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Experts protest Trump's withdrawal from WHO

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Some 750 experts in global public health, US constitutional law, and international law and relations have called for leaders in the US Senate and the House of Representatives to prevent the US president, Donald Trump, from withdrawing from the World Health Organization.¹

On 9 July WHO's director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, pleaded with the international community for unity against the covid-19 pandemic, amid a "lack of leadership and solidarity at the global level and national levels." The pandemic was getting worse and cases had doubled in the past six weeks, he said, urging people to unite to fight a "common enemy."^{2 3}

The experts seeking to prevent the US withdrawal included several former heads of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration, as well as current deans of medical and nursing schools, university and law professors, and foreign affairs experts.

They said that the president "lacks the legal authority to withdraw without congressional participation and approval." They wrote to James Risch, Republican chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Bob Menendez, the committee's ranking Democrat; Eliot Engel, the Democratic chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs; and Michael McCaul, that committee's ranking Republican. The experts asked that their committees and other committees with jurisdiction "hold hearings promptly to address the question of whether the attempt to unilaterally withdraw from the WHO is legal or in the national interest."

The US joined WHO through a joint resolution of Congress in 1948, and a joint resolution would be needed to withdraw, they said. They recommended that Congress state its opposition to withdrawal and its support for continued membership.

Health and national security

The experts also asked that Congress appropriate the full amount that the US had promised to WHO in 2021 and pass a resolution to prohibit withdrawal. "Exiting from the WHO is antithetical to US health and national security interests," they wrote.

The US provides about 15% of WHO's annual budget, about \$450m (£356m; €398m). If the US continues its withdrawal it must pay its current and past dues of about \$200m.

The Trump administration suggested on 14 April that it would withdraw from WHO, and on 18 May Trump wrote a four page letter to Ghebreyesus complaining that WHO showed an "alarming lack of independence from the People's Republic of China."^{4 5} On 6 July Trump formalized the withdrawal, to take effect a year from now after the US presidential election.

Joe Biden, former vice president and the Democratic candidate for president, has said that he would rejoin WHO if elected.

Trump said that WHO had ignored reports about covid-19 spreading and had made "inaccurate or misleading" claims relating to transmission and China's control of the outbreak. Throughout the crisis WHO had been "curiously insistent on praising China for its alleged 'transparency' . . . notwithstanding that China has been anything but transparent," he wrote.

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2 Schemm P, Taylor A. Tearful WHO director calls for global unity to fight the virus following US pullout. *Washington Post* 2020 Jul 9. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/07/09/tearful-who-director-calls-global-unity-fight-virus-following-us-pullout/>.

3 Feuer W. WHO warns the coronavirus is "getting worse," continues to accelerate. *CNBC* 2020 Jul 9. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/09/who-warns-the-coronavirus-is-getting-worse-continues-to-accelerate.html>.

4 Mahase E. Covid-19: Trump halts WHO funding in move labelled "petulant" and "short sighted". *BMJ* 2020;369:m1502. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m1502 pmid: 32295763

5 Mahase E. US to withdraw from WHO as China has "total control" over it, Trump claims. *BMJ* 2020;369:m2178. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m2178 pmid: 32482732