

China counts 170 virus deaths, new countries find infections

January 30 2020, by Ken Moritsugu



People line up to buy face masks from a medical supply company in Nanning in southern China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. Countries began evacuating their citizens Wednesday from the Chinese city hardest-hit by a new virus that has now infected more people in China than were sickened in the country by SARS. (Chinatopix via AP)

China on Thursday raised the death toll to 170 and more countries reported infections from a new virus, including some spread locally, as foreign evacuees from China's worst-hit region returned home to medical tests and even isolation.

India and the Philippines reported their first cases, a traveler and a student who had both been in Wuhan, the central Chinese city where the first illnesses appeared in December. South Korea confirmed a case that was locally spread, a man who had contact with a patient diagnosed the new type of coronavirus earlier.

In Geneva, the World Health Organization convened its coronavirus expert committee to assess whether the outbreak warrants being declared a global emergency. The committee last week had advised the U.N. health agency it was too early to make that pronouncement.

Locally spread cases outside China are a worrying concern as potential signs of the virus spreading more easily and the difficulty of containing it.

The new virus has now infected more people in China than were sickened there during the 2002-2003 outbreak of SARS, another type of coronavirus.

The latest figures for mainland China show an increase of 38 deaths and 1,737 cases for a total of 7,711 confirmed cases. Of the new deaths, 37 were in Hubei province, of which Wuhan is the capital, and one was in the southwestern province of Sichuan.



A station attendant wearing a mask stands on a platform as a subway train departs from Ginza Station in Tokyo Thursday, Jan. 30, 2020. The country began evacuating Japanese citizens on Wednesday from the Chinese city Wuhan hardest-hit by the virus. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

India's health ministry said a student who had been studying in Wuhan was confirmed to have the virus after returning home to Kerala state during the Lunar New Year break. Philippine health officials say a woman who traveled there from Wuhan via Hong Kong tested positive.

A second Japanese flight carrying 210 evacuees landed in Tokyo. Reports said nine of those aboard the flight showed signs of cough and fever. Three of Japan's confirmed cases were among a group of evacuees who had returned on a government-chartered flight the previous day.

A flight arranged between the European Union and China departed Portugal en route to China to bring back 350 Europeans. The U.S. said additional flights were being planned for around Monday, after it evacuated 195 Americans from Wuhan on Wednesday. They are being tested and monitored at a Southern California military base.

South Korea, Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Singapore and other countries are also trying to get out their citizens. Taiwan, the self-governing republic China considers its own territory, has also asked to be able to repatriate its passport holders from Wuhan, but it was awaiting approval from Beijing.



Maria van Kerkhove, Head of the Outbreak Investigation Task Force for World Health Organization (WHO), speaks to the media about the Situation regarding the new Coronavirus, during a press conference at the European headquarters of

the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. Efforts to contain a new and deadly virus have intensified Wednesday, as quarantine facilities are set up, many airlines have suspended or significantly cut back flights from China and efforts continue to find a medical remedy. (Martial Trezzini/Keystone via AP)

Israel's El Al , Spain's Iberia, Scandinavian Airlines, Egypt Air and Korean Air joined the growing list of airlines suspending or reducing service to China.

In South Korea, residents in two cities where quarantine facilities are being prepared threw eggs and water bottles at government officials to protest plans to isolate in their neighborhoods 700 South Koreans the government plans to evacuate from China.

Amid reports of shortages in food and daily necessities in hot-spot areas, Chinese authorities are "stepping up efforts to ensure continuous supply and stable prices," the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

It cited Ministry of Commerce data showing current reserves in Wuhan can ensure a secure supply of rice and cooking oil for more than 15 days, pork and eggs for more than 10 days and vegetables for about five days.



Passengers board buses after arriving on an airplane carrying U.S. citizens being evacuated from Wuhan, China, at March Air Reserve Base in Riverside, Calif. Jan. 29, 2020. The passengers will undergo additional screenings in California and be placed in temporary housing. Officials have not said how long they will stay there. (AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu)

China's highly developed online shopping and home delivery businesses were important in ensuring those confined to home by choice or by order could get food and other essentials.

"I'd just like to ask that folks don't order anything other than the daily necessities," Hou Yanbo, deputy director of market supervision from the National Post Administration, told reporters at a daily briefing.

China extended its Lunar New Year holiday to Sunday to try to keep people home, but the wave of returning travelers could potentially cause the virus to spread further.

Transport ministry spokesman Wu Chungeng outlined a series of rigorous temperature checks and other "severe measures" to detect possibly infectious passengers. Transport restrictions such as those isolating Wuhan and suspending inter-provincial bus services would remain in place, Wu said.



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"It's definitely very challenging, but we're confident we can exert effective control," Wu told reporters at the briefing.

School openings in Hong Kong, Beijing and other regions have been extended by at least two weeks.

The WHO emergencies chief, Michael Ryan, spoke in Geneva after returning from Beijing. He said China was taking "extraordinary measures in the face of an extraordinary challenge" posed by the outbreak.

To date, about 99% of the cases are in China. Ryan estimated the death rate of the new virus at 2%, but said the figure was very preliminary. With fluctuating numbers of cases and deaths, scientists are only able to produce a rough estimate of the fatality rate and it's likely many milder cases of the virus are being missed.

In comparison, the SARS virus killed about 10% of people who caught it. The new virus is from the coronavirus family, which includes those that can cause the common cold as well as more serious illnesses such as SARS and MERS.



A government chartered plane, carrying Japanese evacuees from Wuhan, China, prepares to land at Haneda international airport in Tokyo Thursday, Jan. 30, 2020. A group of 210 Japanese evacuees returned home on the second government chartered flight. Reports said nine of those aboard the flight showed signs of cough and fever. (Kyodo News via AP)

Scientists say there are many questions to be answered about the new virus, including just how easily it spreads and how severe it is.

Chinese authorities have demanded anyone who traveled from or through Wuhan report to health authorities and self-quarantine themselves for 14 days, the maximum incubation period during which patients can be infectious even if they don't show symptoms.

China has been largely praised for a swift and effective response to the outbreak, although questions have been raised about the police suppression of what were early on considered mere rumors—a reflection of the one-party Communist state's determination to maintain a monopoly on information in spite of smart phones and social media.

That stands in stark contrast to the initial response to SARS, when medical reports were hidden as state secrets. The delayed response was blamed for allowing the disease to spread worldwide, killing around 800 people.



A girl wears a face mask as she play on a swing near the Yingwuzhou Yangtze River Bridge in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. Countries began evacuating their citizens Wednesday from the Chinese city hardest-hit by a new virus that has now infected more people in China than were sickened in the country by SARS. (AP Photo/Arek Rataj)



A woman holds a box of face mask as people queue up waiting to purchase face masks outside a shop in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. A viral outbreak that began in China has infected more than 6,000 people in the mainland and more than a dozen other countries. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)



People leave after buying face masks at a pharmacy in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. Countries began evacuating their citizens Wednesday from the Chinese city hardest-hit by an outbreak of a new virus that has killed 132 people and infected more than 6,000 on the mainland and abroad. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

This time, in addition to working with WHO, China's health minister Ma Xiaowei has been in touch with foreign colleagues, including U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar.

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