

WHO elects new chief to lead reform (Update)

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The World Health Organization was electing its new leader Tuesday, with the race narrowed to two finalists who have vowed to shake up the fiercely criticised agency.

After one round of voting WHO member states eliminated a former Pakistani health minister, Sania Nishtar, several diplomats with direct knowledge of the closed-door result told AFP.

That left former Ethiopian health minister Tedros Adhanom and British doctor and UN veteran David Nabarro as the remaining candidates to succeed Hong Kong-born Margaret Chan as the UN's global health boss.

A second round of voting was set to begin shortly.

Chan's decade-long tenure which ends on June 30 was notably marred by condemnation of the agency's response to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa.

The WHO was accused of missing key warning signs about the severity of an outbreak that began in December 2013 and ultimately killed more than 11,000 people.

"We know that the next health emergency is not a question of 'if' but 'when'", US health secretary Tom Price said in Geneva before voting was to start.

"When it happens the world will turn to the WHO for guidance and for leadership. We need to be sure it is up to the task," he told the Swiss Press Club.

The finalists

Nabarro and Tedros are bidding to head perhaps the most influential United Nations agency, charged with emergency response and shaping baseline policies for treatment of major health challenges.

Tedros would be the first African to lead the body and has unanimous public backing from the African Union.

Nabarro has been buoyed by strong support from his native Britain and has touted his intimate knowledge of the UN system.

It could take two more rounds to produce a winner, given the WHO's complex tallying system.

The agency has 194 member states, but only 186 nations were eligible to cast ballots Tuesday because of no-shows and voting rights stripped because of unpaid UN dues.

Tuesday marks the first time countries will get to choose the WHO chief.

Previously the executive committee offered just one candidate for states to rubber stamp.

'Big changes' needed

The WHO has already initiated a range of reforms since it faced

crushing criticism over its response to the Ebola crisis, but experts say the new chief still faces a huge task.

"We need WHO to be more effective than it is today," the director of Harvard University's Global Health Institute, Ashish Jha, said at the Swiss Press Club event.

He highlighted transparency and accountability especially for WHO leadership as areas that need work.

Mark Dybul, who heads the Global Fund To Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, said Chan had "laid the foundations" for improvements, but added that "big, big changes need to be made".

He underscored "massive" coordination problems between regional offices and Geneva headquarters.

This was identified as a significant issue in the Ebola crisis, when the African office in Brazzaville was accused of not sounding the alarm.

Last pitch

The candidates made their final pitch to voters before the first ballots were cast.

Tedros, a malaria specialist, recalled the childhood death of his brother from a treatable sickness to underscore that universal healthcare for all would be a top priority.

The 52-year-old said he refused "to accept that people should die because they are poor".

Nabarro, 67, reminded voters that he turned around the botched Ebola

response when he was named UN special envoy for the crisis roughly a year into the outbreak.

That crisis highlighted that the world needs "a competent and dependable" WHO, he said, vowing to "never allow complacency or bureaucracy to defend life-saving action."

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