

**- Virus**

## WHO experts say search for COVID origins 'stalled'

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The Korea Times · 27 Aug 2021 · 20

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— The search for the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic that has killed millions and crippled economies is at a standstill even as time is running out, scientists charged with the task by the U.N. warned Wednesday.

An initial report by the team of independent, international experts sent to China by the World Health Organization in January concluded that it was most likely that the SARS-CoV-2 virus jumped from bats to humans via an intermediate animal.

A competing hypothesis that the virus somehow leaked from a lab, like the specialized virology laboratory in Wuhan, was deemed “extremely unlikely.”

But in a comment in the journal *Nature*, 11 of the 17 scientists on that mission said it was only intended as a “first step in a process that has stalled.”

“The search for the origins of SARS-CoV-2 is at a critical juncture,” they wrote.

“The window of opportunity for conducting this crucial enquiry is closing fast.”

Tracing the biological trail back to the earliest pockets of the disease, which first surfaced in Wuhan in late 2019, becomes more difficult as evidence disappears or becomes corrupted.

The statement comes less than two weeks after the WHO, in a bid to revive the probe, urged China to hand over information on the earliest COVID-19 cases.

This should include COVID-19 data for 174 infections identified in December 2019 that China failed to share during the initial investigation, the experts said.

The investigators said “it was agreed” at the time that a second phase of research would fill in this gap.

But China pushed back against the WHO request earlier this month, saying the January investigation should suffice and that calls for further data were motivated by politics, not science.