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WHO team, on tightly controlled China mission, visits hospital

Inside C2

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China gene firm providing worldwide COVID tests worked with Chinese military

SYDNEY (Reuters) - BGI Group, the world's largest genomics company, has worked with China's military on research that ranges from mass testing for respiratory pathogens to brain science, a Reuters review of research, patent filings and other documents has found.
FILE PHOTO: A technician works at a genetic testing laboratory of BGI, formerly known as Beijing Genomics Institute, in Kunming, Yunnan province, China December 26, 2018. REUTERS/Stringer
The review, of more than 40 publicly available documents and research papers in Chinese and English, shows BGI's links to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) include research with China's top military supercomputing experts. The extent of those links has not previously been reported.

BGI has sold millions of COVID-19 test kits outside China since the outbreak of the new coronavirus pandemic, including to Europe, Australia and the United States. Shares of BGI Genomics Co, the company's subsidiary listed on the Shenzhen stock exchange, have doubled in price over the past 12 months, giving it a market value of about $9 billion.

But top U.S. security officials have warned American labs against using Chinese tests because of concern China was seeking to gather foreign genetic data for its own research. BGI has denied that. The documents reviewed by Reuters neither contradict nor support that U.S. suspicion. Still, the material shows that the links between the Chinese military and BGI run deeper than previously understood, illustrating how China has moved to integrate private technology companies into military-related research under President Xi Jinping.

The U.S. government has recently been warned by an expert panel that adversary countries and non-state actors might find and target genetic weaknesses in the U.S. population and a competitor such as China could use genetics to augment the strength of its own military personnel.

BGI has worked on PLA projects seeking to make members of the ethnic Han Chinese majority less susceptible to altitude sickness, Reuters found, genetic research that would benefit soldiers in some border areas.

Elsa Kania, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security think tank, who has provided testimony to U.S. Congressional committees, told Reuters that China's military has pushed research on brain science, gene editing and the creation of artificial genomes that could have an application in future bioweapons. She added that such weapons are not currently technically feasible.

BGI's pattern of collaboration with the Chinese military was a "reasonable concern to raise" for U.S. officials, said Kania.
In response to Reuters' questions, BGI said it adheres to international standards and Chinese laws related to open science, data sharing and genomic research. It said its collaboration with military researchers was for academic purposes only.

"BGI strongly rejects any accusations about links with the PLA, particularly in relation to our COVID-19 test kits," it said in a statement.

China's defence ministry did not respond to requests for comment.
'ENHANCE' SOLDIER STRENGTH

Chinese technology companies have come under increasing scrutiny by the United States and were subject to mounting restrictions under the administration of Donald Trump. In November, the Department of Commerce proposed a rule to add gene editing software to the U.S. export control list, saying it could be used to create biological weapons. Officials in the new administration of President Joe Biden have signalled a continued tough approach to what they see as a rising threat from Beijing.

A technology industry panel on artificial intelligence, appointed by the U.S. government and chaired by former Google Chief Executive Eric Schmidt, raised the alarm in October about China's financial support for its biotechnology sector, its advantages in collecting biological data, and the PLA's interest in potential military applications.

The panel, which will deliver its final report in March, warned about adversaries using artificial intelligence to identify genetic weaknesses in a population and engineering pathogens to exploit them, and genetic research designed to enhance soldiers' mental or physical strength.

The panel recommended that the U.S. government "take a more aggressive public posture regarding BGI," citing national security risks posed by the company's links to the Chinese government and its trove of genomic data.
The U.S. Department of State did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Reuters' findings.

In response to Reuters' questions, China's foreign ministry said the U.S. government had "wantonly misinterpreted and smeared China's military-civil fusion policy," and was imposing unreasonable sanctions that would hamper research.

"China's military-civil fusion policy is aimed at effectively mobilizing military and civilian resources, coordinating socio-economic growth and national defense development, and benefiting the public with scientific and technological progress. This policy is above board and beyond reproach," the ministry said in a statement to Reuters.

It added that this was "customary international practice" and said the U.S. government had effectively pursued military-civil fusion for more than 100 years.
BGI Group, based in Shenzhen, has grown quickly by selling genetic sequencing services to universities and health systems around the world and amassing a large DNA databank. It created China's first cloned pig in 2010.

One science paper authored by BGI founders Yang Huanming and Wang Jian along with the PLA's Key Laboratory of High Altitude Medicine and the Third Military Medical University focused on experiments with the brains of monkeys suffering altitude sickness.
The study, published in January 2020, stated that it was funded as one of the "key projects of military science and technology" by the PLA. A decade ago, the military university's research sought to identify genes related to altitude sickness so the PLA could screen for susceptible soldiers. The latest research focused on how drugs interacting with genes could potentially protect a person from brain injury.
An earlier 2017 study designed by BGI's Wang and published in conjunction with a PLA research centre in Xinjiang looked at the effect of rapid mountain ascent on the bodies of "young, healthy men."
China has the world's longest highland border, which includes its border with India, where fighting broke out between the two countries' troops in 2020. A 2018 paper by the same PLA laboratory stated that "high altitude disease is the main reason for reduced combat effectiveness and health damage to soldiers at high altitudes and influences the results of war."
Reuters was unable to contact Yang and Wang. BGI said its research collaboration with the PLA lab and the Third Military Medical University, where Yang has been a professor for almost two decades, was "for academic purposes only."

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

LOCAL NEWS

WHO team, on tightly controlled China mission, visits hospital

WUHAN, China (Reuters) - The World Health Organization-led team investigating the origins of COVID-19 during a mission that has been tightly controlled by its Chinese hosts visited a hospital on Saturday in the central city of Wuhan that treated early coronavirus patients.

On its second day after two weeks in quarantine, the team went to Jinyintan Hospital, where doctors had collected samples from patients suffering from an unidentified pneumonia in late 2019.

"Important opportunity to talk directly w/ medics who were on the ground at that critical time fighting COVID!", team member Peter Daszak said on Twitter.

Team members leaving the hospital did not speak to journalists, who have been kept at a distance since the group left its quarantine hotel on Thursday.

"Just back from visit at Jinyintan hospital, that specialised in infectious diseases and was designated for treatment of the first cases in Wuhan. Stories quite similar to what I have heard from our ICU doctors," team member Marion Koopmans tweeted.

The WHO-led probe has been plagued by delays, concern over access and bickering between Beijing and Washington, which accused China of hiding the extent of the initial outbreak and criticised the terms of the visit, under which Chinese experts conducted the first phase of research.

The WHO, which has sought to manage expectations for the mission, said on Friday that team members would be limited to visits organised by their Chinese hosts and would not have any contact with community members, due to health restrictions.

Exactly a year ago, the WHO declared a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), its highest level of alarm.

The group's itinerary has not been announced but the WHO has said the team plans to visit the seafood market at the centre of the early outbreak as well as the Wuhan Institute of Virology. One hypothesis, rejected by China, is that the outbreak was caused by a leak at the government lab.

Later on Saturday, the WHO team went to an exhibition centre that features an exhibit commemorating early efforts to battle the outbreak in Wuhan, which included a 76-day lockdown of the city of 11 million.

The investigating team had been set to arrive in Wuhan earlier in January, and China's delay of their visit drew rare public criticism from the head of the WHO, which former U.S. President Donald Trump accused of being "China-centric".

China has pushed the idea that the virus existed abroad before it was discovered in Wuhan, with state media citing the presence of the virus on imported frozen food packaging and scientific papers saying it had been circulating in Europe in 2019.

China's foreign ministry has also hinted that the sudden closure of a U.S. army laboratory at Fort Detrick in Maryland in July 2019 was linked to the pandemic.

WHO Team In Wuhan Departs Quarantine For COVID Origins Study

Workers wave to the team of experts from the World Health Organization who ended their quarantine and prepare to leave the quarantine hotel by bus in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

WUHAN, China (AP) — A World Health Organization team emerged from quarantine in the Chinese city of Wuhan on Thursday to start field work in a fact-finding mission on the origins of the virus that caused the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers, who were required to isolate for 14 days after arriving in China, left their quarantine hotel with their luggage — including at least four yoga mats — in the mid-afternoon and headed to another hotel. The mission has become politically charged, as China seeks to avoid blame for alleged missteps in its early response to the outbreak. A major question is where the Chinese side will allow the researchers to go and whom they will be able to talk to.

Workers are seen inside hotel where a team of experts from the World Health Organization are quarantined in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Yellow barriers blocked the entrance to the hotel, keeping the media at a distance. Before the researchers boarded their bus, workers wearing protective outfits and face shields could be seen loading their luggage, including two musical instruments and a dumbbell.

"This is now well over a year past when it all started," said former WHO official Keiji Fukuda, who is not part of the team in Wuhan, earlier this month. "So much of the physical evidence is going to be gone. The memories of people are imprecise and probably the physical layouts of many places are going to be different than they were."

Among the places they might visit are the Huanan Seafood Market, which was linked to many of the first cases, as well as research institutes and hospitals that treated patients at the height of the outbreak.

A security person waves away journalists outside the hotel where a team of experts from the World Health Organization are quarantined in Wuhan in centra China's Hubei province on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

WHO, which is based in Geneva, Switzerland, said late Thursday on Twitter that its team plans to visit hospitals, markets like the Huanan Seafood Market linked to many of the first cases, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and laboratories at facilities like the Wuhan Center for Disease Control.

"All hypotheses are on the table as the team follows the science in their work to understand the origins of the COVID19 virus," WHO tweeted. It said the team had already requested "detailed underlying data" and planned to speak with early responders and some of the first COVID-19 patients. "As members start their field visits on Friday, they should receive the support, access and the data they need," WHO tweeted. The first face-to-face meetings with Chinese scientists are set to take place on Friday, before the team starts the field visits in and around Wuhan, it said.

Journalists gather outside the hotel where a team of experts from the World Health Organization are quarantined in Wuhan in centra China's Hubei province on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

One possible source of the virus is bats in caves in rural Yunnan province, about 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) southwest of Wuhan. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said the experts would have talks, visits and inspections in China to carry out virus-tracing exchanges and cooperation. He did not provide any details.

The mission only came about after considerable wrangling between the two sides that led to a rare complaint from the WHO that China was taking too long to make the final arrangements.

China, which has strongly opposed an independent investigation it could not fully control, said the matter was complicated and that Chinese medical staff were preoccupied with new virus clusters in Beijing, Shanghai

and other cities.

A worker in protective gear carries an exercise dumbbell belonging to the World Health Organization team of experts as they prepare to leave from a quarantine hotel in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

While the WHO was criticized early on, especially by the U.S., for not being critical enough of the Chinese response, it recently accused China and other countries of moving too slowly at the start of the outbreak, drawing a rare admission from the Chinese side that it could have done better. Overall, though, China has staunchly defended its response, possibly out of concern over the reputational or even financial costs if it were found lacking. Chinese officials and state media have also tried to cast doubt on whether the virus even started in China. Most experts believe it came from bats, possibly in southwest China or neighboring areas of Southeast Asia, before being passed to another animal and then to humans.

Workers wave farewell as a member of a World Health Organization team of experts prepares to leave from a quarantine hotel in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

The origins search will try to determine where and exactly how that happened. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki expressed concern Wednesday about what she called "misinformation" coming out of China, adding that the U.S. supports a robust international investigation.

"It's imperative that we get to the bottom of the early days of the pandemic in China," she said.

Zhao responded that any negative speculation and politicized interpretation of the mission is inappropriate.

A member from the World Health Organization team of experts (L) uses his smartphone to record the scene after boarding a bus to leave at the end of a two weeks quarantine at a hotel in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. A worker waves (R) to the team of experts from the World Health Organization. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

"We hope the U.S. can work with the Chinese side in a responsible manner, respect facts and science, and respect the hard work of the international expert team in tracing the origin of the virus," he said, "so that they can conduct scientific research on the virus tracing without any political interference." (Courtesy apnews.com)

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

Editor's Choice

Tiffany Trump, Donald Trump Jr. and his girlfriend Kimberly Guilfoyle, Eric Trump with his wife Lara, and Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner pose before President Donald Trump's departure to Florida from Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, January 20, 2021

Healthcare workers treat patients infected with the coronavirus at United Memorial Medical Center in Houston, Texas. Picture taken December 31, 2020. REUTERS/Callaghan O'Hare

A lorry drives towards the border control at the Port of Dover, following the end of the Brexit transition period, in Dover, Britain, January 4, 2021. REUTERS/Toby Melville

A woman walks through chunks of ice on the frozen Kapchagay reservoir outside Almaty, Kazakhstan January 14, 2021. REUTERS/Pavel Mikheyev

Kelvia Andrea Goncalves, 16, is supported by her aunt Vanderleia dos Reis Brasao, 37, during the burial of her mother Andrea dos Reis Brasao, 39, who passed away due to COVID-19 at Delphina Aziz hospital, at the Parque Taruma cemetery in Manaus

Healthcare workers line up before receiving the first dose of Sinovac's CoronaVac coronavirus vaccine in the Positivo event center at the Barigui Park in Curitiba, Brazil January 28, 2021. REUTERS/Rodolfo Buhrer

A devotee sits at the bank of Hanumante River as he offers prayers during the first day of the month-long Swasthani Brata Katha festival in Bhaktapur, Nepal January 28, 2021. REUTERS/Navesh Chitrakar

Health workers are seen in protective gear inside a locked down portion of the Jordan residential area to contain a new outbreak of the coronavirus in Hong Kong, China January 23, 2021. REUTERS/Tyrone Siu

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

New Coronavirus Variants Demand A Tougher Response

Illustration: Sarah Grillo/Axios

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

New, more contagious coronavirus variants threaten the U.S. response to COVID-19 just as the best tools to fight it are becoming available.

Why it matters: As our response to COVID-19 evolves and improves with the introduction of vaccines, so does SARS-CoV-2 itself, with new variants emerging. The next few months will demand harsher measures to control the pandemic at the very moment when exhaustion is peaking.

But new and more transmissible strains of the coronavirus are circulating more widely across the world, and public health experts caution that, even with the beginnings of mass vaccination programs, the public must be more vigilant than ever in protecting themselves and reducing the spread.

"This is the calm before the real storm. I think the darkest days of the pandemic are just ahead of us," said Michael Osterholm, who directs the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Prevention at the University of Minnesota.

"I think it potentially could get worse," Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, said Thursday morning on MSNBC.

Details: The emergence of the new variants has driven governments to reimpose some border controls in an effort to stop their introduction, while scientists are pushing for more restrictions and hardier protective equipment.

• Germany last week proposed strict, temporary bans on travel to the EU — including EU citizens returning to their nations — from countries where variants are prevalent, like Britain.

• President Biden quickly instituted a ban on travelers coming into the U.S. from more than 25 countries, including all the nations in Europe's free-travel Schengen Area — though the order does not include U.S. citizens, a loophole that minimized the effectiveness of earlier bans.

• In light of the more contagious variants, NIAID director Anthony Fauci told NBC's "Today," it "makes common sense" to wear more than one layer of mask. Even better would be an N95 medical-grade mask, but even a year into the pandemic, supplies remain so low that the CDC still says they should be reserved for health-care workers.

Be smart: We can simultaneously be doing almost enough to control the spread of the original coronavirus strain and not enough to control more dangerous variants.

• "There are essentially two separate COVID-19 epidemics," the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in the Netherlands reported last week. "One epidemic involving the 'old' variant, in which infections are decreasing, and another epidemic involving the (new) variant, in which infections are increasing."

• We don't know for sure which epidemic currently has a hold over the U.S., in part because genomic surveillance here lags well behind countries like Denmark or the U.K., meaning variants could be spreading under the radar.

• But the more the coronavirus spreads, the more opportunities variants will have to crowd out their competition — or for entirely new mutants to emerge.

Infection level testing: California-based Clear Labs today announced an automated whole-genome sequencing solution that can determine the full sequence of a SARS-CoV-2 infection in less than 24 hours with little hands-on lab work, compared to days for many current techniques.

• "It's very important to quickly find out if there are changes in the virus that impacts response to the vaccine, and you're not going to get that from a PCR test," says Jeff Field, chief commercial officer at Clear Labs.

Facing the coronavirus and its variants: Think of this next and most dangerous stage of the pandemic as a three-sided race: more contagious variants against the pace of vaccinations against our own willingness to endure more social distancing. All indications are that existing vaccines will remain effective against the known variants.

South African Variant: One possible exception is the South African variant 501Y.V2. Moderna reported this week that the antibodies triggered by its vaccines were less effective at neutralizing the variant, though the vaccine still provided significant protection and the company said it could develop a booster shot if needed.

Clinical results from the Novavax vaccine trials in South Africa and the United Kingdom have now shown the vaccine to be effective against the South African and UK variants of the coronavirus. After weeks of uncertainty and speculation, during a press conference just before midnight on Thursday, January 28, the lead investigator in the Novavax vaccine trial and dean of Wits University's Faculty of Health Sciences, Prof. Shabir Madhi announced that their vaccine is the first that has shown high levels of efficacy against the South African strain of the coronavirus as well as the UK variant.

He said Novavax now plan to create a vaccine that will include both the "original" virus and the South African mutation within the next few months.

"At the moment it is the only vaccine showing objective efficacy against the South African variant," he said.

Scientists Are Very Worried About The Variant From Brazil

Brazilian variant: Last Monday evening, Minnesota reported the first confirmed case of the P.1 Brazilian variant of the novel coronavirus in a Twin Cities resident with a recent travel history to Brazil.

• P.1 is one of four variants — mutated strains of SARS-CoV-2 that seem to spread more efficiently than the original coronavirus — the CDC is watching with concern.

• That includes the B.1.1.7 variant first identified in the U.K., which has now been detected in more than 20 states and which British scientists warn is both more contagious and potentially more deadly than the original strain.

• CDC officials project the U.K. variant could become dominant in the U.S. by March, which would drive more cases without a tougher response.

The concern with P.1 is twofold: Scientists don't understand why the variant has spread so explosively in Brazil, and the variant carries a particularly dangerous set of mutations.

Indigenous health care workers treat patients last week at a campaign hospital set up in the Parque das Tribos neighborhood of Manaus, Brazil. (Photo/J. Roriz/Bloomberg via Getty Images.)

The question is why is there a bigger surge with P.1? Could P.1 be evading the antibodies made against the previous version of the virus, making reinfections easier? Could it just be significantly more contagious? Could both be true?

Reinfections are a serious concern for several reasons. First off, like the variant from South Africa, P.1 carries a cluster of mutations along the surface of the virus where antibodies — especially the potent antibodies — like to bind.

"They are kind of the major targets of the immune system," said virus expert Penny Moore at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases in South Africa and the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

"So when we see a whole lot of mutations in [those surfaces], it raises the possibility that the mutations might be conferring immune escape." That is, the mutations are helping the virus evade antibodies or escape recognition by them. In essence, the mutations are providing the virus with a type of "coat of invisibility." (Courtesy axios.com and https://www.npr.org/)

美国生活 Daily News

美国国税局教你7种方法规避税务诈骗

(本文转自CNN财经)在美国，每个人的一生都在和税打交道，无论你是年薪百万的高管，还是一般工作的白领，你都逃不开报税、退税等等和税务有关的活动，也正是因为如此，很多不法分子利用税务信息进行诈骗，让很多纳税人蒙受损失。

据CNN报道，IRS (国家税务局)，国家税务机关和报税公司都同时在保护您的个人资料，从而避免犯罪分子有机可乘。但是IRS(国家税务局)声称，就算有关部门再努力进行保护，也不能够阻止退款的欺诈行为和涉税身份盗窃。所以，作为纳税人的你，还是应该要采取积极的措施，去防范于未然。

今年5月初，美国国税局表示，犯罪团夥使用"Get Transcript"工具，从国税局网站上下载了33万人的税务表格，并进行电话诈骗，无论是从诈骗范围还是从诈骗的金额上来讲，这都创造了电话诈骗的历史的最高水平。

美国国税局的局长John Koskinen在上周四关于税收、安全、一起的新闻发布会上指出："我们尽最大努力去保护纳税人的权益和信息，但是还是希望所有纳税人从自身做起，加强自我保护意识。"

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