



# Covid-19: Trump threatens to stop funding WHO amid “China-centric” claims

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The BMJ

Donald Trump has warned that the US could stop funding the World Health Organization, as he accused it of being “China-centric” and of calling “every shot wrong.”

Speaking at a press conference on 7 April, President Trump criticised WHO for its decisions on covid-19 and said that the US could put a “very powerful” freeze on funding for the organisation.

He said, “The WHO receives a vast amount of money from the US. We pay for a majority, the biggest portion of their money. They actually criticised and disagreed with my travel ban at the time I did it. They were wrong, they have been wrong about a lot of things. They had a lot of information early and they didn’t want to divulge. They seemed very China-centric . . .

“We will be looking into that very carefully, and we’re going to put a hold on money spent on the WHO, we are going to put a very powerful hold on it and we’re going to see. It’s a great thing if it works, but when they call every shot wrong, that’s not good.”

When asked whether the right time to freeze WHO’s funding was during a pandemic, Trump backtracked.

“No, I didn’t [say we were going to freeze funding], I said we are going to look at it. We are going to investigate it. But we will look at ending funding, because you know what, they called it wrong, and if you look back over the years even, everything seems to be very biased towards China. That’s not right.”

## Downplayed concerns

Despite Trump’s suggestion that WHO did not warn about covid-19 early enough, the organisation has been asking countries to prepare since January. Speaking at a daily press briefing on 29 January, Michael Ryan, head of WHO’s health emergencies programme, said, “The whole world needs to be on alert now. The whole world needs to take action and be ready for any cases that come from the epicentre or other epicentre that becomes established.”

Meanwhile, Trump himself has been criticised for downplaying concerns over covid-19, especially after he repeatedly compared it to influenza.<sup>1,2</sup> In late February—a month after WHO had warned countries to prepare for covid-19—Trump claimed that public health warnings on the virus were a conspiracy against

him.<sup>3</sup> He tweeted, “Low Ratings Fake News . . . are doing everything possible to make the Caronavirus [sic] look as bad as possible, including panicking markets, if possible.”

He was later asked at a press conference whether he agreed with the talk radio host Rush Limbaugh that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was “exaggerating the threat of coronavirus” to “weaponise” it and to “hurt [Trump] politically.” He replied, “I think they are. And I’d like it to stop.”

## “Shoestring” budget

WHO is funded through contributions from member states and private organisations, and, although the US is the largest contributor, it is not WHO’s main source of funding. In recent years the US has contributed around 22% of all member state assessed contributions.<sup>4</sup>

Speaking at a press briefing in London on 8 April, David Heymann, professor of infectious disease epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, responded to Trump’s suggestion that the US could cut WHO funding.

Heymann said, “Of course, if WHO loses its funding, it cannot continue to do its work. It works on a shoestring budget already. What is really important during this outbreak is to see that, despite geopolitical tensions and also tensions between international organisations and governments, the technical people in all countries work together really well.

“It would be disastrous for WHO to lose funding, but through the technology that exists today we will continue the technical work despite whatever tensions occur.”

- 1 WhiteHouse.gov. Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and members of the Coronavirus Task Force in press conference. 27 Feb 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-conference/>.
- 2 Trump D. Twitter. 9 Mar 2020. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1237027356314869761>.
- 3 Dyer O. Trump claims public health warnings on covid-19 are a conspiracy against him. *BMJ* 2020;368:m941. 10.1136/bmj.m941 32144176
- 4 Kaiser Family Foundation. The US government and the World Health Organization. 24 Jan 2019. <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/the-u-s-government-and-the-world-health-organization/>.

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