

EXCLUSIVE-US removed position of CDC expert in China months before coronavirus outbreak

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Body

By Marisa Taylor

WASHINGTON, 22 Sea (Reuters) - Several months before the start of the coronavirus epidemic, President Donald Trump's government removed a key position from the U.S. public health service in Beijing that aimed to help detect outbreaks of diseases in China, show Reuters research.

The U.S. disease expert, an epidemiologist working at China's disease control agency, left her post in July, according to four sources with knowledge of the issue.

The first cases of the new coronavirus would have appeared in November, and when the cases exploded, the Trump administration in February criticized China for censoring information about the outbreak and preventing AMERICAN experts from entering the country to help.

"It was disheartening to see it," said Bao-Ping Zhu, a Chinese-American expert who held the position, created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 2007 and 2011. "If someone had been there, public health authorities and the world's governments would have acted much faster," he added.

Zhu and other sources said U.S. expert Dr. Linda Quick trained Chinese epidemiologists on the ground who were deployed to outbreak epicenters to help track, investigate and contain diseases.

As a US employee at the CDC, they said, Quick was ideally positioned to be the eyes and ears on the ground of the United States and other countries for the coronavirus outbreak, and could have alerted them to the growing threat weeks earlier.

No other foreign expert was assigned to lead the program after Quick left office in July, according to sources. Zhu said a deputy expert can frequently alert you to outbreaks earlier, after forming a close relationship with their Chinese counterparts.

Zhu and the other sources said Quick was able to deliver real-time information to the United States and authorities in other countries during the first weeks of the outbreak, when they said the Chinese government stopped disseminating information and delivered misinformation .

Quick left office amid a sour trade dispute between the United States and China, when he learned that his federally funded work, officially known as a resident adviser to the U.S. Field Epidemiological Training Program in China, it would be completed in September, the sources said.

The U.S. CDC said they initially learned of a "group of 27 cases of pneumonia" of unexplained origin in Wuhan, China, on December 31.

Since then, the outbreak of the disease known as COVID-19 has spread rapidly around the world, killing more than 13,600 people, infected with more than 317,000. The epidemic has overtaken the health systems of some countries, including Italy, and threatens to do the same in the United States and elsewhere.

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In a statement sent to Reuters, the U.S. CDC said that the removal of the advisory position did not hinder Washington's ability to receive information and "had absolutely nothing to do with the CDC not being reported before the cases in China."

The agency said the decision not to have a resident adviser "started well before the summer (boreal) and was due to China's excellent technical ability and program maturity."

The CDC said they had assigned two of their Chinese employees as "mentors" to help with the training program. The agency did not answer questions about the specific role of mentors or their competence.

"The CDC has had 30 years of partnership and close collaboration with the CDC of China," the statement said. "We had the right staff to engage with China and the ability to provide technical assistance when requested," he added.

The CDC did not comment on Quick, who still works for the agency.

(Report of Marisa Taylor from Washinton; Additional report from Tony Munroe from Beijing; Edited in Spanish by Ricardo Figueroa)

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