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Ukraine and Russia:



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EXCLUSIVE WHO says it advised Ukraine to destroy pathogens in health labs to prevent disease spread

By Jennifer Rigby and Jonathan Landay

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A logo is pictured at the World Health Organization (WHO) building in Geneva, Switzerland, February 2, 2020. Picture taken February 2, 2020. REUTERS/Denis Balibouse

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March 11 (Reuters) - The World Health Organization advised Ukraine to destroy high-threat pathogens housed in the country's public health laboratories to prevent "any potential spills" that would spread disease among the population, the agency told Reuters.

Like many other countries, Ukraine has public health laboratories researching how to mitigate the threats of dangerous diseases affecting both animals and humans including, most recently, COVID-19. Its labs have received support from the United States, the European Union and the WHO.

Biosecurity experts say Russia's movement of troops into Ukraine and bombardment of its cities have raised the risk of an escape of disease-causing pathogens, should any of those facilities be damaged.

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In response to questions from Reuters about its work with Ukraine ahead of and during Russia's invasion, the WHO said in an email on Thursday that it has collaborated with Ukrainian public health labs for several years to promote security practices that help prevent "accidental or deliberate release of pathogens."

"As part of this work, WHO has strongly recommended to the Ministry of Health in Ukraine and other responsible bodies to destroy high-threat pathogens to prevent any potential spills," the WHO, a United Nations agency, said.

The WHO would not say when it had made the recommendation nor did it provide specifics about the kinds of pathogens or toxins housed in Ukraine's laboratories. The agency also did not answer whether the recommendations were followed.

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Recommendations were

Ukrainian officials in Kyiv and at their embassy in Washington did not respond to requests for comment.

Ukraine's laboratory capabilities have been at the center of a growing information war since Russia began moving troops into Ukraine two weeks ago.

On Friday, Russia called a meeting of the 15-member U.N. Security Council to reassert, without providing evidence, a longstanding claim that Ukraine ran biological weapons laboratories with U.S. Defense Department support. [read more](#)

The accusation has been repeatedly denied by Ukraine and the United States, where government officials warn Russia may use it as a pretext to deploy its own chemical or biological weapons.

Izumi Nakamitsu, the U.N. High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, told the Security Council on Friday that the United Nations is "not aware" of any biological weapons program in Ukraine, which joined an international ban on such arms, as has Russia and the United States along with 180 other countries.

U.N. officials have also said the WHO, in its work with Ukraine, is not aware of any activity in the country that would violate international treaties "including on chemical weapons or biological weapons."

The WHO statement to Reuters referred solely to public health laboratories. The agency said it encourages all parties to cooperate in "the safe and secure disposal of any **My View** **World** come across, and to reach out for technical assistance as needed." It offered to help wherever possible with technical guidance and coordination.

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Reporting by Jennifer Rigby and Jonathan Landay; Editing by Michele Gershberg and Howard Goller

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