

Asia steps up checks as China virus kills six, infects more than 300

January 21 2020, by Helen Roxburgh and Laurent Thomet



The discovery of human-to-human transmission comes as hundreds of millions of people are criss-crossing China in packed trains, buses and planes this week to celebrate the Lunar New Year

Asian countries on Tuesday ramped up measures to block the spread of a

new virus as the death toll in China rose to six and the number of cases surpassed 300, raising concerns in the middle of a major holiday travel rush.

Nations across the Asia-Pacific region stepped up checks of passengers at airports to detect the SARS-like coronavirus, which first emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan.

Fears of a bigger outbreak rose after a prominent expert from China's National Health Commission confirmed late Monday that the virus can be passed between people.

Authorities previously said there was no obvious evidence of person-to-person transmission and animals were suspected to be the source, as a seafood market where live animals were sold in Wuhan was identified as the centre of the outbreak.

But the World Health Organization (WHO), which was concluding a fact-finding mission in Wuhan, was still being cautious, saying at a briefing in Geneva that "not enough is known to draw definitive conclusions about how it is transmitted".

Spokesman Tarik Jasarevic warned though that "more cases should be expected" both in China and in other countries.

Hundreds of millions of people are criss-crossing China this week in packed buses, trains and planes to celebrate the Lunar New Year with relatives.

More than 80 new cases have been confirmed, bringing the total number of people hit by the virus in China to 315, with the vast majority in Hubei, the province where Wuhan lies, according to the National Health Commission (NHC), as well as reports from regional health

commissions.

Virus: flights from Wuhan, China

More than 2,300 flights planned
from January 20-27

- Domestic flights (2,131)
- International (205)



Source: Flightradar24

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Destinations of planned flights from January 20-27 from Wuhan, where a mystery virus outbreak has killed three people and infected over 200.

Other cases have also been confirmed in cities around the country,

including Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing.

Regional governments have started to confirm cases as well, including Guangdong, Zhejiang and Henan provinces.

Meanwhile Wang Guangfa, one of the doctors on the NHC team investigating the epidemic, told Hong Kong TV station iCable News that he was receiving treatment after becoming infected.

The first case on the self-ruled island of Taiwan was also confirmed Tuesday, with a woman taken to hospital on arrival at the airport from Wuhan.

Wuhan mayor Zhou Xianwang told state broadcaster CCTV Tuesday that the death toll had risen from four to six.

China said it would attend a special WHO meeting Wednesday which will determine whether to declare a rare global public health emergency over the disease, which was also detected in Thailand, Japan and South Korea among four people who had visited Wuhan.

The coronavirus has caused alarm because of its genetic similarities to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which killed nearly 650 people across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-2003.



The SARS-like coronavirus first emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, where a seafood market has been identified as the centre of the outbreak

Fever checks

At four airports in Thailand, authorities introduced mandatory thermal scans of passengers arriving from high-risk areas of China. Anyone exhibiting signs of fever will be quarantined for 24 hours for monitoring.

Around 1,300 passengers are expected each day in Thailand from Wuhan over Chinese New Year, which starts on Friday.

In Hong Kong, where memories of SARS still haunt the city, authorities said they were on "extreme high alert", with passengers from Wuhan

required to fill out health declarations and face possible jail time if they do not declare symptoms.

Enhanced screening measures have also been set up at airports in Australia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Singapore and the United States. Malaysia and Vietnam have also installed thermal scanners at airports.

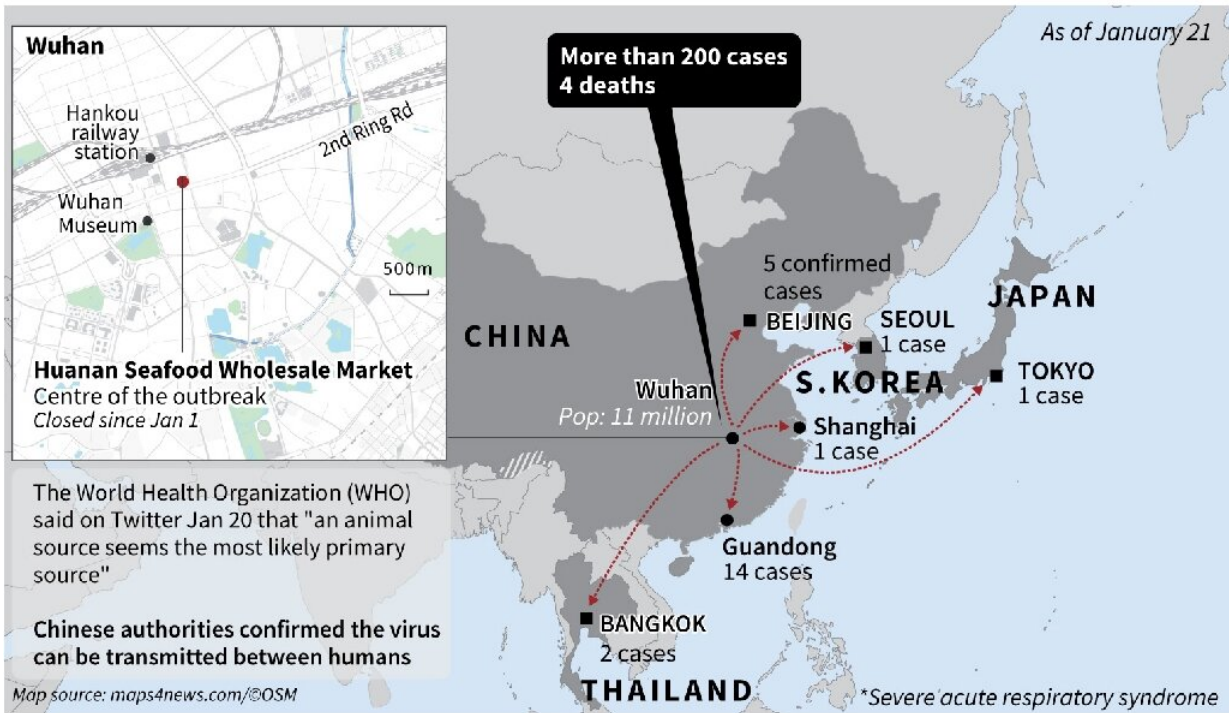
A man showing symptoms of the disease who had travelled to Wuhan has been put in isolation in Australia as health officials await test results, authorities said Tuesday.

In China, the government announced it was classifying the outbreak in the same category as SARS, meaning compulsory isolation for those diagnosed with the disease and the potential to implement quarantine measures on travel.

In Wuhan, authorities banned tour groups and police were conducting spot checks for live poultry or wild animals in vehicles leaving and entering the city, state media said.

China SARS-like virus

Novel SARS*-like coronavirus confirmed in four countries



Regional map including China, Japan, Thailand, South Korea, and Wuhan Seafood Market, identified as the centre of a pneumonia outbreak that has sickened dozens and killed four.

It added that city health authorities had scheduled 800 beds to be made available in three hospitals and 1,200 more would soon be ready.

Passengers were being screened for fever at the airport, railway stations and bus terminals. Those with fevers would be registered, handed masks and advised to see a doctor.

Chinese train and plane authorities said travellers with tickets to Wuhan could get refunds.

WHO meeting

Zhong Nanshan, a renowned scientist at the National Health Commission, raised the alarm when he said on Monday that patients can contract the virus without having visited Wuhan, though he added that it was milder than SARS.

Doctors at the University of Hong Kong released a study on Tuesday estimating that there have been 1,343 cases of the new virus in Wuhan. Scientists at Imperial College in London said last week the number was likely closer to 1,700.

The WHO has only called a global public health emergency a handful of times, including during the H1N1—or swine flu—pandemic of 2009 and the Ebola epidemic that devastated parts of West Africa from 2014 to 2016.

China was accused of covering up the SARS outbreak in 2003 but some foreign experts have praised the swift release of information on this new virus.

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