

# Virus cases in China top SARS as evacuations begin

January 29 2020, by Ken Moritsugu

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A Japanese chartered plane carrying evacuees from Wuhan, China, landed at Haneda international airport in Tokyo Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020, in Tokyo. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

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.

The number of confirmed cases jumped to 5,974, surpassing the 5,327 in mainland China during the SARS outbreak in 2002-2003.

The death toll rose to 132, which is still lower than the 348 people who were killed in China by SARS, or [severe acute respiratory syndrome](#). Scientists say there are still many questions to be answered about the [new virus](#), including just how transmissible and severe it is.

Chartered planes carrying about 200 evacuees each arrived in Japan and the United States early Wednesday as other countries planned similar evacuations from the city of Wuhan, which authorities have shut down to try to contain the virus.

The first cases in the Middle East were confirmed Wednesday, a family of four from Wuhan that was visiting the United Arab Emirates. Airlines around the world announced they were cutting flights to China, and Hong Kong was suspending rail travel to and from the mainland at midnight.

The number of cases in China rose 1,459 from the previous day, a smaller increase than the 1,771 new cases reported Tuesday. Australia and Singapore were among those reporting new cases, as the number outside China topped 70. The vast majority are people who came from Wuhan.



A Japanese chartered plane carrying evacuees from Wuhan, China, landed at Haneda international airport in Tokyo Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. Countries on Wednesday began evacuating their citizens from the Chinese city hardest-hit by an outbreak of a new virus. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

Four passengers on the evacuation flight to Japan had coughs and fevers, and two were diagnosed with pneumonia.

It wasn't clear whether they were infected with the new virus, which first appeared in Wuhan in December. Its symptoms, including cough and fever and in severe cases pneumonia, are similar to many other illnesses.

Takeo Aoyama, an employee at Nippon Steel Corp.'s subsidiary in Wuhan, told reporters he was relieved to be able to return home.

"We were feeling increasingly uneasy as the situation developed so rapidly and we were still in the city," Aoyama said, his voice muffled by a white surgical mask.

The U.S. plane was headed to California after a refueling stop in Alaska. All 201 passengers, who included diplomats from the U.S. Consulate in Wuhan, passed health screenings in China and Anchorage.



In this Thursday, Jan. 23, 2020, file photo, Chinese paramilitary police wear face masks as they stand guard at Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing. British Airways and Asian budget carriers Lion Air and Seoul Air are suspending all flights to China as fears spread about the outbreak of a new virus that has killed more than 130 people. British Airways said Wednesday it is immediately suspending all flights to and from mainland China after the U.K. government warned against unnecessary travel to the country. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein,

File)

Australia, New Zealand and Britain were among the latest countries to announce they are planning evacuations.

British Airways said it was suspending all flights to and from mainland China after the U.K. government warned against unnecessary travel to the country. The airline has daily flights from London to Shanghai and Beijing.

British health secretary Matt Hancock tweeted that "anyone who returns from Wuhan will be safely isolated for 14 days, with all necessary medical attention." The measures are a step up from those during the devastating 2014-16 Ebola outbreak, when returning travelers from West Africa were asked to monitor themselves for symptoms.

Mark Woolhouse, a professor of infectious disease epidemiology at the University of Edinburgh, said the steps are justified to prevent the introduction of the virus and its spread.



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)

"There's always a balance between the draconian measures of public health and what people might want to do, and obviously it's regrettable if people who turn out not to have the virus are quarantined unnecessarily," he said.

The outbreak has affected international sporting events. The International Hockey Federation postponed Pro League games in China, and soccer, basketball and boxing qualifiers for the Tokyo Olympics in

February have been moved outside of the country.

In Australia, health officials said the Chinese women's national soccer team was quarantined in the city of Brisbane because it had passed through Wuhan a week ago.

The team will be kept in isolation in a hotel until Jan. 5. None of the 32 players and staff has shown symptoms.

In China's Hubei province, 17 cities including Wuhan have been locked down, trapping more than 50 million people in the most far-reaching disease control measures ever imposed.



A saleswoman takes out face masks from a box 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)

Sara Platto, an Italian animal behavior researcher and veterinarian, said there were 25 Italians stuck in Wuhan, who stay in touch online for material and emotional support.

"My son turned 12 on January 23, the first day of the lockdown in Wuhan. So he couldn't invite his friends over. We had a remote birthday celebration, with people 'visiting' him over WeChat," Platto said, referring to a Chinese messaging app. "We called it the epidemic birthday."

As much as panic, people spending most of their times indoors have to deal with boredom.

Her son Matteo usually has a very busy agenda between his school, sports, and volunteer work, but now "it's like suddenly everything has slowed down," Platto said. As with other international schools, classes are moving online until the all-clear is sounded.





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)

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. As of December, MERS had sickened nearly 2,500 people since its identification in 2012.

The source of the new virus and the full extent of its spread are still unknown. However, the World Health Organization said most cases reported to date "have been milder, with around 20% of those infected experiencing severe illness."

Scientists expect many crucial questions about the virus' behavior will be answered in the coming weeks as the outbreak evolves and it becomes clearer how people are infected.

Although the Chinese health minister and others have suggested that the virus is spreading before people get symptoms, data to confirm that has not yet been shared widely beyond China.



Chinese tourists wearing face masks visit famed Nara Park in Nara, western Japan, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. Japan's health officials on Tuesday said that it has confirmed what could be the first human-to-human infection in the country. The first suspected person-to-person infection involves a male patient in his 60s from Nara, who has not traveled to Wuhan. The man, however, is a tour bus driver who served two groups of Chinese tourists from Wuhan from Jan. 8-16. (Nobuki Ito/Kyodo News via AP)



Visitors and exhibitors wear masks at the Arab Health Exhibition in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. The United Arab Emirates on Wednesday confirmed the first cases in the Mideast of the new Chinese virus that causes flu-like symptoms, saying doctors now were treating a family that had just come from a city at the epicenter of the outbreak. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili)



In this Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2020, photo, construction workers labor at the site of the Huoshenshan temporary field hospital being built in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province. China as of Wednesday has more infections of a new virus than it did in with SARS, though the death toll is still lower. (Chinatopix via AP)



A woman wears a face mask as she walks along a street in Beijing, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. China as of Wednesday has more infections of a new virus than it did in with SARS, though the death toll is still lower. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



In this Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2020, photo, construction workers labor at the site of the Huoshenshan temporary field hospital being built in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province. China as of Wednesday has more infections of a new virus than it did in with SARS, though the death toll is still lower. (Chinatopix via AP)



A view of British Airways planes parked at London's Heathrow Airport, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. British Airways and Asian budget carriers Lion Air and Seoul Air have joined a growing list of airlines that are suspending flights to China as fears spread about the outbreak of a new virus that has killed more than 130 people. (Steve Parsons/PA via AP)



In this Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2020, photo, construction workers labor at the site of the Huoshenshan temporary field hospital being built in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province. China as of Wednesday has more infections of a new virus than it did in with SARS, though the death toll is still lower. (Chinatopix via AP)





A man sells face masks on the sidewalk outside of a subway station in Beijing, Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020. China as of Wednesday has more infections of a new virus than it did in with SARS, though the death toll is still lower. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

"It's still unclear whether that takes place," said Malik Peiris, chair in virology at the University of Hong Kong.

If it does, that might explain why China has already exceeded the case numbers for SARS.

"The fortunate thing about SARS, if there was anything fortunate, was that transmission did not take place before symptoms," he said. Peiris said that if it turns out that the new coronavirus can indeed be spread by

people who don't show any symptoms, "a pandemic is a scenario that we have to consider."

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