

US intel: Coronavirus not manmade, still studying lab theory

April 30 2020, by Zeke Miller



President Donald Trump speaks about reopening the country, during a roundtable with industry executives, in the State Dining Room of the White House, Wednesday, April 29, 2020, in Washington. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

U.S. intelligence agencies are debunking a conspiracy theory, saying they

have concluded that the new coronavirus was "not manmade or genetically modified" but say they are still examining a notion put forward by the president and aides that the pandemic may have resulted from an accident at a Chinese lab.

The statement from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the clearinghouse for the web of U.S. spy agencies, comes as President Donald Trump and his allies have touted the as-yet-unproven theory that an infectious disease lab in Wuhan, the epicenter of the Chinese outbreak, was the source of the global pandemic, which has killed more than 220,000 people worldwide.

In recent days the Trump administration has sharpened its rhetoric on China, accusing the geopolitical foe and vital trading partner of failing to act swiftly enough to sound the alarm to the world about the outbreak or to stop the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. U.S. officials have said the Chinese government should "pay a price" for its handling of the pandemic.

The new statement says, "The Intelligence Community also concurs with the wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not manmade or genetically modified."

"The IC will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan."

Trump on Thursday again blamed China for not doing enough to contain the coronavirus.

"We just got hit by a vicious virus that should never have been allowed to escape China," he said during an Oval Office meeting with New

Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy.

Earlier this month, Trump addressed the lab theory saying, "More and more, we're hearing the story." Secretary of State Mike Pompeo added at the time, "The mere fact that we don't know the answers—that China hasn't shared the answers—I think is very, very telling."

Pompeo also pressed China to let outside experts into the lab "so that we can determine precisely where this virus began."

While Trump and Pompeo have made public statements speculating about the lab, a U.S. intelligence official disputed the notion that there was any pressure on agencies to bolster a particular theory. The intelligence official was not authorized to publicly discuss the issue and spoke only on condition of anonymity.

Scientists say the virus arose naturally in bats. Even so, Pompeo and others have pointed fingers at an institute that is run by the Chinese Academy of Sciences. It has done groundbreaking research tracing the likely origins of the SARS virus, finding new bat viruses and discovering how they could jump to people.

"We know that there is the Wuhan Institute of Virology just a handful of miles away from where the wet market was," Pompeo said two weeks ago. The institute has an address 8 miles, or 13 kilometers, from the market that is considered a possible source.

U.S. officials say the American Embassy in Beijing flagged concerns about potential safety issues at the lab in Wuhan in 2018, but they have yet to find any evidence the virus originated there nearly two years later.

The Chinese government said Thursday that any claims that the coronavirus was released from a laboratory are "unfounded and purely

fabricated out of nothing."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang cited the institute's director, Yuan Zhiming, as saying the lab strictly implements bio-security procedures that would prevent the release of any pathogen.

"I would like to point out again that the origin of the virus is a complex scientific issue, and it should be studied by scientists and professionals," Geng said.

The U.S. was providing funding to the Wuhan lab for its research on coronaviruses, Michael Morell, former acting director and deputy director of the CIA, said Thursday.

He said State Department cables indicate that there have been concerns in past years among U.S. officials about the safety protocols at that lab. If the virus did escape from a Chinese lab, it not only reflects negatively on China but also on the United States for providing research funding to a lab that has safety concerns, Morell said during an online forum hosted by the Michael V. Hayden Center for Intelligence, Policy and International Security at George Mason University.

"So if it did escape, we're all in this together," Morell said. "This is not a gotcha for China. This is a gotcha for both of us."

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng also criticized U.S. politicians who have suggested China should be held accountable for the global pandemic, saying they should spend their time on "better controlling the epidemic situation at home."

But another government spokesman, Zhao Lijian, demonstrated that China was not above sowing confusion in the face of the pandemic. He tweeted in March the falsehood that the virus might have come from the

U.S. Army.

Trump, whose early response to the outbreak has been questioned, also pushed back on news reports that he was repeatedly warned about the virus by intelligence agencies. Trump said he was given the first intelligence briefing in "later January." Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar also briefed Trump on the threat by phone on Jan. 18.

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Citation: US intel: Coronavirus not manmade, still studying lab theory (2020, April 30) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-04-intel-coronavirus-manmade-lab-theory.html>

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