

# WHO mulls reforms to repair reputation after bungling Ebola

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In this Sunday Oct. 19, 2014 file photo, Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), addresses the media in Gammarth, northeastern Tunisia. The World Health Organization is considering reforms that could overhaul its structure in what may be a last-ditch effort to salvage its credibility after botching the response to the biggest-ever Ebola outbreak. WHO has been repeatedly slammed for its sluggish, clumsy efforts in battling the epidemic in West Africa. On Sunday, Jan. 25, 2015, WHO's executive board, which advises the agency, will discuss proposals that could radically transform the U.N. health agency. (AP Photo/Adel Ben Salah, File)

The World Health Organization is debating how to reform itself after botching the response to the Ebola outbreak, a sluggish performance that experts say cost thousands of lives.

On Sunday, WHO's executive board planned to discuss proposals that could radically transform the U.N. health agency in response to sharp criticism over its handling of the West Africa epidemic.

"The Ebola outbreak points to the need for urgent change," WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan said. She acknowledged that WHO was too slow to grasp the significance of the Ebola outbreak, which is estimated to have killed more than 8,600 people, mainly in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Critics say the kinds of reform being debated are long overdue.

"The groundswell of dissatisfaction and lack of trust in WHO over Ebola has reached such a crescendo that unless there is fundamental reform, I think we might lose confidence in WHO for a generation," said Lawrence Gostin, director of the WHO Collaborating Center on Public Health Law and Human Rights at Georgetown University.

"Ebola revealed all of WHO's inherent weaknesses and the international community saw painfully what it was like to see WHO not being able to lead. That resulted in thousands of deaths that were completely avoidable," he said. "If that doesn't light a fire for reform, I don't know what will."

In a draft resolution being discussed Sunday, several dozen countries proposed measures including the creation of an emergency fund to respond to health emergencies and setting up a reserve of health workers to respond to crises. Similar measures were proposed after the 2009 swine flu epidemic, but virtually nothing has been done since then.



In this Wednesday, Sept. 24, 2014 file photo, health workers load a suspected Ebola patient into the back of an ambulance in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The World Health Organization is considering reforms that could overhaul its structure in what may be a last-ditch effort to salvage its credibility after botching the response to the biggest-ever Ebola outbreak. WHO has been repeatedly slammed for its sluggish, clumsy efforts in battling the epidemic in West Africa. On Sunday, Jan. 25, 2015, WHO's executive board, which advises the agency, will discuss proposals that could radically transform the U.N. health agency. (AP Photo/Michael Duff, File)

A year before Ebola broke out in West Africa, WHO's outbreak department slashed its staff to save \$6 million. In proposals to be discussed Sunday, WHO appears to be backtracking on that decision, saying it must develop operational expertise. The agency also conceded that, despite public expectations that it can respond quickly to health emergencies, it simply is not designed to do that.

WHO declared Ebola to be a global emergency in August. But it wasn't until Jan. 12 that Chan officially assigned Bruce Aylward, the agency's lead official on Ebola, to work full time on the outbreak, according to an internal memo sent to WHO staff.

"WHO is indispensable but we know significant changes are needed," said Dr. Tom Frieden, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the meeting. He said decisions at the agency had frequently been made for political rather than scientific reasons.

Some experts expressed skepticism that the broad reforms being discussed by WHO would significantly change anything.



In this Wednesday, Oct. 22, 2014 file photo, a child stands near a sign advising of a quarantined home in an effort to combat the spread of the Ebola virus in Port Loko, Sierra Leone. The World Health Organization is considering reforms that could overhaul its structure in what may be a last-ditch effort to salvage its credibility after botching the response to the biggest-ever Ebola outbreak. WHO

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"If we try to reform everything, then nothing will be done," said Dr. Jean Clement Cabrol, a director of operations at Doctors Without Borders. He described certain parts of WHO - specifically its Africa office, which was blamed by Geneva officials for blundering the early response - as "dreadful."

Gostin said no other agency has a mandate to protect public health that could easily replace WHO.

"If we didn't have a WHO, we would need to create one," he said. "But we need to make them politically accountable for their failures and force them to be leaders."



In this Thursday Aug. 28, 2014 file photo, Bruce Aylward, WHO Assistant Director-General speaks, during a press conference about the WHO briefing on the Ebola roadmap. The World Health Organization is considering reforms that could overhaul its structure in what may be a last-ditch effort to salvage its credibility after botching the response to the biggest-ever Ebola outbreak. WHO has been repeatedly slammed for its sluggish, clumsy efforts in battling the epidemic in West Africa. On Sunday, Jan. 25, 2015, WHO's executive board, which advises the agency, will discuss proposals that could radically transform the U.N. health agency. (AP Photo/Keystone/Martial Trezzini, File)

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