

# **Covid: Serious failures in WHO and global response, report finds**

*BBC, 2021-05-12*

**The Covid-19 pandemic was preventable, an independent review panel has said.**

The panel, set up by the World Health Organization, said the combined response of the WHO and global governments was a "toxic cocktail". The WHO should have declared a global emergency earlier than it did, its report said, adding that without urgent change the world was vulnerable to another major disease outbreak. More than 3.3 million people around the world have now died of Covid. While the US and Europe are beginning to ease restrictions and resume some aspects of pre-pandemic life, the virus is still devastating parts of Asia. India in particular is seeing record-breaking numbers of new cases and deaths, with severe oxygen shortages in hospitals across the country. Countries neighbouring India, such as Nepal, are also seeing surges of the virus.

## **What did the report say?**

Covid-19: Make it the Last Pandemic, was compiled by the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response. Its aim was to find answers as to how the virus had killed more than 3.3 million people and infected more than 159 million. "The situation we find ourselves in today could have been prevented," co-chair Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a former president of Liberia, told reporters. "It is due to a myriad of failures, gaps and delays in preparedness and response."

The panel argued that the WHO's Emergency Committee should have declared the outbreak in China an international emergency a week earlier than it did.

It should have done so at its first meeting on 22 January last year, the report said, instead of waiting until 30 January. The month following the WHO's declaration was "lost" as countries failed to take appropriate measures to halt the spread of the virus. The WHO was then hindered by its own regulations that travel restrictions should be a last resort, the panel said, adding that Europe and the US wasted the entire month of February and acted only when their hospitals began to fill up.

When countries should have been preparing their healthcare systems for an influx of Covid patients, much of the world descended into a "winner takes all" scramble for protective equipment and medicines, the report said.

To prevent another catastrophic pandemic, the report suggests key reforms:

- A new global threats council should be created with the power to hold countries accountable
- There should be a disease surveillance system to publish information without the approval of countries concerned
- Vaccines must be classed as public goods and there should be a pandemic

- financing facility
- There was an immediate request for the wealthy G7 nations to commit \$1.9 billion to the WHO's Covax programme providing vaccine support to low income countries

Panel co-chair and former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said it was "critical to have an empowered WHO".

"If travel restrictions had been imposed more quickly, more widely, again that would have been a serious inhibition on the rapid transmission of the disease and that remains the same today," she added. The most eye-catching line of this report is that the pandemic was the 21st Century's "Chernobyl moment" and its assertion that the world wasted time in February 2020 while the virus took hold.

The panel calls for better processes and structures to spot the next highly infectious pathogen. As well as better funding for the World Health Organization to make it stronger and give it more teeth. After the worst shock to the global economy since World War Two, all countries will agree that it's a case of "never again". But will meaningful reform be possible when so much of the current response is still about putting national interests first?

The panel has called for rich countries to share one billion doses of vaccine by September, for example. Yet many nations with large stockpiles remain reluctant to declare their hand. There are some issues the panel didn't have time to consider in depth. The most fundamental one remains our relationship with the animal world to stop viruses jumping to humans in the first place