

US officials confirm full-scale investigation of whether coronavirus escaped from Wuhan lab

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EXCLUSIVE: The U.S. is conducting a full-scale investigation into whether the novel coronavirus, which went on to morph into a global pandemic that has brought the global economy to its knees, escaped from a lab in Wuhan, China, Fox News has learned.

Intelligence operatives are said to be gathering information about the laboratory and the initial outbreak of the virus. Intelligence analysts are piecing together a timeline of what the government knew and “creating an accurate picture of what happened,” the sources said.

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Once that investigation is complete — something that is expected to happen in the near-term — the findings will be presented to the Trump administration. At that point, White House policymakers and President Trump will use the findings to determine how to hold the country accountable for the pandemic.

Fox News first reported on Wednesday that there is increasing confidence that the outbreak likely originated in a Wuhan lab, not as a bioweapon but as part of a Chinese effort to show that its efforts to identify and combat viruses are equal or greater than those of the U.S.

U.S. officials and the intelligence community have confirmed to Fox News that they have taken the possibility of the coronavirus being man-made or engineered inside China as some sort of bioweapon off the table and have ruled it out at this point.

Sources point to the structure of the virus, in saying the genome mapping

specifically shows it was not genetically altered. The sources believe the initial transmission of the virus was a naturally occurring strain that was being studied there — and then went into the population in Wuhan.

Sources say the investigation of open source and classified data points to the work in the lab of Dr. Shi Zhengli, who was working on antivirals and immunizations for coronavirus, specifically with bats.

SOURCES BELIEVE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK ORIGINATED IN WUHAN LAB AS PART OF CHINA'S EFFORTS TO COMPETE WITH US

US officials are 100 percent confident China went to great lengths to cover up after the virus was out, the sources said.

Additionally, the sources believe that the World Health Organization — which the president paused funding to this week over its role in the crisis — was either complicit in the coverup or looked the other way.

The president hinted at an investigation on Wednesday when he told Fox News' John Roberts: "More and more we're hearing the story...we are doing a very thorough examination of this horrible situation."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Friday reiterated that the administration was eyeing the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and accused the Chinese government of stonewalling scientists from finding out what happened.

"We know that the first sightings of this occurred within miles of the Wuhan Institute of Virology. We know that this - the history of the facility, the first BSL-4 lab where there's high-end virus research being conducted, took place at that site," Pompeo said on the Hugh Hewitt Show. "We know that the Chinese Communist Party, when it began to evaluate what to do inside of Wuhan, considered whether the WIV was, in fact, the place where this came from."

"And most importantly, we know they've not permitted the world's scientists to go into that laboratory to evaluate what took place there, what's happening there, what's happening there even as we speak," he said.

There has been speculation for months, not just in the U.S., that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory. A February study on the origins of the virus from the South China University of Technology concluded: "In addition to origins

of natural recombination and intermediate host, the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan.”

Should it turn out that the virus escaped from a Chinese laboratory, the global pushback against the Chinese government could be significant. The virus has infected and killed hundreds of thousands of people and ravaged economies across the globe. Trump, who has frequently taken a hardline towards China even before the crisis, would be expected to lead calls to make Beijing face consequences.

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During Thursday’s daily press briefing, China’s foreign ministry pushed back on claims that anything suspicious had taken place in the Wuhan lab and reiterated there was no evidence that the coronavirus, which has infected more than 2 million people globally, was made there.

“The head of the WHO has stated many times that there is no evidence that the new coronavirus originated in the laboratory,” spokesperson Zhao Lijian said. “Many prominent medical experts in the world also believe that so-called laboratory leaks have no scientific basis.”

Fox News’ Barnini Chakraborty and Gregg Re contributed to this report.

Bret Baier is the chief political anchor of Fox News Channel, and the anchor and executive editor of “Special Report with Bret Baier.” He is the author of “Three Days in January: Dwight Eisenhower’s Final Mission,” and “Three Days in Moscow: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of the Soviet Empire.” His third presidential book, “Three Days at the Brink: FDR’s Daring Gamble to win World War II,” will be released on Oct. 22, 2019.

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