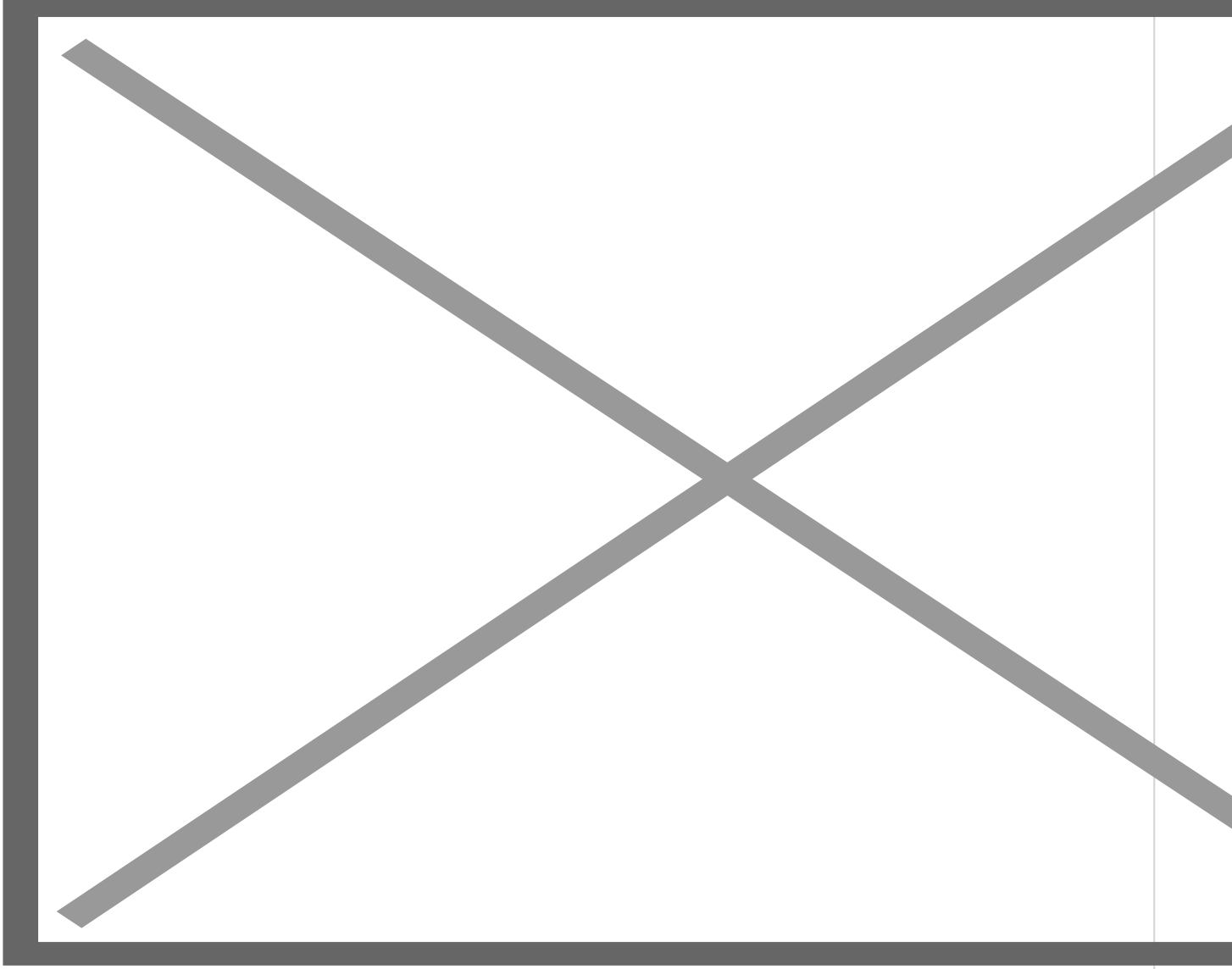


WHO team in Wuhan says coronavirus source 'remains unidentified'

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Liang Wannian speaks during a joint-press conference with the WHO team at the end of its mission in Wuhan. (Photo: Ng Han Guan / AP)

Beijing, February 9 (RHC)-- An expert mission from the World Health Organization (WHO) investigating the origins of the coronavirus pandemic in China says it has yet to identify the animal source of the SARS-COV-2 virus, which has so far killed more than 2.3 million people across the world.

Liang Wannian, an expert with China's National Health Commission, told reporters in the central city of Wuhan that the joint Chinese and WHO team of 34 experts believe the virus originated in an animal, "but the reservoir host remains to be identified."

Wuhan is the city where the virus was first identified, and Liang said there was no evidence to suggest the virus was spreading in the city before the first official cases were recorded in December 2019. He also went on to suggest the virus could have been circulating in other regions before it was identified in China.

A literature review of research that included "unpublished studies from different countries, suggest that SARS-Cov-2 circulation preceding the initial detection of cases by several weeks," he said. "Some of the suspected positive samples were detected even earlier than the first case reported. This indicates the possibility of the misreported circulation in other regions."

Analysis of records of respiratory illnesses reported at hospitals in Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province show "there is no substantial unrecognised circulation of SARS-COV-2 in Wuhan during the latter part of 2019," he added.

WHO foreign expert Ben Embarak, who was based in the WHO's Beijing office for two years from 2009, backed up the assertion, saying there was no evidence of "large outbreaks in Wuhan" before then. The mission is a diplomatically knotty one, which was hounded even before it began by fears of a whitewash, with the United States demanding a "robust" probe and China firing back with a warning not to "politicise" the investigation.

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