

# Who Is WHO's Tedros Adhanom? The Wuhan Lockdown is Unprecedented

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*On the surface it appeared that the Director-General of the UN World Health Organization (WHO) has acted swiftly and seriously about the spreading coronavirus health emergency spreading across China. He has gone to meet with Chinese leaders to discuss the situation and on January 30, after his talks in Beijing and meetings with the WHO advisory body, **Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** declared the coronavirus a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)." What the WHO has really done and especially the remarks of the Director-General, give cause for concern that he is motivated by something other than world health.*

There are still many open questions surrounding the outbreak of what is being called 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019 nCov) that was first noted sometime in December in Wuhan city in central China. By about January 20 severe cases of respiratory disease were spreading at such a rate that Beijing took drastic measures including canceling major social events of the Chinese New Year celebrations and imposing a cordon sanitaire around Wuhan, a city of 11 million on January 23 in a desperate bid to contain whatever was spreading. The quarantine however was imposed after some 5 million residents had reportedly already left to visit relatives outside in the largest holiday in China.

On January 28 Tedros was in Beijing meeting with **President Xi Jinping** to discuss the situation.

By the time of Tedros' January 30 declaration that the coronavirus situation in China warranted proclaiming a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)," a full week had passed since the Wuhan lockdown was declared. Such a public health lockdown had never in modern times been attempted. Indeed, on the day Wuhan was sealed off by the authorities, Gauden Galea, WHO China representative, told Reuters, "The lockdown of 11 million people is unprecedented in public health history, so it is certainly not a [recommendation](#) the WHO has made."

By the time WHO head Tedros arrived however, the Director-General had nothing but praise for the extraordinary measures being taken by Beijing to contain and deal with the situation. Back in WHO Geneva headquarters Tedros announced that China is "setting a new standard" for outbreak response, he said. "It's actually doing more than China is required to do," he added. But then he made the inexplicable statement that other countries were not warranted to ban air travel to China as precaution. He declared, "It's not a time for judgment... This is a time for solidarity, not stigma," refusing to recommend any international restrictions on travel or trade with China.

What that should mean is not at all clear, only that he clearly was trying to dampen world

response at a critical time. As the leading international health authority, the UN WHO carries considerable influence over national responses to any such health danger. This makes Tedros' condemnation of airline travel bans more noteworthy. It raises the question whether the WHO head has an undisclosed agenda.

### **Who is WHO's Tedros?**

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was voted WHO Director-General in 2017 replacing the controversial **Dr Margaret Chan** of Hong Kong. He is the first African to head the health agency and the first one not a medical doctor. He has a BA degree in biology at the University of Asmara in Eritrea. He then served in a junior position, at the Ministry of Health under the Marxist dictatorship of Mengistu. After the fall of Mengistu in 1991 Tedros went to the UK and took a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) in Community Health from the University of Nottingham in 2000, with a doctoral dissertation on "The effects of dams on malaria transmission in Tigray Region, northern Ethiopia."

He then went on to become Minister of Health from 2005 to 2012 under Prime Minister **Meles Zenawi**. There he met former President **Bill Clinton** and began a close collaboration with Clinton and the Clinton Foundation and its Clinton HIV/AIDS Initiative (CHAI). He also developed a [close relation](#) with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. As health minister, Tedros would also chair the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria that was co-founded by the Gates Foundation. The Global Fund has been riddled with fraud and corruption scandals.

Today the largest donors to the WHO are the Gates Foundation and its associated GAVI Alliance for vaccination. With backers like Gates and Clinton it was no surprise that Tedros went on, after a stint as Ethiopian Foreign Minister, to win the post of WHO Director-General, this despite being the first non-physician to hold the position. During Tedros' three year campaign to win the WHO post he was charged with having covered up three major epidemics of cholera while health minister in Ethiopia, mislabeling the cases as "acute watery diarrhea" (AWD)—a symptom of cholera—in an attempt to play down the significance of the epidemics, charges he [denied](#).

### **"Don't stigmatize..."**

As reports of the spread of confirmed and suspected cases of the novel coronavirus in other countries grew in the past several weeks, numerous airlines took the precaution to temporarily cancel their flights to and from China. Tedros, while officially declaring the Wuhan novel coronavirus as a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)," (in 2009 the WHO called it a Level 6 Global Pandemic), sharply and repeatedly criticized other countries for allowing air travel to China to be cut. On February 7 the China Peoples' Daily reported Tedros stating, his disapproval of imposing travel bans on China, stressing that *"such restrictions can have the effect of increasing fear and stigma, with little [public health benefit](#)."*

Important in containing any epidemic is taking action very early in the detection of the disease.

### **Ethiopian Airlines**

There is one country where the national air carrier has not cut flights to China to this

date—Tedros’ own Ethiopia. Ethiopian Airlines continues to fly daily into Ethiopia from major Chinese cities. At the Addis Ababa airport the passengers are only given a minimal temperature test, something for a disease with a 14 day incubation period is hardly sufficient to limit the spread of the pathogen to Africa. While 59 other air carriers from 44 different countries have all grounded their flights to China, Ethiopian Airlines insists that it will follow directives from the World Health Organization and [continue](#) its daily China flights.

The entry point for air travel between China and Africa is Ethiopia. The Chinese have built a new airport in Addis Ababa and it is the “gateway” for travel between many African countries like Zambia and China. Ethiopia’s Bole International airport sees on average 1500 passengers per day arriving from China. There are an estimated one million Chinese working in Africa from Zambia to Nigeria, and Tedros’ Ethiopia is their place to enter. The problem is that Ethiopia is an extremely poor country and it, like most of Africa is ill-prepared to handle any outbreak of coronavirus. Despite the fact that Ethiopian citizens have protested at the continuing China air travel risk, the government continues to use WHO and Tedros’ statements to keep business flowing. In an alarm signal, the first reported case of coronavirus in Botswana was of an African student who [came](#) from China on an Ethiopian Airlines plane.

With the daily traffic through Ethiopia’s Bole International Airport of some 1,500 China passengers the health system of the country is ill-prepared to take adequate precautions. It is one of the poorest countries in Africa after decades of civil war. The largest investor by far is China which sees Ethiopia as a centerpiece of its African investment strategy for the Belt and Road.

Is it because he does not want to jeopardize that economic relation that WHO head Tedros does not pressure his own state airline to take short-term precautions by declaring a moratorium on its China flights? At the time he was elected to WHO Tedros was a member of the politburo of the minority Tigray People’s Liberation Front, which had [ruled](#) Ethiopia since 1991 with an iron fist. Is he today more concerned with the financial health of Ethiopian Airways and the future of China investments in his country for his party allies than with the precautionary principles of public health in a growing international crisis that shows little sign of being under control? Indeed, now in the past days Tedros has shown signs of growing alarm, noting that the WHO has seen “concerning incidents” of onward spreading among people with no history of travel to China, noting it “could be the spark that becomes a bigger fire.” We must watch closely to see if that translates into a changed WHO policy towards not only the China flights of Ethiopian Airlines.

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