, and cases began being reported to WHO from several European countries, including in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden.¹⁸ The clinical presentation of mpox resembles that of smallpox, but it is less contagious and causes less severe illness. There is no specific vaccine for mpox, but smallpox vaccines can provide effective protection.¹⁹

Speaking at the opening of the 75th World Health Assembly on 22 May 2022, the WHO director-general, referring to both the Covid-19 pandemic and the mpox outbreak, said: 'We face a formidable convergence of disease,

¹⁴ WHO, Intergovernmental Negotiating Body, 'Documentation'.

¹⁵ WHO, Intergovernmental Negotiating Body, 'Public hearings'.

¹⁶ WHO, 'WHO member states agree to develop zero draft of legally binding pandemic accord in early 2023', WHO News, 7 Dec. 2022.

¹⁷ WHO, 'Monkeypox: United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland', Disease Outbreak News, 16 May 2022. Mpox was formerly known as 'monkeypox'. 'WHO recommends new name for monkeypox disease', WHO News, 28 Nov. 2022.

¹⁸ WHO, 'Monkeypox: United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland', Disease Outbreak News, 18 May 2022; and WHO, 'Multi-country monkeypox outbreak: Situation update', Disease Outbreak News, 10 June 2022.

¹⁹ WHO, 'Monkeypox', Fact sheet, 19 May 2022.

drought, famine and war, fuelled by climate change, inequity and geopolitical rivalry.²⁰ By early June there were confirmed cases from 28 countries in four WHO Regions where mpox is ‘not usual or had not been previously reported’, with clinical presentation of cases being ‘variable’.²¹ In July 2022, the director-general declared the escalating global mpox outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC).²²

While the mpox outbreak was brought under control, governments around the world are more conscious than ever of threats from infectious diseases and are investing heavily in preparedness of ‘Disease X’ and the next PHEIC.²³

²⁰ Ghebreyesus, T. A., WHO director-general, Speech to the high-level welcome at the 75th World Health Assembly, Geneva, 22 May 2022.

²¹ WHO, ‘Multi-country monkeypox outbreak: Situation update’ (note 18).

²² WHO, ‘WHO director-general declares the ongoing monkeypox outbreak a public health emergency of international concern’, Press release, 23 July 2022.

²³ WHO, ‘Prioritizing diseases for research and development in emergency contexts’.