China closes off large city to stop spread of deadly virus

January 23 2020, by Ken Moritsugu and Yanan Wang

Travelers wear face masks as they stand in the arrivals area at Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020. China closed off a city of more than 11 million people Thursday, halting transportation and warning against public gatherings, to try to stop the spread of a deadly new virus that has sickened hundreds and spread to other cities and countries in the Lunar New Year travel rush. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

China closed off a city of more than 11 million people Thursday in an unprecedented effort to try to contain a deadly new viral illness that has sickened hundreds and spread to other cities and countries in the Lunar New Year travel rush.

Normally bustling streets, shopping malls, restaurants and other public spaces in Wuhan were eerily quiet. Social media users posted that movie theaters were canceling showings and complained that food vendors were exploiting the situation with huge price increases on fresh produce.

Police, SWAT teams and paramilitary troops guarded the city's train station, where metal barriers blocked the entrances at 10 a.m. sharp. Only travelers holding tickets for the last trains were allowed to enter, with those booked for later trains being turned away. Virtually everyone at the scene was wearing masks, news website The Paper's live broadcast showed.

"To my knowledge, trying to contain a city of 11 million people is new to science," Gauden Galea, the World Health Organization's representative in China, told The Associated Press in an interview at the WHO's Beijing office. "It has not been tried before as a public health measure. We cannot at this stage say it will or it will not work."

Local authorities have demanded all residents wear masks in public places and urged government staff to wear them at work and for shopkeepers to post signs for their visitors, Xinhua news agency quoted a government notice as saying.

Travelers in face masks walk past a display board showing a canceled flight from Wuhan at Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020. China closed off a city of more than 11 million people Thursday, halting transportation and warning against public gatherings, to try to stop the spread of a deadly new virus that has sickened hundreds and spread to other cities and countries in the Lunar New Year travel rush. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

Train stations, the airport, subways, ferries and long-distance shuttle buses were stopped in the city, an industrial and transportation hub in central China's Hubei province. Xinhua cited the city's anti-virus task force as saying the measures were taken in an attempt to "effectively cut off the virus spread, resolutely curb the outbreak and guarantee the people's health and safety."

Cake Liu left Wuhan last Friday after visiting her boyfriend there. She said everything was normal then, before human-to-human transmission of the virus was confirmed. But things have changed rapidly.

"(My boyfriend) didn't sleep much yesterday. He disinfected his house and stocked up on instant noodles," Liu said. "He's not really going out. If he does he wears a mask."

The illnesses from a newly identified coronavirus first appeared last month in Wuhan, and the vast majority of mainland China's 571 cases have been in the city. Other cases have been reported in the Thailand, the United States, Japan and South Korea. One case was confirmed Thursday in Hong Kong after one was earlier confirmed in Macao. Most cases outside China were people from Wuhan or who had recently traveled there.

Dr. Gauden Galea, the World Health Organization (WHO) representative in China, speaks during an interview with The Associated Press at the WHO's offices in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020. Galea said that "trying to contain a city of 11 million people is new to science," as Wuhan canceled departing trains and flights amid a viral outbreak that the representative said could infect thousands. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

A total of 17 people have died, all of them in and around Wuhan. Their average age was 73, with the oldest 89 and the youngest 48.

The significant increase in illnesses reported just this week come as millions of Chinese travel for the Lunar New Year, one of the world's largest annual migrations of people. Analysts have predicted the reported cases will continue to multiply.

"Even if (the number of cases) are in the thousands, this would not surprise us," Galea said, adding, however, that the number of cases is not an indicator of the outbreak's severity, so long as the mortality rate remains low.

The coronavirus family includes the common cold as well as viruses that cause more serious illnesses, such as the SARS outbreak that spread from China to more than a dozen countries in 2002-2003 and killed about 800 people, and Middle Eastern respiratory syndrome, which developed from camels.

A display board shows a canceled flight arrival from Wuhan at Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020. China closed off a city of more than 11 million people Thursday, halting transportation and warning against public gatherings, to try to stop the spread of a deadly new virus that has sickened hundreds and spread to other cities and countries in the Lunar New Year travel rush. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

China is keen to avoid repeating mistakes with its handling of SARS. For months, even after the illness had spread around the world, China parked patients in hotels and drove them around in ambulances to conceal the true number of cases and avoid WHO experts.

In the current outbreak, China has been credited with sharing information rapidly, and President Xi Jinping has emphasized that as a

priority.

"Party committees, governments and relevant departments at all levels must put people's lives and health first," he said Monday. "It is necessary to release epidemic information in a timely manner and deepen international cooperation."

The first cases in the Wuhan outbreak were connected to people who worked at or visited a seafood market, which has since been closed for an investigation. Experts suspect the virus was first transmitted from wild animals but the virus also may be mutating. Mutations can make it deadlier or more contagious.

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A traveler wears a face mask beneath an information display showing a canceled flight from Wuhan at Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020. China closed off a city of more than 11 million people Thursday, halting transportation and warning against public gatherings, to try to stop the spread of a deadly new virus that has sickened hundreds and spread to other cities and countries in the Lunar New Year travel rush. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

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A traveler wearing a face mask walks into the arrivals area at Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020. China closed off a city of more than 11 million people Thursday, halting transportation and warning against public gatherings, to try to stop the spread of a deadly new virus that has sickened hundreds and spread to other cities and countries in the Lunar New Year travel rush. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

WHO plans another meeting of scientific experts Thursday on whether to declare the outbreak a global health emergency, which it defines as an "extraordinary event" that constitutes a risk to other countries and requires a coordinated international response.

Many countries are screening travelers from China for illness, especially those arriving from Wuhan. North Korea has banned foreign tourists, a

step it also took during the SARS outbreak and in recent years due to Ebola. Most foreigners going to North Korea are Chinese or travel there through neighboring China.

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