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US withdraws from the World Health Organisation

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By **Jennifer Rigby** and **Emma Farge**, Reuters

The United States has officially left the World Health Organisation. Photo: FABRICE COFFRINI / AFP

US owes WHO US\$260 million in fees

WHO faces budget crisis, staff cuts linked to US exit

US official says country does not intend to return to WHO

Global health experts urge re-think.

The United States has officially left the World Health Organisation after a year of warnings that doing so would hurt public health in the US and globally, saying its decision reflected failures in the UN health agency's management of the Covid-19 pandemic.

US President Donald Trump gave notice the US would quit the organisation on the first day of his presidency in 2025, via an executive order.

According to a press release from the US Health and State Departments, the US will only work with the WHO in a limited fashion in order to effectuate the withdrawal.

"We have no plans to participate as an observer, and we have no plans of rejoining," a senior government health official said.

The US said it plans to work directly with other countries - rather than through an international organisation - on disease surveillance and other public health priorities.

Dispute over US-owed fees

Under US law, it was supposed to give one-year notice and pay all outstanding fees - around US\$260 million - before departing.

But a US State Department official disputed that the statute contains a condition that any payment needs to be made before withdrawal.

"The American people have paid more than enough," a State Department spokesperson said in an email earlier on Thursday.

The Department of Health and Human Services said in a document released on Thursday (local time) that the government had ended its funding contributions to the agency. Trump had exercised his authority to pause the future transfer of any US government resources to the WHO because the organisation had cost the US trillions of dollars, the HHS spokesperson said.



US President Donald Trump speaking on 16 January, 2026, during a meeting on rural health care investments, in the East Room of the White House. Photo: AFP/ Brendan Smialowski

The US flag had been removed from outside the WHO headquarters in Geneva on Thursday (local time), according to witnesses.

In recent weeks, the US has moved to exit a number of other United Nations organisations, and some fear that Trump's recently launched Board of Peace could undermine the UN as a whole.

Several WHO critics have also proposed setting up a new agency to replace the organisation, although a proposal document reviewed by the Trump administration last year instead suggested the US push for reforms and American leadership at WHO.

Quick return unlikely

Over the last year, many global health experts have urged a rethink, including most recently WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The WHO also said the US has not yet paid the fees it owes for 2024 and 2025. Member states are set to discuss the US departure and how it will be handled at the WHO's executive board in February, a WHO spokesperson said.

This is a clear violation of US law, said Lawrence Gostin, founding director of the Neill Institute for Global Health Law at Georgetown University in Washington, a close observer of the WHO. But Trump is highly likely to get away with it.

Bill Gates, chair of the Gates Foundation, a major funder of global health initiatives and some of the WHO's work told Reuters at Davos that he did not expect the US to reconsider in the short term.

Gates said he would still advocate for the US to rejoin. The world needs the World Health Organisation, he said.

What the departure means

The U.S. departure has sparked a financial crisis that has seen the WHO cut its management team in half and scale back work, cutting budgets across the agency. Washington has traditionally been by far the UN health agency's biggest financial backer, contributing around 18% of its overall funding. The WHO will also shed around a quarter of its staff by the middle of this year.

The agency said it has been working with the US and sharing information in the last year. It was unclear how the collaboration will work going forward.

Global health experts said this posed risks for the US, the WHO and the world.

The US withdrawal from WHO could weaken the systems and collaborations the world relies on to detect, prevent, and respond to health threats, said Kelly Henning, public health program lead at Bloomberg Philanthropies, a US-based non-profit.

- Reuters

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