WHO’s Annual Travel Budget: $200 Million

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By Maria Cheng

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The World Health Organization routinely spends about $200 million a year on travel — far more than what it doles out to fight some of the biggest problems in public health including AIDS, tuberculosis or malaria, according to internal documents obtained by the Associated Press.

As the cash-strapped United Nations health agency pleads for more money to fund its responses to health crises worldwide, it also has been struggling to control its own travel costs. Despite introducing new rules to try to curb its expansive travel budget, senior officials have complained internally that U.N. staff members are breaking the rules by booking perks such as business-class airplane tickets and rooms in five-star hotels.

Last year, WHO spent about $71 million on AIDS and hepatitis. On malaria, it spent $61 million. And to slow tuberculosis, WHO invested $59 million. Still, some health programs do get exceptional funding — the agency spends about $450 million trying to wipe out polio every year.

On a recent trip to Guinea, where WHO Director-General Margaret Chan praised health workers in West Africa for triumphing over Ebola, Chan stayed in the biggest presidential suite at the Palm Camayenne hotel in Conakry. The suite has an advertised price of 900 euros ($1,008) a night. The agency declined to say who picked up the tab, noting only that her hotels are sometimes paid for by the host country.

But some say that sends the wrong message to the rest of the agency’s 7,000 staff members.

“We don’t trust people to do the right thing when it comes to travel,” Nick Jeffreys, WHO’s director of finance, said during an in-house seminar on accountability in September 2015 — a video of which was obtained by the AP.

Despite WHO’s numerous travel regulations, Jeffreys said staff members “can sometimes manipulate a little bit their travel.” He said the agency couldn’t be sure they were always booking the cheapest ticket or that the travel was even warranted.

Ian Smith, executive director of Chan’s office, said the chair of WHO’s audit committee said the agency often did little to stop misbehavior.

“We, as an organization, sometimes function as if rules are there to be broken and that exceptions are the rule rather than the norm,” Smith said.

Earlier that year, a memorandum was sent to Chan and other top leaders with the subject, “ACTIONS TO CONTAIN TRAVEL COSTS” in all-caps. The memo reported that compliance with rules that travel be booked in advance was “very low” and also pointed out that WHO was under pressure from its member countries to save money.

In a statement to the AP, the U.N. health agency said “the nature of WHO’s work often requires WHO staff to travel” and such costs had been reduced 14 percent last year compared to the previous year — although that year’s total was exceptionally high because of the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa.