

# Plague patient 'near death' in remote Chinese town

August 5 2009, By GILLIAN WONG , Associated Press Writer

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UPDATES text; Graphic locates Ziketan, China, where three have died from pneumonic plague 1c x 1 7/8 inches; 46.5 mm x 47 mm;

(AP) -- Public buses were ordered off the roads of a remote Chinese town to control the possible spread of deadly pneumonic plague that has killed three people and seemed poised to claim a fourth victim Wednesday, residents and authorities said.

One patient hospitalized with the highly infectious [lung disease](#) was "near death" while another person was in serious condition, according to a notice from the health bureau of northwestern Qinghai province, where

the stricken town of Ziketan is located. Seven others infected were "basically stable," the notice said.

Police have set up checkpoints around Ziketan, a farming town of 10,000 people in an ethnically Tibetan area, sealing it off to prevent the spread of the disease that can kill in as few as 24 hours if left untreated. Residents have reported that some people have tried to flee the town on foot, though it's unclear if they made it past the checkpoints.

Authorities have set up a cordon with a 17-mile (28-kilometer) radius around Ziketan, more than 300 miles (480 kilometers) west of Beijing, residents say. Calls to the town and provincial public security bureaus rang unanswered.

Public buses were pulled off the streets, and few shops were open, according to a food seller living in Ziketan, surnamed Han. The public have been told to disinfect their homes and shops, he said.

"Yesterday afternoon there were police patrolling on the streets, advising the shops to close," said Han, who gave only his surname because of the sensitivity of the issue. "I took a stroll out of my shop earlier this morning and found that only around 20 shops are open in town. There are few people or vehicles on the streets."

China has had previous cases of plague, a disease that circulates mainly among small animals like rats and mice but can also infect humans. Experts have said most cases in China's northwest occur when hunters are contaminated while skinning infected animals.

Pneumonic plague is the least common and most deadly form of the disease. It can be directly spread between humans since the bacteria is airborne and can easily be inhaled by those in close contact with infected patients. But if treated early with antibiotics, it is curable.

The outbreak, first detected July 30, has killed three. There have been no reports of new infections and authorities continue to track close contacts of the sickened, the health bureau said.

The three were neighbors, and most of the other sickened people are relatives of the first victim, a 32-year-old herdsman who became ill after burying his dog, according to a spokesman with the provincial government surnamed Wang.

Worldwide, thousands of plague cases are reported each year, mostly in Africa. Between 1998 and 2008, nearly 24,000 cases were reported, including about 2,000 deaths, in Africa, Asia, the Americas and eastern Europe.

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