



Two children and a family member wearing personal protective equipment praying by the grave of a Covid-19 victim at a cemetery in Lhokseumawe, Aceh, on Tuesday. The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response found gaps and failings at every point in the chain of global preparedness and response to the disease. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Pandemic preventable? S'pore experts weigh in on global report

They agree with panel that many countries did not make full use of the global alert

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The suffering and the millions of lives lost due to Covid-19 could have been prevented if many countries around the world had not taken a wait-and-see approach in the early days, said local experts, weighing in after the recent release of a scathing report on the handling of Covid-19.

The report, titled Covid-19: Make It The Last Pandemic, was compiled by a panel assembled by former New Zealand prime minister

Helen Clark and former Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, at the request of World Health Organisation (WHO) director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response found gaps and failings at every point in the chain of preparedness and response to the disease, which has killed several million globally. This was despite years of warnings of an inevitable pandemic, it said.

Just yesterday, the WHO put its early estimate for last year's global excess deaths due to Covid-19 at 3.4 million.

It said deaths reported to WHO are likely a significant undercount, with true figures at least two to three times higher.

At the G-20 Global Health Summit yesterday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Covid-19 will not be the last, or worst, pandemic. The world must thus take every opportunity to learn from this pandemic to prepare for the next one, he said.

In its report, the panel said the global alert system was too slow and meek, the WHO was underpowered, and global political leadership was absent.

It faulted governments and leaders for ignoring early warnings, saying that February was a "lost month" as too many governments acted only after they had seen widespread local transmission.

The WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern on Jan 30 last year. It was its highest alarm – sounded previously for six outbreaks, including the 2019 Ebola outbreak in Congo – but it was largely ignored.

The WHO eventually used the unofficial term "pandemic" to describe Covid-19 on March 11.

"Regrettably, many countries, including those in Europe and North America, did not make full use of the global alert, whether issued by the WHO or from the striking developments happening in China, South Korea and Italy," said Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

Professor Tikki Pangestu, a visiting professor at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, said the "slowness in responding until it was too late" was the biggest mistake made in this pandemic.

Prof Teo, who had contributed to the report by sharing details on the management of Covid-19 in the Asia-Pacific and the lessons learnt here, said global health is as much about geopolitics as it is about health.

"Poor decision-making by the leaders of countries or state governments have impeded public health and medical responses at the national and sub-national levels," he said. The question is to what extent global leaders can extend their jurisdiction to encroach into the national responses of other countries, he said.

At the same time, the fracture in global leadership, whether due to trade and economy, religion or civil rights, means that it will always be difficult to coordinate between country leaders who may be guided by different priorities, he added.

Prof Pangestu, who previously worked at the WHO, said: "Other pandemics will come – it is a

question of 'when', not 'if'. But hopefully, the recommendations from the panel, if implemented, will better prepare countries for future incidents."

The panel said the world must act now to prevent future infectious disease outbreaks from becoming catastrophic pandemics.

Its recommendations include strengthening the WHO's independence, authority and financing, which is crucial, said Professor Wang Linfa of the Duke-NUS Medical School's emerging infectious diseases programme. One of the world's leading experts in zoonotic diseases, which are passed from animals to humans, he, too, had contributed to the report.

Right now, the WHO does not have enough authority. "It cannot order an investigation without the consensus and approval of member nations," he said.

At the G-20 global health summit, PM Lee said the WHO has a central role to play and Singapore supports the panel's recommendations. He added that Singapore will play its part by working with all countries to strengthen collective resilience against future pandemics.

The panel also listed steps aimed at ending the current pandemic. One measure is for wealthy nations that have enough vaccines to provide low- and middle-income countries in the Covax vaccine-sharing scheme with at least a billion vaccine doses by September, and more than two billion by mid-2022.

Over 75 per cent of all vaccine doses have been administered in only 10 countries, while the lowest-income countries have administered less than 0.5 per cent of global doses, the WHO has said.

Vaccination and adherence to ongoing public health measures such as mask wearing and social distancing are "our only hope of controlling the pandemic globally as no one is safe until everyone is safe", said Prof Pangestu.

Singapore, China, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam were countries that adopted an aggressive containment strategy, the report noted.

However, Thailand is now grappling with a third and worst wave, with outbreaks also in its overcrowded prisons, while a second wave has hit Singapore. The Republic has seen its first hospital cluster, and the movement of migrant workers is still strictly restricted in exchange for the health of the community, mainly as a result of coping with new coronavirus variants that are much more transmissible, said Prof Teo.

"But this is the reality that the world will be faced with, where the coronavirus will continue to evolve in order to survive against the suite of public health measures that we adopt against it," he said.

Amid the threat of new variants, the panel has called for a mindset shift, from fighting to stop a pandemic to acknowledging that Covid-19 will be here to stay for the foreseeable future.

"Every vaccinated person is a brake on the virus, and the fewer bodies the virus travels through, the fewer chances it has to mutate," the panel said in its report.

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