

More airlines halt China flights as virus toll hits 132

January 29 2020, by Sébastien Ricci



Global fears are mounting about the virus that has killed at least 132 people in China

Foreign airlines began suspending flights to and from China on Wednesday as global fears mounted over a coronavirus epidemic that has

killed 132 people and infected around 6,000.

The flight announcements came hours after some countries began airlifts of their nationals trapped in Wuhan, the quarantined central Chinese city of 11 million people at the epicentre of the health emergency.

Among the 206 Japanese nationals who returned home, 12 were hospitalised for tests and monitoring because they felt unwell or showed flu-like symptoms.

A growing number of governments—including the United States, Britain and Germany—have advised their citizens to avoid non-essential travel to China over concerns about the viral outbreak.

China has urged its own citizens to delay trips abroad, with at least 15 countries having confirmed cases of the disease.

The United Arab Emirates reported the first known case in the Middle East on Wednesday.

British Airways was the first major airline to announce a total suspension of flights to and from China, citing the travel advice of the foreign office.

"We apologise to customers for the inconvenience, but the safety of our customers and crew is always our priority," the airline said in a statement.

Indonesia's Lion Air Group, Southeast Asia's biggest carrier by fleet size, then said it would halt services to and from China from Saturday "until further notice".

Meanwhile Kazakhstan, an important China trade partner, stopped

issuing visas to Chinese citizens and said it would halt cross-border passenger train traffic and suspend regular flights between the neighbours.



Japanese nationals airlifted from the epicentre of China's deadly viral epidemic speak to reporters in Tokyo

Airlines from Myanmar and Nepal also announced suspensions of all China routes.

Cathay Pacific has reduced flights, citing low demand and the Hong Kong government's response plan against the virus.

In one of the most dramatic measures, the tiny Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea announced no travellers from Asia would be allowed in.

Mongolia closed its border to cars from China earlier this week.

Foreigners escape

China has taken extraordinary measures to try and stop the disease spreading, including bans on tour groups travelling overseas, suspending schools and extending the Lunar New Year holiday.

Authorities last week banned most street traffic in and around Wuhan in an unprecedented quarantine effort, leaving more than 50 million people shuttered in their homes.

"This is the first day since the lockdown that I've had to go out," a man in his 50s told AFP on the mostly deserted streets of the industrial city on Wednesday.

"I have no choice because I need to buy food."

Thousands of foreigners have been among those trapped in Wuhan, now a near ghost-town.

The spread of the coronavirus

Confirmed cases of 2019 nCoV as of January 29, 0300 GMT



Map showing countries and territories where cases of the China virus have been confirmed, as of January 29, 0300 GMT

Countries have scrambled for days to try and get their citizens out of Wuhan safely, but have faced huge logistical, medical and bureaucratic hurdles.

One US charter flight left Wuhan on Wednesday with 210 Americans on board—including consulate staff—according to US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

They will be screened and monitored before arriving at March Air Reserve Base in California, the CDC said, adding that they will be evaluated on landing and then monitored again for symptoms.

Some 250 French citizens and 100 other Europeans will be flown out of

Wuhan on board two French planes this week.

The Italian government said it would send an aircraft on Thursday. Up to 70 Italians are reportedly in Wuhan.

France said it would keep its returnees in a holding facility in Paris for 14 days—the estimated incubation period for the virus.

Australia plans to house any citizens evacuated on an island normally used to detain asylum seekers.

Highest priority

The number of confirmed cases across China climbed to 5,974, while the death toll nationwide jumped to 132.

The scale of the deepening crisis was emphasised with the total number of infections on the Chinese mainland exceeding that of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak of 2002-03.



The virus is believed to have originated in a wild-animal market in Wuhan, where it jumped to humans before spreading across China

But the death toll is so far much lower than SARS, which claimed nearly 800 lives around the world—with most fatalities in mainland China and Hong Kong.

The virus is believed to have originated in a wild-animal market in Wuhan, where it jumped to humans before spreading across the country as the peak travel period for Lunar New Year festivities got under way.

The World Health Organization said Tuesday it would urgently dispatch international experts to China "to guide global response efforts".

The US asked China on Tuesday to step up its cooperation with international health authorities over the epidemic.

Economic pain

The virus has rattled global markets and started to dent an already-slipping Chinese economy.

Japanese automaker Toyota said it would keep its plants in China closed until at least February 9.

Tech giant Foxconn said Wednesday that Taiwan staff at its vast network of factories in China do not need to return to work until mid-February, a move likely to impact global supply chains for tech companies that rely on the Taiwan company to manufacture everything from iPhones to flat-screen TVs and laptops.

The virus has also disrupted sporting events, with a women's football Olympic qualifier event moved from Wuhan to Australia.

Despite the precaution, the Chinese team was quarantined in a Brisbane hotel after arriving for the competition, according to Australian media.

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