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COVID-19 origin still 'inconclusive' after years-long WHO study

WHO chief Tedros says 'all hypotheses must remain on the table' after critical information not provided to investigators.

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A nurse collects a nasal swab sample from a traveller at a COVID-19 testing site at the Los Angeles International Airport [File: Jae C Hong/AP]

27 Jun 2025



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The World Health Organization (WHO) says efforts [COVID-19](#) pandemic are still ongoing and incomplete, as critical information has not been provided”.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said “all hypotheses must remain on the table” to determine the cause of the virus, also known as SARS-CoV-2, after an expert

group investigating its origins reached an unsatisfying conclusion in its final report released on Friday.

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“We continue to appeal to China and any other country that has information about the origins of COVID-19 to share that information openly, in the interests of protecting the world from future pandemics,” Tedros said.

The global pandemic, which began in 2020, killed millions worldwide, with countries enforcing lockdowns in an attempt to stop the spread of the virus. With the first cases detected in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, information from the country is seen as key to preventing future pandemics.

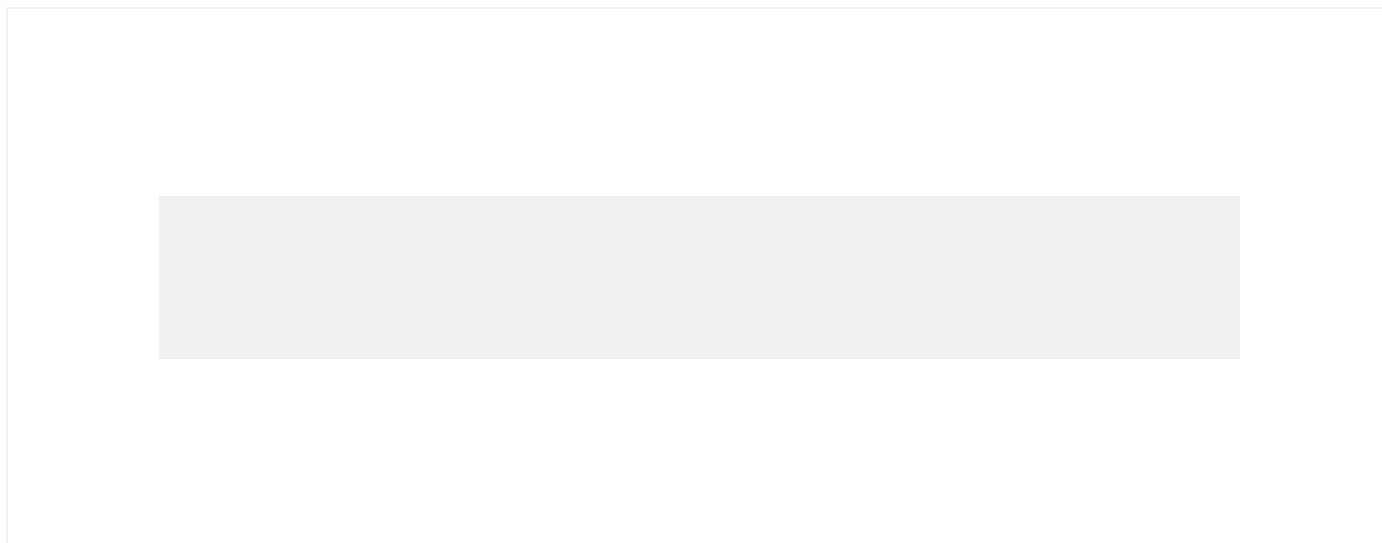
In 2021, Tedros launched the WHO Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO), a panel of 27 independent international experts.

Marietjie Venter, the group’s chair, said on Friday that most scientific data supports the hypothesis that the new coronavirus jumped to humans from animals.

But she added that after more than three years of work, SAGO was unable to get the necessary data to evaluate whether or not COVID was the result of a lab accident,

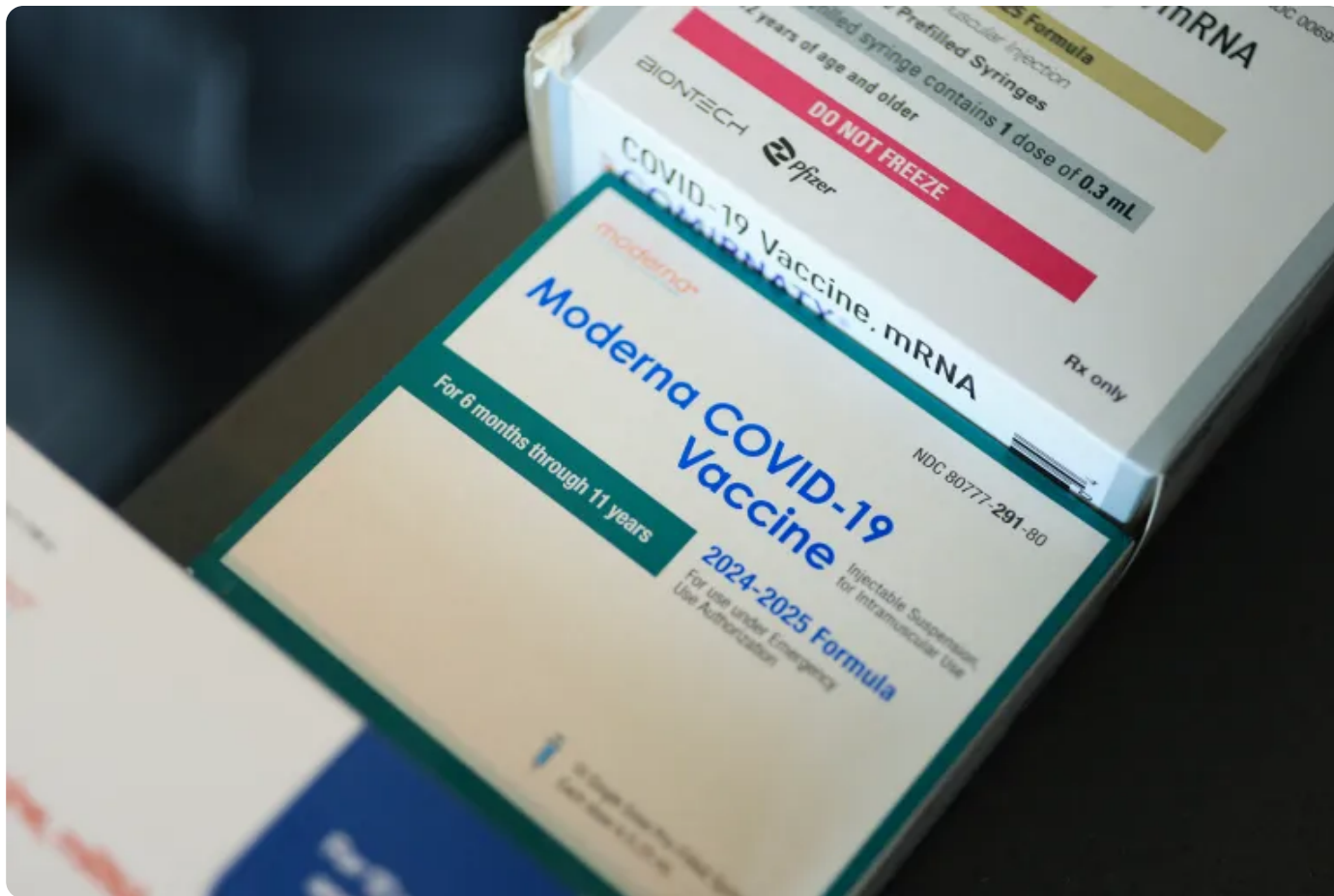
despite repeated requests for detailed information made to the Chinese government.

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“Therefore, this hypothesis could not be investigated or excluded,” she said, however adding, “It was deemed to be very speculative, based on political opinions and not backed up by science.”

Venter also said there was no evidence to prove that COVID had been manipulated in a lab, nor was there any indication that the virus had been spreading before December 2019 anywhere outside of China.



Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines sit in boxes at Borinquen Health Care Center on May 29, 2025, in Miami, Florida [Joe Raedle/Getty Images via AFP]

'Remains inconclusive'

In 2021, a group of experts from the WHO first travelled to Wuhan to examine the origins of the virus with their Chinese counterparts.

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By March of that year, their joint report found that the most likely hypothesis was from bats to humans via an intermediate animal.

They said at the time that a lab leak was “extremely unlikely”.

However, that investigation faced backlash for lacking transparency and access, and not taking the lab-leak theory seriously.

After that, SAGO was launched.

According to the SAGO report, “the weight of available evidence ... suggests zoonotic [a disease spread between animals to humans] spillover ... either directly from bats or through an intermediate host”.

“Until more scientific data becomes available, the origins of how SARS-CoV-2 entered human populations will remain inconclusive,” Venter said.

“Understanding the origins of SARS-CoV-2 and how it sparked a pandemic is needed to help prevent future pandemics, save lives and livelihoods, and reduce global suffering,” she added.

Tedros said it was a “moral imperative” to determine how COVID began, noting that the virus killed at least 20 million people, wiped at least \$10tn from the global economy and upended the lives of billions.

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