United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

April 25, 2022

Case No. FL-2021-00033

Gary Ruskin
4096 Piedmont Ave. #963
Oakland, CA 94611

Dear Mr. Ruskin:

As we noted in our letter dated March 24, 2022, we are processing your request for material under the Freedom of Information Act (the "FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552. Since our last letter, the Department of State ("Department") has processed in excess of 550 pages of material potentially responsive to your request. The Department has identified an additional five responsive records subject to the FOIA. We have determined all five records may be released in part.

An enclosure explains the FOIA exemptions and other grounds for withholding material. Where we have made redactions, the applicable FOIA exemptions are marked on each document. All non-exempt material that is reasonably segregable from the exempt material has been released, and is enclosed.

We will keep you informed as your case progresses. If you have any questions, your attorney may contact Laurel Lum, Trial Attorney, at laurel.h.lum@usdoj.gov or (202) 305-8177. Please refer to the case number, FL-2021-00033, and the civil action number, 20-cv-08415, in all correspondence about this case.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Miller
Chief, Programs and Policies Division
Office of Information Programs and Services

Enclosures: As stated.

The Freedom of Information Act (5 USC 552)

FOIA Exemptions

(b)(1) Information specifically authorized by an executive order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy. Executive Order 13526 includes the following classification categories:

- 1.4(a) Military plans, systems, or operations
- 1.4(b) Foreign government information
- 1.4(c) Intelligence activities, sources or methods, or cryptology
- 1.4(d) Foreign relations or foreign activities of the US, including confidential sources
- 1.4(e) Scientific, technological, or economic matters relating to national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
- 1.4(f) U.S. Government programs for safeguarding nuclear materials or facilities
- 1.4(g) Vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, infrastructures, projects, plans, or protection services relating to US national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
- 1.4(h) Weapons of mass destruction

(b)(2) Related solely to the internal personnel rules and practices of an agency

(b)(3) Specifically exempted from disclosure by statute (other than 5 USC 552), for example:

ARMSEXP	Arms Export Control Act, 50a USC 2411(c)
CIA PERS/ORG	Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949, 50 USC 403(g)
EXPORT CONTROL	Export Administration Act of 1979, 50 USC App. Sec. 2411(c)
FS ACT	Foreign Service Act of 1980, 22 USC 4004
INA	Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 USC 1202(f), Sec. 222(f)
IRAN	Iran Claims Settlement Act, Public Law 99-99, Sec. 505

(b)(4) Trade secrets and confidential commercial or financial information

(b)(5) Interagency or intra-agency communications forming part of the deliberative process, attorney-client privilege, or attorney work product

(b)(6) Personal privacy information

(b)(7) Law enforcement information whose disclosure would:
- (A) interfere with enforcement proceedings
- (B) deprive a person of a fair trial
- (C) constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy
- (D) disclose confidential sources
- (E) disclose investigation techniques
- (F) endanger life or physical safety of an individual

(b)(8) Prepared by or for a government agency regulating or supervising financial institutions

(b)(9) Geological and geophysical information and data, including maps, concerning wells

Other Grounds for Withholding

NR Material not responsive to a FOIA request excised with the agreement of the requester

From:	"SMART Archive" <>
To:	SMART Core <>
Subject:	USAU: Africa CDC Focuses on Regional Capacity Building
Date:	Wed, 20 Sep 2017 05:12:13 GMT

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MRN:	17 USAU ADDIS ABABA 382
Date/DTG:	Sep 20, 2017 / 200510Z SEP 17
From:	USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA
Action:	WASHDC, SECSTATE *ROUTINE*
E.O.:	13526
TAGS:	PREL, SOCI, SHLH, PGOV, CDC, AID, AU-1, CN
Captions:	SENSITIVE
Reference:	A) 17 USAU ADDIS ABABA 56 B) 17 USAU ADDIS ABABA 134 C) 16 USAU ADDIS ABABA 430 D) 17 USAU ADDIS ABABA 326
Subject:	USAU: Africa CDC Focuses on Regional Capacity Building

1. (U) **Summary:** After launching at the January 2017 African Union Heads of State Summit (ref a), Africa Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has focused on staffing and setting up its Regional Collaborating Centers (RCCs). AU member states remain supportive of the Africa CDC, which has deployed its U.S.-funded epidemiologists to respond to outbreaks of Lassa Fever and meningitis in Nigeria and cholera in Ethiopia, to assist with malaria control and eradication efforts in Namibia and Mozambique, to support efforts to combat the recent DRC Ebola outbreak, and to support the response to the mudslide in Sierra Leone. The new AU Commissioner for Social Affairs Amira El-Fadil (Sudan), who oversees the AU Commission (AUC) Department that houses Africa CDC, traveled to Freetown, Sierra Leone as the AU's official representative to offer support to victims of the mudslide. She pledged Africa CDC's support to combat disease outbreaks in the affected area. End Summary.

Africa CDC Moves from Inception to Growth

2. (U) Africa CDC is setting up its Regional Collaborating Centers in line with its five year strategic plan (attached) unveiled in March, 2017 (ref b). The organization has also launched its formal staffing process with vacancy announcements for its Headquarters ("Secretariat") team in Addis Ababa. The current Africa CDC staff consists of its Director, Dr. John Nkengasong (ref c), ten U.S.-funded epidemiologists, two U.S. CDC advisors seconded to Africa CDC, one U.S.

public health advisor on long-term detail, two Chinese advisors, and two Chinese-funded managerial personnel. The vacancy announcements are primarily for program leadership, including the Deputy Director position, and support staff. Africa CDC plans to post the announcements for technical and scientific staff in the coming weeks. The AUC through the Department of Social Affairs continues to provide administrative support to the Africa CDC, with the Africa CDC Director reporting to Commissioner El-Fadil.

Africa CDC Focuses on Regional Collaborating Centers

3. (U) In line with is ambitious five year strategy, Africa CDC is looking to build its structure in a non-linear fashion. It will focus on the Secretariat in Addis Ababa and the Regional Centers, while building linkages to national public health institutes in member states. Its strategic plan involves five focus areas: surveillance and disease intelligence, emergency preparedness and response, information systems, laboratory systems and networks, and public health institutes and research. To stand up its Regional Centers, Africa CDC has convened consultative meetings with stakeholders at four of the five RCCs to date. Consultations for the RCC for Northern Africa in Cairo will take place in late September. The consultations have involved Ministers of Health of member states from the respective AU Regional Economic Communities (RECs), private health institutions, World Health Organization (WHO) representatives, and partners including U.S. CDC, China CDC, and USAID. Each RCC will report to the Africa CDC Secretariat, but will also be governed by a Steering Committee consisting of member states' Ministers of Health. Advisory Technical Working Groups will inform RCC decision making, and will comprise representatives from national public health institutes, non-government organizations, and WHO.

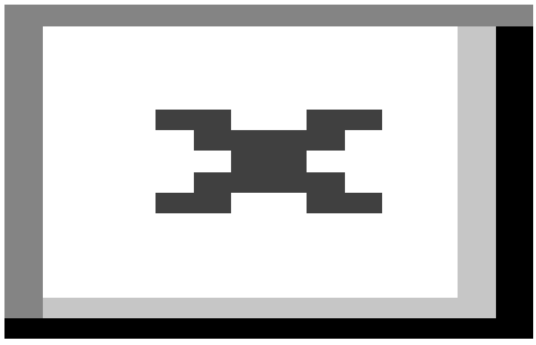

Figure 1. Proposed RCC Organizational Structure

4. (U) Africa CDC's strategic plan envisions that each RCC will establish a Regional Integrated Surveillance and Laboratory Network (RISLNET). These networks will consist of all available public health assets in their region, including universities, national public health institutes, and private laboratories, centers of excellence, non-governmental organizations, and veterinary networks working to monitor priority diseases. The strategic plan also envisions establishing an Antimicrobial Resistance Surveillance Network (AMRSNET) that works closely with the WHO Global Antimicrobial Resistance Surveillance Systems. An initial AMRSNET Framework was endorsed by the Africa CDC Governing Board in August 2017 and received public support from WHO African Regional Office Director Dr. Matshidiso Rebecca Moeti (Botswana).

New AUC Commissioner Seeks Continued U.S. Commitment

5. (U) In her courtesy call with Ambassador Leonard, Social Affairs Commissioner Amira El-Fadil lauded U.S. contributions to establish Africa CDC and asked the United States to continue its support. [Note: The U.S.-funded epidemiologists will complete their two year terms in January 2018. The Africa CDC Secretariat has signaled that these epidemiologists are eligible to compete for permanent technical staff positions. U.S. CDC has communicated to the Secretariat that funds may be made available to support another cohort of epidemiologists if needed. End Note]. Commissioner El-Fadil is actively engaged across different AUC Departments on cross-cutting issues of gender, peace and security, food security and drought, and even South Sudan (ref d). As the political front for Africa CDC, her leadership and advocacy can be harnessed to help Africa CDC gain further traction and financial support from member states and private partnerships. Dr. Nkengasong received endorsement from the Africa CDC Governing Board for his plan to generate funding through private-public partnerships interfacing with an Africa CDC Foundation.

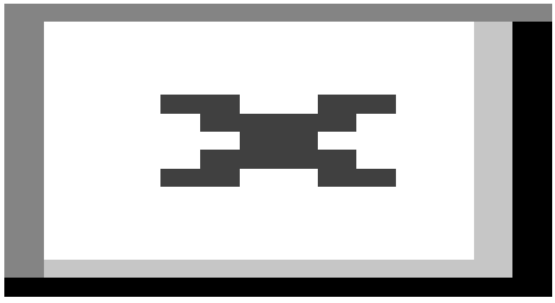

Figure 2: Africa CDC's fundraising plans

China Moves Forward with Constructions; Questions U.S. Commitment

6. (U) China and the AUC have signed the official agreement to begin construction of the Africa CDC headquarters building on AU land in Addis Ababa. Africa CDC Director John Nkengasong intends to travel to Beijing in October 2017 to move forward with planning. China is also moving ahead with plans to construct infrastructure at the RCCs. Chinese representatives are talking to member states directly to negotiate agreements, much to the chagrin of the AUC, which feels negotiations should go through the AU and Africa CDC. This may also be a factor behind the Commissioner's direct requests to USAU to outline and formalize future assistance, according to the U.S. advisors to Africa CDC.

7. ~~(SBU)~~ Although China and the United States signed an MOU in 2016 (attached) for health collaboration in Africa focusing on the Africa CDC, counterparts from the Chinese Mission to the AU in Addis have expressed skepticism at the value of additional tripartite meetings between the AU, China AU, and USAU. There has been no tripartite meeting after the initial AU-hosted meeting over a year ago, nor are there any indications, despite several reassurances, that the Chinese Mission plans to convene one in the near future. Hosting of the tri-partite engagement was informally scheduled to occur on a rotational basis. China AU and USAU have met separately to discuss respective Africa CDC support.

8. ~~(SBU)~~ In an informal encounter with Poloff at the AU, a counterpart from the Chinese Mission to the AU questioned the planned cooperation in the absence of additional U.S. pledges or a high level statement on health cooperation from the Heads of State at the U.S.-China Mar-A-Lago meeting in April. Additionally, our US CDC adviser at Africa CDC reported the Chinese advisors do not agree with Director Nkengasong's direction that they fully integrate as seconded staff in Africa CDC – the Chinese said they would prefer to continue as external advisors to Africa CDC. The Chinese advisors told US CDC adviser that they had not raised this issue with their Embassy to avoid "politicization," but continue to resist attempts to be assigned specific roles and tasks. With other issues arising about the roles and organizational placement of the Chinese and U.S. advisors within the evolving Africa CDC, USAU is encouraging Director Nkengasong to organize regular joint conversations with Ambassador Leonard and the Chinese Ambassador as a mechanism to resolve outstanding issues and adhere to the spirit of the MOU.

Comment

9. ~~(SBU)~~ Africa CDC has embarked on its ambitious agenda focusing on health system capacity building at the continental, regional, and member state level. Adding additional management and administrative staffing would enhance its current limited capacity. Its consultative meetings, involving a broad range of stakeholders, reflect its commitment to coordinate efforts and avoid duplication with other players such as the WHO. The commitment of the dynamic new Social Affairs Commissioner will help maintain focus on its relevance, however, member state buy-in and financial support will be the key to Africa CDC's future success. Continued technical support from the United States along with other partners, including China, will ensure it evolves to be a first responder to public health crises in Africa. Successful management of disease outbreaks at their origin protects our borders and helps advance U.S. peace and security goals in Africa, and Africa CDC remains one of the most important projects that we have with the African Union. End comment.

Signature:	LEONARD
Drafted By:	USAU ADDIS ABABA:(b)(6)
Cleared By:	POL-ECON:(b)(6) EXEC:(b)(6) HHS/CDC/CGH:Idowu, Rachel T (Addis Ababa) CDC/USAU:Varma, Jay (Addis Ababa)
Approved By:	EXEC/LEG:(b)(6)
Released By:	USAU ADDIS ABABA:(b)(6)
Info:	NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC *ROUTINE*; DIA WASHINGTON DC *ROUTINE*; CIA WASHINGTON DC *ROUTINE*; HQ AFRICOM STUTTGART GE *ROUTINE*; CJTF HOA *ROUTINE*; (b)(6) *ROUTINE*; AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE *ROUTINE*; IO COLLECTIVE *ROUTINE*
Attachments:	Africa CDC Strategic Plan_English.pdf, Signed ACDC MOU -FINAL 11.23.2016-.pdf
Dissemination Rule:	Archive Copy

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To:	EAP-ALL <EAP-ALL@state.gov>
CC:	(b)(6) @state.gov>; (b)(6) @state.gov>; (b)(6) @state.gov>; (b)(6) @state.gov>; (b)(6) @state.gov>; (b)(6) @state.gov>
Subject:	EAP Top Cables April 1, 2020
Date:	Wed, 1 Apr 2020 12:03:05 +0000

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EAP Top Cables
April 1, 2020

- ~~(SBU)~~ PRC Starts Asymptomatic COVID-19 Case Reporting, Omits Retrospective Cases (20 BEIJING 614)
- ~~(SBU)~~ Myanmar: AA Designated Terrorist Group as War Rages in Rakhine (20 RANGOON 292)
- ~~(SBU)~~ Kansai Governments Debate Need for Emergency Declaration on COVID-19 (20 OSAKA KOBE 22)
- (~~SBU~~) Singapore: Ever the Overachiever, Singapore Strives for "Gold Standard" in COVID-19 Response (20 SINGAPORE 306)
- (~~SBU~~) Australia Response: Securing Supplies for U.S. Health Care Needs Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic (20 CANBERRA 470)

COVID-19 reporting

~~(SBU)~~ Coronavirus Reporting4PPO: Mission Korea Update (20 SEOUL 566)
~~(SBU)~~ Malaysia COVID-19 Update 19 4PPO: Second Phase of MCO Begins, Surge in Testing Facing Backlogs, UNHCR Continues Support For Refugees (20 KUALA LUMPUR 314)
~~(SBU)~~ Philippines Coronavirus (COVID-19) Reporting 4PPO: Cases Continue to Rise (20 MANILA 528)

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From:	(b)(6)
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Subject:	EAP Top Cables April 1, 2020
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Sender:	(b)(6)
Recipient:	EAP-ALL <EAP-ALL@state.gov>; (b)(6) (b)(6)

From:	(b)(6)
To:	(b)(6)
Subject:	Fwd: How did covid-19 begin? Its initial origin story is shaky. from The Washington Post
Date:	Fri, 3 Apr 2020 21:22:04 +0000

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From: (b)(6)
Sent: Friday, April 3, 2020 8:38:48 AM
To: EAP-J-Office-DL <EAP-J-Office-DL@state.gov>
Subject: Fw: How did covid-19 begin? Its initial origin story is shaky. from The Washington Post

You heard it first from (b)(6)
From: (b)(6)
Sent: Friday, April 3, 2020 8:18 AM
To: EAP-CM-Office-DL <EAP-CM-Office-DL@state.gov>; EAP-FO-Principals-DL <EAP-FO-Principals-DL@state.gov>; INR-China-Small Group <INR-ChinaSmallGroup@state.gov>
Subject: How did covid-19 begin? Its initial origin story is shaky. from The Washington Post

David Ignatius runs through the possible origins…

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-did-covid-19-begin-its-initial-origin-story-is-shaky/2020/04/02/1475d488-7521-11ea-87da-77a8136c1a6d_story.html

April 2, 2020 at 6:56 p.m. EDT

The story of how the novel coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China, has produced a nasty propaganda battle between the United States and China. The two sides have traded some of the sharpest charges made between two nations since the Soviet Union in 1985 falsely accused the CIA of manufacturing AIDS.

U.S. intelligence officials don't think the pandemic was caused by deliberate wrongdoing. The outbreak that has now swept the world instead began with a simpler story, albeit one with tragic consequences: The prime suspect is "natural" transmission from bats to humans, perhaps through unsanitary markets. But scientists don't rule out that an accident at a research laboratory in Wuhan might have spread a deadly bat virus that had been collected for scientific study.

"Good science, bad safety" is how Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) put this theory in a Feb. 16 tweet. He ranked such a breach (or natural transmission) as more likely than two extreme possibilities: an accidental leak of an "engineered bioweapon" or a "deliberate release." Cotton's earlier loose talk about bioweapons set off a furor, back when he first raised it in late January and called the outbreak "worse than Chernobyl."

President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo added to the bile last month by describing the coronavirus as the "Chinese virus" and the "Wuhan virus," respectively. China dished wild, irresponsible allegations of its own. On March 12, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao charged in a tweet: "It might be [the] US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan." He retweeted an article that claimed, without

evidence, that U.S. troops might have spread the virus when they attended the World Military Games in Wuhan in October 2019.

China retreated on March 22, when Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai told "Axios on HBO" that such rumors were "crazy" on both sides. A State Department spokesman said Cui's comment was "welcome," and Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged in a March 27 phone call to "focus on cooperative behavior," a senior administration official told me.

To be clear: U.S. intelligence officials think there's no evidence whatsoever that the coronavirus was created in a laboratory as a potential bioweapon. Solid scientific research demonstrates that the virus wasn't engineered by humans and that it originated in bats.

But how did the outbreak occur? Solving this medical mystery is important to prevent future pandemics. What's increasingly clear is that the initial "origin story" — that the virus was spread by people who ate contaminated animals at the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan — is shaky.

Scientists have identified the culprit as a bat coronavirus, through genetic sequencing; bats weren't sold at the seafood market, although that market or others could have sold animals that had contact with bats. The Lancet noted in a January study that the first covid-19 case in Wuhan had no connection to the seafood market.

There's a competing theory — of an accidental lab release of bat coronavirus — that scientists have been puzzling about for weeks. Less than 300 yards from the seafood market is the Wuhan branch of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Researchers from that facility and the nearby Wuhan Institute of Virology have posted articles about collecting bat coronaviruses from around China, for study to prevent future illness. Did one of those samples leak, or was hazardous waste deposited in a place where it could spread?

Richard Ebright, a Rutgers microbiologist and biosafety expert, told me in an email that "the first human infection could have occurred as a natural accident," with the virus passing from bat to human, possibly through another animal. But Ebright cautioned that it "also could have occurred as a laboratory accident, with, for example, an accidental infection of a laboratory worker." He noted that bat coronaviruses were studied in Wuhan at Biosafety Level 2, "which provides only minimal protection," compared with the top BSL-4.

Ebright described a December video from the Wuhan CDC that shows staffers "collecting bat coronaviruses with inadequate [personal protective equipment] and unsafe operational practices." Separately, I reviewed two Chinese articles, from 2017 and 2019, describing the heroics of Wuhan CDC researcher Tian Junhua, who while capturing bats in a cave "forgot to take protective measures" so that "bat urine dripped from the top of his head like raindrops."

And then there's the Chinese study that was curiously withdrawn. In February, a site called ResearchGate published a brief article by Botao Xiao and Lei Xiao from Guangzhou's South China University of Technology. "In addition to origins of natural recombination and intermediate host, the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan. Safety level may need to be reinforced in high risk biohazardous laboratories," the article concluded. Botao Xiao told the Wall Street Journal in February that he had withdrawn the paper because it "was not supported by direct proofs."

Accidents happen, human or laboratory. Solving the mystery of how covid-19 began isn't a blame game, but a chance for China and the United States to cooperate in a crisis, and prevent a future one.

Read more from David Ignatius's archive, follow him on Twitter or subscribe to his updates on Facebook.

Sender:	(b)(6)
Recipient:	(b)(6)

From:	(b)(6) @state.gov>
To:	EAP-CM-Office-DL <EAP-CM-Office-DL@state.gov>
Subject:	FW: WP: State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses
Date:	Tue, 14 Apr 2020 11:40:27 +0000

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From: (b)(6) @state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, April 14, 2020 7:15 AM
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)
(b)(6)

Subject: Fwd: WP: State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses

Rogin's piece is out.

State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses

Josh Rogin

Two years before the novel coronavirus pandemic upended the world, U.S. Embassy officials visited a Chinese research facility in the city of Wuhan several times and sent two official warnings back to Washington about inadequate safety at the lab, which was conducting risky studies on coronaviruses from bats. The cables have fueled discussions inside the U.S. government about whether this or another Wuhan lab was the source of the virus — even though conclusive proof has yet to emerge.

In January 2018, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing took the unusual step of repeatedly sending U.S. science diplomats to the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), which had in 2015 become China's first laboratory to achieve the highest level of international bioresearch safety (known as BSL-4). WIV issued a news release in English about the last of these visits, which occurred on March 27, 2018. The U.S. delegation was led by Jamison Fouss, the consule general in Wuhan, and Rick Switzer, the embassy's counselor of environment, science, technology and health. Last week, WIV erased that statement from its website, though it remains archived on the Internet.

What the U.S. officials learned during their visits concerned them so much that they dispatched two diplomatic cables categorized as Sensitive But Unclassified back to Washington. The cables warned about safety and management weaknesses at the WIV lab and proposed more attention and help. The first cable, which I obtained, also warns that the lab's work on bat coronaviruses and their potential human transmission represented a risk of a new SARS-like pandemic."During interactions with scientists at the WIV laboratory, they noted the new lab has a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory," states the Jan. 19, 2018, cable, which was drafted by two officials from the embassy's environment, science and health sections who met with the WIV scientists. (The State Department declined to comment on this and other details of the story.)

The Chinese researchers at WIV were receiving assistance from the Galveston National Laboratory at the University of Texas Medical Branch and other U.S. organizations, but the Chinese requested additional help. The cables argued that the United States should give the Wuhan lab further support, mainly because its research on bat coronaviruses was important but also dangerous.

As the cable noted, the U.S. visitors met with Shi Zhengli, the head of the research project, who had been publishing studies related to bat coronaviruses for many years. In November 2017, just before the U.S. officials' visit, Shi's team had published research showing that horseshoe bats they had collected from a cave in Yunnan province were very likely from the same bat population that spawned the SARS coronavirus in 2003.

"Most importantly," the cable states, "the researchers also showed that various SARS-like coronaviruses can interact with ACE2, the human receptor identified for SARS-coronavirus. This finding strongly suggests that SARS-like coronaviruses from bats can be transmitted to humans to cause SARS-like diseases. From a public health perspective, this makes the continued surveillance of SARS-like coronaviruses in bats and study of the animal-human interface critical to future emerging coronavirus outbreak prediction and prevention."

The research was designed to prevent the next SARS-like pandemic by anticipating how it might emerge. But even in 2015, other scientists questioned whether Shi's team was taking unnecessary risks. In October 2014, the U.S. government had imposed a moratorium on funding of any research that makes a virus more deadly or contagious, known as "gain-of-function" experiments.

As many have pointed out, there is no evidence that the virus now plaguing the world was engineered; scientists largely agree it came from animals. But that is not the same as saying it didn't come from the lab, which spent years testing bat coronaviruses in animals, said Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at the School of Information at the University of California at Berkeley.

"The cable tells us that there have long been concerns about the possibility of the threat to public health that came from this lab's research, if it was not being adequately conducted and protected," he said.

There are similar concerns about the nearby Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention lab, which operates at biosecurity level 2, a level significantly less secure than the level-4 standard claimed by the Wuhan Insititute of Virology lab, Xiao said. That's important because the Chinese government still refuses to answer basic questions about the origin of the novel coronavirus while suppressing any attempts to examine whether either lab was involved.

Sources familiar with the cables said they were meant to sound an alarm about the grave safety concerns at the WIV lab, especially regarding its work with bat coronaviruses. The embassy officials were calling for more U.S. attention to this lab and more support for it, to help it fix its problems.

"The cable was a warning shot," one U.S. official said. "They were begging people to pay attention to what was going on."

No extra assistance to the labs was provided by the U.S. government in response to these cables. The cables began to circulate again inside the administration over the past two months as officials debated whether the lab could be the origin of the pandemic and what the implications would be for the U.S. pandemic response and relations with China.

Inside the Trump administration, many national security officials have long suspected either the WIV or the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention lab was the source of the novel coronavirus

outbreak. According to the New York Times, the intelligence community has provided no evidence to confirm this. But one senior administration official told me that the cables provide one more piece of evidence to support the possibility that the pandemic is the result of a lab accident in Wuhan.

"The idea that is was just a totally natural occurrence is circumstantial. The evidence it leaked from the lab is circumstantial. Right now, the ledger on the side of it leaking from the lab is packed with bullet points and there's almost nothing on the other side," the official said.

As my colleague David Ignatius noted, the Chinese government's original story — that the virus emerged from a seafood market in Wuhan — is shaky. Research by Chinese experts published in the Lancet in January showed the first known patient, identified on Dec. 1, had no connection to the market, nor did more than one-third of the cases in the first large cluster. Also, the market didn't sell bats.

Shi and other WIV researchers have categorically denied this lab was the origin for the novel coronavirus. On Feb. 3, her team was the first to publicly report the virus known as 2019-nCoV was a bat-derived coronavirus.

The Chinese government, meanwhile, has put a total lockdown on information related to the virus origins. Beijing has yet to provide U.S. experts with samples of the novel coronavirus collected from the earliest cases. The Shanghai lab that published the novel coronavirus genome on Jan. 11 was quickly shut down by authorities for "rectification." Several of the doctors and journalistswho reported on the spread early on have disappeared.

On Feb. 14, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a new biosecurity law to be accelerated. On Wednesday, CNN reported the Chinese government has placed severe restrictions requiring approval before any research institution publishes anything on the origin of the novel coronavirus.

The origin story is not just about blame. It's crucial to understanding how the novel coronavirus pandemic started because that informs how to prevent the next one. The Chinese government must be transparent and answer the questions about the Wuhan labs because they are vital to our scientific understanding of the virus, said Xiao.

We don't know whether the novel coronavirus originated in the Wuhan lab, but the cable pointed to the danger there and increases the impetus to find out, he said.
"I don't think it's a conspiracy theory. I think it's a legitimate question that needs to be investigated and answered," he said. "To understand exactly how this originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."

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