

Italy declares state of emergency over coronavirus

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The Italian government declared a state of emergency on Friday to fast-track efforts to prevent the spread of the deadly coronavirus strain after two cases were confirmed in Rome.

Italy had said Thursday it was stopping all flights to and from China following the news that a Chinese couple visiting Italy from Wuhan had tested positive for the virus.

The husband and wife were being treated in isolation in Rome's Spallanzani infectious diseases institute.

The state of emergency, a fairly common procedure after natural disasters like earthquakes or floods, gives regional authorities special powers and cuts red tape. It will last six months, the government said.

An initial five million euros (\$5.3 million) has been allocated to tackle the virus, according to Italian media.

The Chinese couple, a 65-year-old woman and her 66-year-old husband, reportedly arrived in Milan and then travelled to Rome, where they started showing symptoms on Wednesday.

Police sealed off the room where the couple had been staying at a hotel in the centre of the capital.

"The patients are doing well, they're young and it's as if they have the flu," said Giuseppe Ippolito of Spallanzani hospital.

"They will remain in isolation for a few days," he told Italian radio.

"We're almost certain there are no other infections," he said, adding that the virus "isn't contagious during incubation".

Twenty people who had come into contact with the couple, but showed no symptoms, were being held for observation.

Another 12 people from areas of China affected by the virus had been admitted to the hospital and were undergoing tests.

Italy's civil aviation authority said all flights in the air before the suspension was declared were permitted to land, and passengers' temperatures checked.

The planes were also permitted to take off again with passengers who

had been scheduled for the return leg.

The SARS-like virus epidemic which originated in the central Chinese city of Wuhan has so far killed 213 people and spread to at least 18 countries.

The World Health Organization on Thursday declared it an international public health emergency.

Some 70 Italians still in Wuhan will likely be flown back on Monday, Italian media reported, before spending two weeks in quarantine.

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