Another week, another scandal at the United Nations

October 25, 2017

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The Washington Post

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/10/25/another-week-another-scandal-at-the-united-nations/?utm_term=.c9efcdb6b7e9>

The announcement stunned the audience. The head of the World Health Organization had just revealed his decision to honor a well-known tyrant, Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe, by [naming him](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/22/world/africa/who-robert-mugabe-goodwill-ambassador.html) a WHO “goodwill ambassador.”

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the recently appointed WHO chief, may have thought that his speech during a conference in Uruguay last week would pass without notice. Maybe he assumed that his grotesque praise of a man whose actions [show how](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/12/how-to-kill-a-country/302845/) one can single-handedly destroy a country would disappear into the U.N.’s bulging records of outrageous decisions.

Tedros clearly did not expect the reaction that ensued. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [said](https://globalnews.ca/news/3817790/justin-trudeau-robert-mugabe-appointment/) he first thought it was a “bad April Fool’s joke.” Ireland’s health minister [called](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/simon-harris-calls-choice-of-mugabe-as-who-ambassador-offensive-and-bizarre-1.3264581) the decision “offensive and bizarre.” And an alliance of health organizations, whose members were in the hall in Montevideo when Tedros (as he is known) made the announcement, issued [a joint statement](https://ncdalliance.org/node/9443) saying they were “shocked and deeply concerned.” Even top WHO staff took to Twitter to complain. “Senior WHO staff dumbfounded,” noted one, [adding](https://twitter.com/globalhlthtwit/status/921276657893347328) that his colleagues were “greatly concerned” about the impact on WHO’s credibility and funding.

The firestorm of criticism, however, persuaded Tedros to rescind his decision. But that should not be the end of this farcical episode. The U.N. is far too important, and the WHO, its public health arm, has an enormously consequential mandate.

Maybe when Tedros paid tribute to Zimbabwe as a country committed to “provide health care for all,” he thought no one would remember the avalanche of reports showing how the 93-year-old Mugabe, who has run his once-prosperous country for 30 years, managed to turn it into an economic disaster zone.

One [particularly damning report](http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/blog/report-health-in-ruins-zimbabwe.html) by the group Physicians for Human Rights in 2009 detailed how Mugabe systematically undermined the health-care system in order to keep his hold on power. To avoid tarnishing his image at home and abroad, he banned reporting on the crisis and neglected to tackle an explosion of epidemics. Suffice it to say that, as the New York Times noted in [its editorial](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/23/opinion/23iht-edmugabe.1.19632133.html) about the report, life expectancy in Zimbabwe fell from 62 years in 1990 to 36 in 2006.

The WHO director’s decision to honor the dictator is a misjudgment of breathtaking proportions. The stain it has left on the WHO will not be easily cleansed. We must find out what was behind it. If an investigation proves that giving this prestigious appointment to a brutal human rights violator was the result of corruption, Tedros must leave. In fact, Tedros’s tenure should already be regarded as probationary, and his judgment in question.

Needless to say, this is not the first time the U.N. has inspired outrage. From [the scandalous actions](http://www.startribune.com/frida-ghitis-at-the-united-nations-the-fox-almost-always-guards-the-henhouse/118206839/) of the U.N.’s human rights body, from the selection of vile conspiracy mongers as special “rapporteurs,” to the selection of Iran and then Saudi Arabia to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, to the choice of [repressive, democracy-destroying nations](https://www.unwatch.org/china-russia-uae-venezuela-wins-seats-un-organ-overseeing-human-rights/) to vital bodies, the U.N. sometimes seems determined to seek precisely the opposite of what it claims. It’s hardly a wonder that the United States recently [decided](https://twitter.com/FridaGhitis/status/918542181518008321) to leave UNESCO, the U.N.’s Israel-bashing cultural organization, once again.

But the job of the WHO is not symbolic. Lives depend on it. What was Tedros thinking when he chose to honor Mugabe? This is not a rhetorical question. It demands urgent answers.

[Hillel Neuer](https://www.unwatch.org/home/hillelneuer/), executive director of the watchdog organization UN Watch, told me, “It’s clear that this was a prize, if not compensation, for something.” Tedros may have been rewarding Mugabe [for supporting his nomination](http://www.ebc.et/web/ennews/-/au-executive-council-endorses-dr-tedros-for-who-director-general) to the WHO post last year, when Tedros was Ethiopia’s foreign minister and Mugabe headed the African Union.

When Tedros won the top job at the WHO in May, many lauded the choice of the first African to lead the organization. But not everyone was so sanguine. While it is true that he was a highly effective health minister in Ethiopia, electing him required overlooking his long record as a major figure within a repressive regime. The government he served [has been accused](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/03/a-license-to-torture/) of torture, repression and electoral fraud.

Some [speculate](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/mugabes-new-role-as-un-goodwill-ambassador-is-payoff-for-china-x2l2cd3g6) that Tedros’s decision to appoint Mugabe was a pay-off to China, which worked tirelessly behind the scenes to help Tedros defeat the United Kingdom candidate for the WHO job, David Nabarro. Tedros’s victory was also a victory for Beijing, whose leader Xi Jinping has made public his goal of flexing China’s muscle in the world.

Beijing strongly supports Mugabe, and Mugabe has repaid the favor, helping to ease pressure from Africans who criticize China for exploiting Africa’s natural resources. In December 2015, Mugabe [gushed](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xv2Xm-P3xAA) about Xi at the China-Africa summit in Johannesburg, even calling the Chinese autocrat “a God-sent person.”

The U.N.’s problems will not disappear if Tedros leaves. But it’s important to send a strong signal that such appalling events are not acceptable. Tedros has not apologized for his scandalous decision to Mugabe’s victims, to WHO staff, or to the international community. This matter is not closed.