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throat, played
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allegedly...

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WHO says COVID-19 'lab leak' theory needs further investigation

By **Yaron Steinbuch**

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A group of World Health Organization scientists says the theory that the coronavirus could have escaped from a Wuhan lab needs “further investigations”— though data from China is still missing.

In its first preliminary report Thursday, the Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens stressed that it had no conclusive findings on the origins of worst global pandemic in a century.

“There are key pieces of data that are not yet available for a complete understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic began,” the expert said in their report, stressing that further studies are needed “to follow up on several gaps in our knowledge,” according to Agence France-Presse.

The WHO panel's report said all available data pointed to the novel coronavirus probably coming from animals, likely bats, a similar conclusion to the U.N. agency's work after a 2021 trip to China, where the first cases were reported in December 2019.

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Members of the WHO arrive in Wuhan in Feb. 2021 to perform an investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 virus.

AFP via Getty Images

“The strongest evidence is still around zoonotic transmission,” SAGO Chairwoman Marietjie Venter said Thursday, although the original host, intermediate hosts or how the virus jumped to humans are still unknown.

The mission had determined that the theory that the virus may have escaped from a lab was “extremely unlikely,” though the SAGO team stressed that further study is needed.

“It remains important to consider all reasonable scientific data that is available either through published or other official sources to evaluate the possibility of the introduction of SARS-CoV-2 into the human population through a laboratory incident,” the report said.

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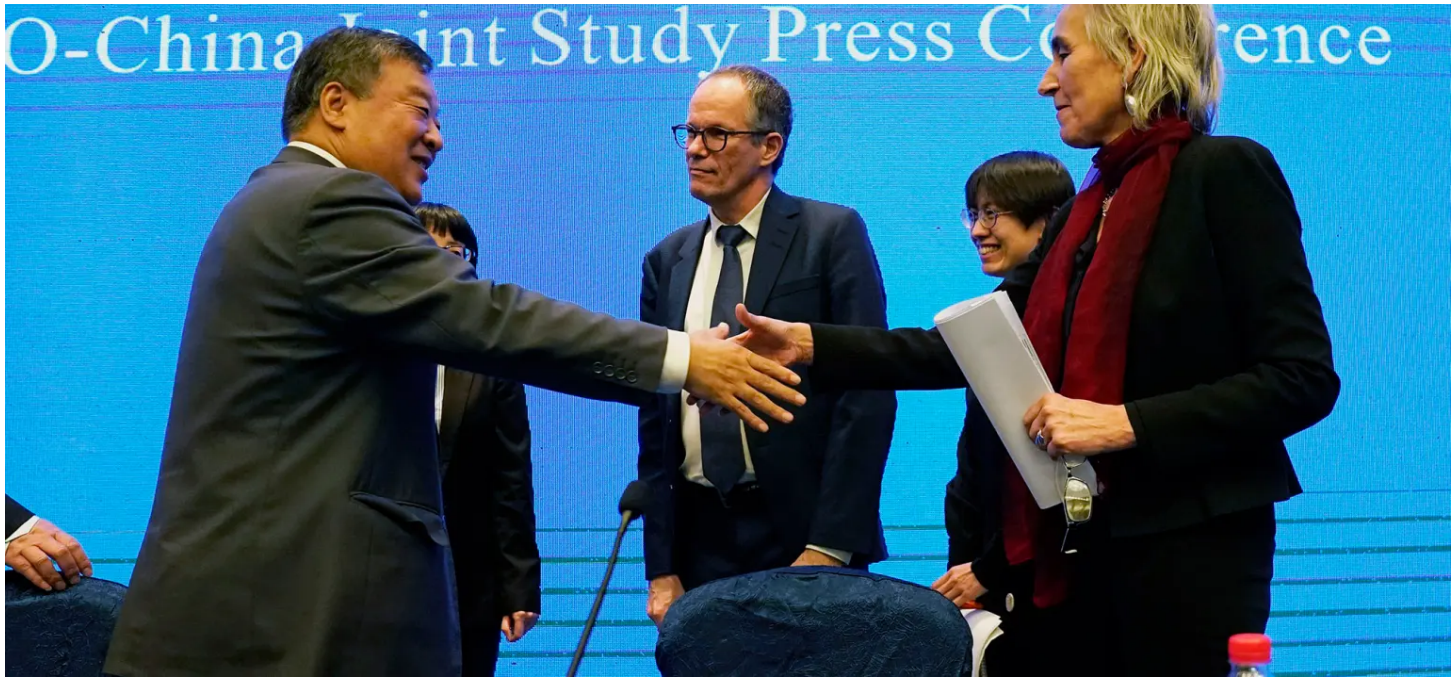
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Marion Koopmans, right, and Peter Ben Embarek, center, of the World Health Organization team say farewell to their Chinese counterpart Liang Wannian, left, after a WHO-China Joint Study Press Conference.

AP

But SAGO also acknowledged that three members of the team — from China, Russia and Brazil — objected to including the recommendation.

Venter told reporters it was important to be open to various theories.

“Having it in the report doesn’t say that that’s definitely what we think it is,” she said, stressing that it merely means “we are open to scientific data... so if anything comes up that’s new, we will not ignore it.”

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An aerial photo from 2020 shows the P4 laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province.

AFP via Getty Images

Co-chair Jean-Claude Manuguerra stressed that so far there had been no real investigation into the lab leak theory.

"We need to be open-minded and cover all the hypotheses, including that one," Manuguerra said.

The experts said access was needed to staff and data from labs to assess biosafety and biosecurity practices, but this could be tricky, especially in the case of China, which has pushed back against suggestions of new missions to the country.

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A worker in protective overalls and carrying disinfecting equipment walks outside the Wuhan Central Hospital.
AP

“Understanding the origins of the virus is very important scientifically, to prevent future epidemics and pandemics. But morally, we also owe it to all those who have suffered and died, and their families,” WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Thursday.

“All hypotheses must remain on the table until we have evidence that enables us to rule certain hypotheses in or out,” he said, adding that all countries, particularly China, should be transparent and cooperative by sharing data without governmental interference.

For its report, SAGO reviewed available research but did not conduct its own investigation.

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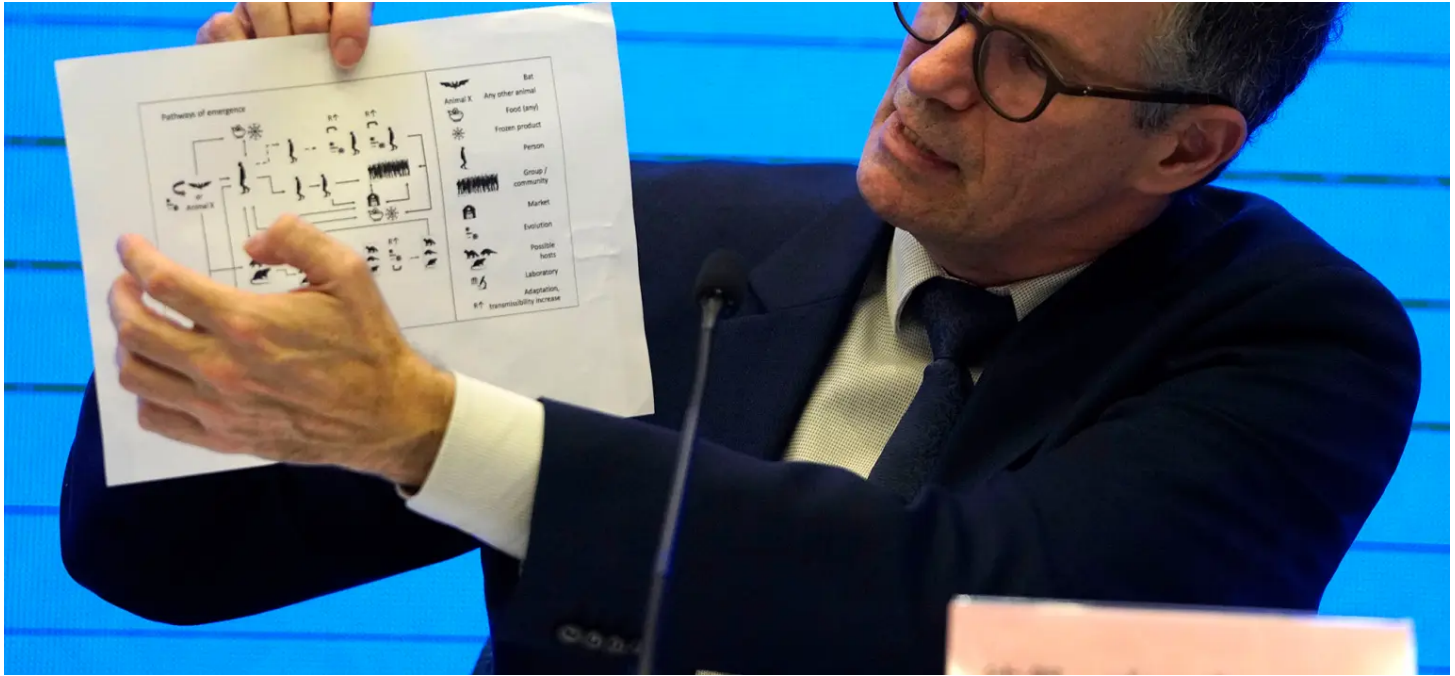
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Ben Embarek of the World Health Organization team holds up a chart showing pathways of transmission of the virus in 2021.

AP

Maria Van Kerkhove, a senior WHO official on the SAGO secretariat, said the WHO will support all ongoing efforts to better understand how the pandemic began.

"We owe it to ourselves, we owe to the millions of people who died and the billions of people who were infected," she told reporters.

Last year, a classified US intelligence report delivered to President Joe Biden also was inconclusive about the theories, including the widely-pushed one that the deadly bug jumped from animals to humans.

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