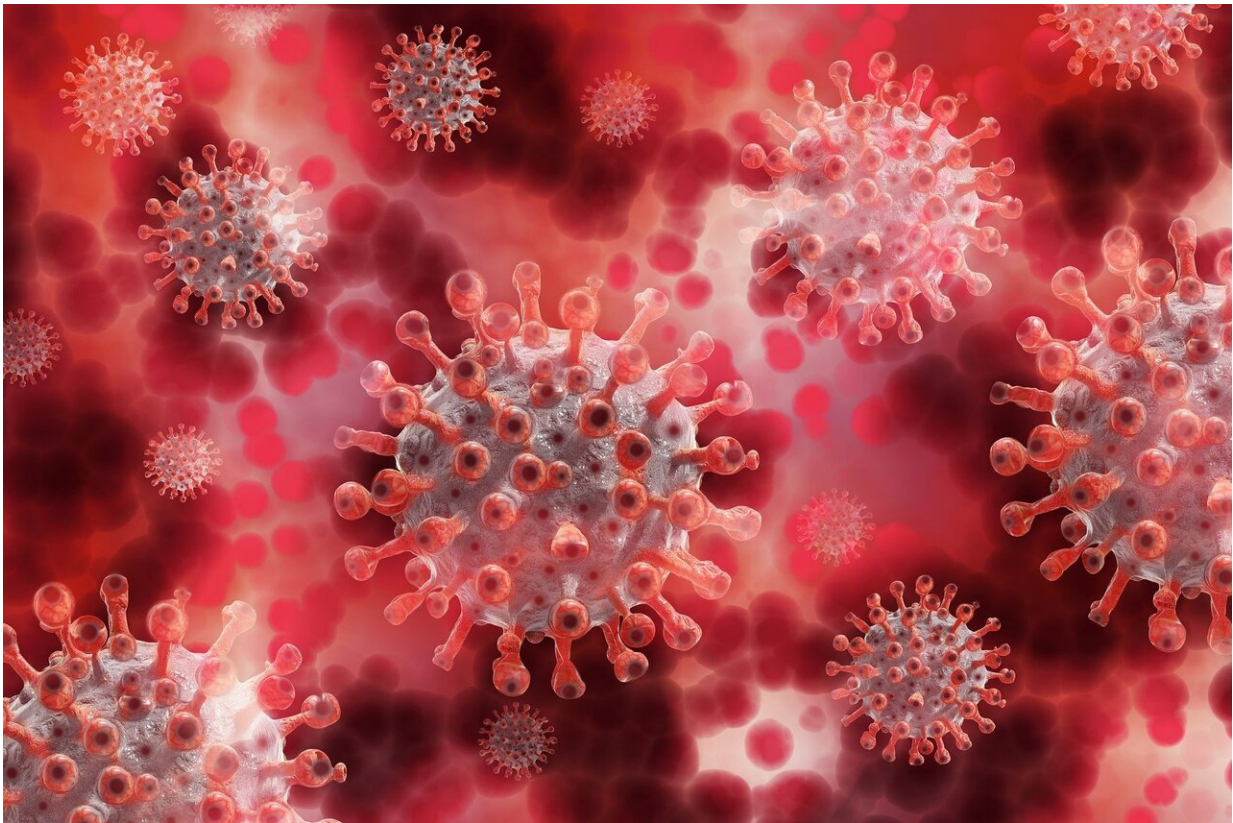


WHO team probing COVID origins in China to brief media

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An international team of experts wrapping up a month spent in China investigating the COVID-19 pandemic's origins will brief the media in Wuhan on Tuesday, the WHO announced.

"The international team working to understand the origins of the COVID-19 virus is completing its four weeks' stay in Wuhan, China and together with their Chinese colleagues will participate in a press conference," the World Health Organization said Monday.

The briefing will be held at 3:30pm (0730 GMT) at a hotel in the city, the Chinese foreign ministry said. It will be live-streamed in English on the UN health agency's digital and social media platforms.

The first COVID-19 cases were detected in Wuhan in December 2019.

Scientists think the disease—which has gone on to kill more than 2.3 million people worldwide—originated in bats and could have been transmitted to humans via another mammal.

But there are no definitive answers so far and top WHO officials have played down the chances of the sensitive mission finding them on the first attempt.

They have said the Wuhan visit will likely throw up many more questions that need answering.

Since emerging from their initial 14-day hotel quarantine, the WHO experts have visited a number of high-profile sites linked to the pandemic origins, including a seafood market where people were first found falling ill.

A trip last Wednesday to the Wuhan Institute of Virology was one of the highest-profile events on the agenda due to the controversial theory it might have been the source of the pandemic.

Scientists at the laboratory conduct research on some of the world's most dangerous diseases, including strains of bat coronaviruses similar to

COVID-19.

Speculation emerged early in the pandemic that the virus could have accidentally leaked from the lab in Wuhan, although there was no evidence provided to back up that theory.

Then-US president Donald Trump and his supporters seized on those rumours and amplified them with conspiracy theories that China had deliberately leaked the virus.

Peter Ben Embarek, the head of the WHO mission, said the inspectors had "very frank" discussions with Chinese scientists about the source of the pandemic—including theories that it leaked from the laboratory, he told AFP last Thursday.

While he did not identify specific theories, Ben Embarek described some of them as irrational and insisted the investigators would not waste time chasing the wildest claims.

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