

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 29, 2020

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director General
World Health Organization
20 Avenue Appia
1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland

Dear Director General Tedros:

As the senior members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations subcommittee responsible for oversight of multilateral institutions, we write today to express our profound concern about the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in the People's Republic of China. We urge you in your capacity as Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) to formally declare the crisis a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) and issue legally-binding country-specific recommendations to forestall the disease's rapid spread in China and globally.

As of Wednesday, January 29, 2020, Chinese health officials have reported approximately 6,078 confirmed cases of a new coronavirus, a strain of zoonotic disease that causes symptoms ranging from breathing difficulties and high fever to more severe conditions such as pneumonia, kidney failure, and acute respiratory syndrome. Since Monday, the case count exploded by over 118 percent, and the death toll skyrocketed from 82 to 132 people in China. The outbreak has spread across the globe, with 14 cases reported in Thailand; 11 in Hong Kong; 10 in Singapore; eight in Taiwan; seven in Japan, Macau, Malaysia, and Australia; five in the United States; and additional cases in South Korea, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, France, Canada, Vietnam, Nepal, Cambodia, Finland, and Germany.

While Chinese authorities have expanded a travel lockdown of Wuhan into full or partial quarantines covering 60 million people in central China to contain the spread of the virus, the case count and death toll are only expected to continue to climb. Meanwhile, after two days of deliberation by an Emergency Committee of Experts, on January 22, 2020 the WHO determined that it was too early to declare the outbreak a PHEIC, but we urge you to consider making this determination now. The committee is tasked with advising the WHO's Director General, who makes the final determination on whether an outbreak qualifies as a global health emergency.

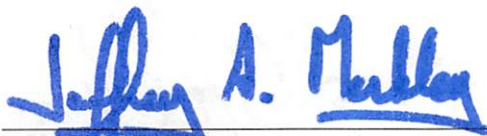
As an instrument of international law, the 2005 International Health Regulations (IHR) define a PHEIC as an "extraordinary event" that "constitute[s] a public health risk to other states through the international spread of disease" and "potentially requires a coordinated international response." The definition implies an event that is serious, unusual, or unexpected, with significant risk of global spread, and may necessitate immediate action by the international community. Given the outbreak's already alarming proliferation well beyond Chinese borders, as

well as screening procedures and other measures that countries such as the United States have already adopted in response, we question the WHO's verdict that coronavirus fails to satisfy those criteria, and urge you to reverse the decision after the panel's next meeting in the coming weeks.

Declaring coronavirus a PHEIC would grant the WHO broad authority to issue legally-binding recommendations on whether countries should impose trade and travel restrictions, facilitating global capacity to coordinate an effective response. The designation might also incentivize governments to dedicate international assistance to bolster the capacity of health systems worldwide to provide care to those already infected.

The WHO neglected to declare two earlier coronavirus epidemics, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), as public health emergencies of international concern. Meanwhile, according to WHO statistics, SARS resulted in 813 confirmed deaths and MERS resulted in 858. We hope that this time the determination will not be overdue.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Todd Young
United States Senator