

Written Evidence Submitted by Fight for Freedom: Stand with Hong Kong.

(C190052)

Introduction

1. [Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong](#), is a completely independent, grassroots, crowdfund-initiated group of individuals who have come together to fight for freedom and democracy for Hong Kong. Our members come from all walks of life and range widely in age and profession, united in one shared vision.

Summary

2. Our submission will point to two factors that may have impacted the UK's ability to manage the COVID-19 outbreak:
 - a) The failings of the World Health Organisation (WHO).
 - b) The failings of China in withholding valuable data and in controlling the global outbreak.
3. Whilst the UK must not forget the importance of international co-operation, it must hold non-governmental organisations – such as the WHO – to account and ensure that they act impartially and ethically in its global pandemic response.
4. There is an abundance of public information, which we have referenced in this submission, demonstrates that the Chinese government was responsible for misguiding the UK's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. To maximise learnings, it would have been crucial for the UK to receive the most accurate information on the symptoms of COVID-19 from the onset, so that an appropriate response could have been formed.
5. The UK's willingness to hold non-governmental organisations and third countries, such as China in this instance, to account will have a profound impact on its readiness to deal with future outbreaks.

The failings of the World Health Organisation (WHO)

6. The WHO was first alerted in late December 2019 that a new disease had appeared in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Despite this, the WHO continued to repeat Beijing's assurances that 'Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission' of COVID-19.¹
7. The WHO only recognised human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus on January 24th 2020, in turn, delaying an announcement of a global emergency. This was despite persistent indications to the contrary, and alerts by Taiwanese health officials - directly signalled to the WHO - at the end of December, regarding the risk of human-to-human transmission.² But those concerns were not forwarded to other countries. Finally, it took another week for the WHO to declare the spread of the virus as a global health emergency.³
8. The WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, gave continual praise and endorsement of Chinese actions throughout the crisis.⁴ WHO has clearly demonstrated an evident bias to accept Chinese information at face value - creating a delay in international responses - and only attempting to gain access on the ground on a mission on February 12.⁵ WHO and DG Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus refused to question information and to fairly evaluate China's handling of the pandemic, which falls below the international standard expected of the non-governmental organisation.
9. The WHO's refusal to declare a pandemic until March 11th cost valuable time in preparing the appropriate measures against the virus. At this point, 114 countries had already collectively reported 118,000 cases.⁶ The failure of the WHO to act immediately and thoroughly in response to the initial claims made to them in December 2019, have had ripple effects, as countries and private actors based their actions on WHO guidelines, information and advice. Despite the WHO's limited enforcement mechanisms, more timely statements and advice would have had a profound effect on the global response to COVID-19.
10. If the WHO wants to maintain its legitimacy on the world stage, it must now answer some tough questions about the extent it has kowtowed to China during the coronavirus pandemic and how it has impaired a prompt and proportionate global response to the new virus .

¹ <https://twitter.com/who/status/1217043229427761152?s=21>

² <https://www.ft.com/content/2a70a02a-644a-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-51318246>

⁴ [https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-statement-on-ihr-emergency-committee-on-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)](https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-statement-on-ihr-emergency-committee-on-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov))

⁵ <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/fighting-coronavirus-pandemic-chinas-influence-world-health-organization>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/who-declares-coronavirus-pandemic>

11. On May 29th , President Trump declared that the U.S would terminate its relationship with the WHO.⁷ This was in light of Trump accusing the WHO of protecting China as the COVID-19 pandemic first escalated. The announcement arrived after President Trump stated the U.S would suspend funding for the WHO, pending a review.⁸ The increasing financial contribution by China to the WHO emphasises the need for a review into the WHO's response to the pandemic and the extent it kowtowed to China. It also raises questions over how the WHO will be governed in future.

The failings of China in withholding valuable data and in controlling the global outbreak

12. The Chinese government emphatically and repeatedly claimed that human transmission was impossible, long after doctors in Wuhan had concluded human transmission was ongoing. According to a study in *The Lancet*, the symptom onset date of the first patient was identified on December 1st, 2019.⁹ This indicated as early as the second week of December, Wuhan doctors were finding cases that indicated the virus was spreading from one human to another.

13. The Chinese government purposefully concealed the extent of its COVID-19 outbreak and gave false numbers of cases and deaths in the country. This was determined by the US intelligence community in April 2020, according to three US officials who asked not to be identified because the report was secret.¹⁰ The decision by China to downplay the number of cases could have impacted on the timeliness of the UK's response and, indeed, the global response and the severity of the measures that were in fact imposed by countries.

14. An Associated Press investigation has shown China was slow to share critical information about the new coronavirus with the WHO throughout January - frustrating officials and hindering the early response. Despite the WHO publicly praising China, behind the scenes it was a different story, one where China caused significant delays and considerable frustration among WHO officials over not receiving the information required to fight the spread of the virus. It has been revealed that China prevented the release of the genetic map, or genome, of the virus for more than a week after three different government labs had fully decoded the information. A delay of this significance would have hampered an appropriate global response.¹¹

⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-actions-china/>

⁸ https://www.axios.com/trump-world-health-organization-funding-65de2595-2d5e-4a6c-b7c6-9c18aa4cb905.html?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=organic&utm_content=1100

⁹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30183-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30183-5/fulltext)

¹⁰ https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-01/china-concealed-extent-of-virus-outbreak-u-s-intelligence-says?utm_source=twitter&utm_content=politics&cmpid%3D=socialflow-twitter-politics&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic

¹¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/internal-memos-reveal-frustration-chinese-secrecy->

15. The Chinese government actively suppressed those attempting to raise the alarm about COVID-19 in the early days of the outbreak. This was seen with Dr Li Wenliang, who attempted to message fellow medics regarding the outbreak at the end of December. Three days later, police visited Dr Li ordering him to stop immediately. Subsequently, Dr Li returned to work and caught the virus from a patient. He would perish from the disease five weeks later on 7th February 2020.¹²
16. This behaviour by the Chinese Communist Party was further highlighted later in April, following reports that China sought to block a European Union report alleging that Beijing was spreading disinformation about the coronavirus outbreak.¹³ According to EU diplomatic correspondence reviewed by Reuters, a senior Chinese official contacted European officials in Beijing to tell them that, 'if the report is as described and it is released today it will be very bad for cooperation'.¹⁴ This behaviour clearly demonstrates that CCP officials were actively putting pressure on European countries to downplay China's responsibilities in the pandemic.
17. The decision to spread misinformation, and put pressure on Europe to remain silent of China's disinformation campaign and blame deflection, China have significantly impacted the decisions made by the UK government during the crisis, negatively influencing its ability to draw accurate conclusions and skewing the learning opportunities as a result of the unreliable captured data.
18. Any government strategy which sets out the UK's readiness to deal with future outbreaks must include mechanisms to hold third countries to account, should they be withholding or misquoting vital information which could impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of UK and global citizens.

Conclusion

19. China's control of the flow of information has materially affected the global response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Earlier acknowledgement and sharing of accurate information would have saved countless lives.
20. The UK must hold organisations such as the WHO to account on issues of governance and undue influence to ensure they are fit-for-purpose in future public health emergencies.

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[early-stage/](#)

¹² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30382-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30382-2/fulltext)

¹³ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/china-forces-eu-to-tone-down-fake-news-dossier-zdh5fvkcf>

¹⁴ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8258305/EU-officials-watered-report-Chinas-coronavirus-fake-news-campaign-pressure.html>