Most people probably hadn't heard of the WHO until Trump announced he was cutting off funding. Here's what you should know about the organization and Trump's complaints about it.

The Organization.

The World Health Organization, an agency of the UN, was established by a 1946 agreement, which went into effect two years later. It has over 7000 workers in 150 countries. It's budget is about $4 billion, of which about 40% goes to communicable diseases (including the campaign to eradicate polio). About 10% of the budget comes from the United States, the largest single supporter.

Its Activities

The Washington Post details some of the WHO's accomplishments:

> In its more than 70-year history, the WHO has tackled some of the world's most pressing health issues, including emergencies. It helped eliminate smallpox and all but eliminate polio. It supports the administration of measles vaccines worldwide. More recently it played a role in the 2003 SARS outbreak, the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak and the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa.
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> The Post then continues by noting a criticism: "The organization also came under criticism for its response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak, with some health experts saying the body was too slow to act in the face of an outbreak that resulted in more than 10,000 deaths."

WHO Coronavirus Programs.

The WHO was receptive to the Chinese government's version of events there, which may be part of a general pattern of deference toward member nations. The WHO was equivocal about the risks of person-to-person transmission until mid-January, although from an early point it had acknowledged that possibility. At the same time, however, the WHO was taking steps to help nations other than China to cope.

As early as January 17, 2020, the WHO issued a protocol for using a coronavirus test developed in Germany. By February 5, when our CDC was sending out its test

(which proved to be defective), the WHO had already shipped 250,000 of its own test.

Around the same time, the WHO recommended that countries avoid unnecessary travel bans after Trump imposed restrictions on travel from China on January 31.

The WHO has distributed millions of items of personal protective equipment to dozens of countries. An internal state department memo details some of the other work WHO is doing in connection with COVID-19. The WHO is active in some countries where other organizations find it difficult to work. It sent test kits to Lebanon, worked to open international ports for supplies in Yemen, and has approved spending $500,000 in Algeria.

The Controversy

Trump’s reluctance to fund the WHO predates the current controversy. In his February 2020 budget proposal, he asked for a 50% cut in U.S. funding for the WHO. In mid-April, however, he suspended all funding for sixty days, pending an investigation into the WHO’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak. This announcement apparently took US health officials by surprise. The head of the CDC said the agency would continue working with WHO. It’s not clear if the suspension of funding is legal, although there doesn’t seem to be any obvious legal remedy if it isn’t.

As The Hill explains:

> [Trump’s announcement] followed escalating attacks against the WHO, which initially criticized travel bans like the one Trump imposed on China. Trump and other Republicans have also said the WHO was not forthcoming and too reliant on Chinese assurances in the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak.

Many Democrats seem to agree that the WHO gave too much credence to China in the early days of the epidemic. They contend, however, that Trump himself made the same mistake, that cutting off funding will hurt other valuable programs, and that withdrawing the U.S. eliminates a counterweight to Chinese influence. It now appears that U.S. representatives at the WHO gave the Trump Administration up-to-date information as it was received by the WHO, unfiltered by the organization’s

leadership.

Trump’s actions have been criticized by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine. The presidents of those academics contend:

> The WHO’s leadership in helping to curb the pandemic in other countries undoubtedly benefits the United States as well, as we cannot begin to fully recover here until the threat of the pandemic subsides in other nations. Even a temporary halt in U.S. funding would have a potentially damaging impact on the WHO’s essential activities and global health security.

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So there you have it. That’s what WHO is, and why Trump says he doesn’t like WHOever.