

There's still a 'fighting chance' to contain coronavirus but time is running out, world health leader says

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The head of the World Health Organization, alarmed by the recent spread of the coronavirus from Iran, warned Friday that while the chance to contain the virus globally still exists, "the window of opportunity is

narrowing."

"We still have a chance to contain it, but we have to prepare for other eventualities," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the WHO. "This could go in many directions, it could be even messy. It is in our hands now ... we can reverse or avert serious crisis. If we don't, if we squander this opportunity, then there could be a serious problem on our hands."

Among other measures, Tedros called for financial aid to help countries fighting the [virus](#) to buy critical medical equipment and to strengthen their [health systems](#).

The world community, he said, has a "fighting chance" to contain the spread of the virus, but we "must not look back and regret that we failed to take advantage of the window of opportunity that we have now."

Tedros, speaking to reporters in Geneva, said the fresh Iran cases show how the virus, which originated in China, is now moving not only to second countries, but to third countries in a lengthening chain of transmission.

"The cases that we see in the rest of the world, although the numbers are small, but not linked to Wuhan or China, it's very worrisome," Tedros said. "These dots are actually very concerning."

There have been 76,787 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 2,248 deaths worldwide, the vast majority of cases in mainland China. More than 1,000 cases and 14 deaths have been confirmed elsewhere, from Japan to France.

2 more coronavirus deaths in Iran

Iranian health authorities on Friday reported two more deaths from the coronavirus, bringing the total number of fatalities to four from 18 reported cases.

The semiofficial Mehr news agency quoted the spokesman of the health ministry, Kianoush Jahanpour, said the newly detected cases are all linked with city of Qom where the first two elderly patients died on Wednesday.

Minoo Mohraz, an Iranian health ministry official, said the virus "possibly came from Chinese workers who work in Qom and traveled to China." She did not elaborate. A Chinese company has been building a solar power plant in Qom.

At the same time, Lebanon announced its first confirmed coronavirus case in the country from an individual who had apparently picked up the virus during a visit to Qom, according to Lebanese Health Minister Hammad Hassan said during a news conference Friday.

In Canada, a woman in her 30s was diagnosed with a mild case of the virus after a trip to Iran, prompting authorities to notify those who traveled with her on the same aircraft, according to [health officials](#) in British Columbia.

And in Italy, two more residents have tested positive for coronavirus in the Lombardy region, in the wake of the first reported case of local transmission of the virus in the country, Reuters reported. The wife and a close friend of the initial patient, who had recently returned from China, were confirmed as having contracted the virus and were placed in quarantine.

China's leaders say nation yet to turn corner in virus

fight

As China once again shifts its methodology for counting coronavirus cases, China's top leadership on Friday cautioned that the country had not yet turned the corner on halting the spread of the virus that has killed more than 2,200 people.

"We should clearly see that the turning point of the development of the epidemic across the country hasn't arrived yet," the Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee said at a meeting led by President Xi Jinping and reported by state broadcaster CCTV.

The 25-member Politburo, made up of the senior officials of the ruling Communist Party, said the situation in Hubei province and its capital, Wuhan, where the outbreak erupted in December, remains grave.

The latest warning followed several days of official reports indicating a downward trend in newly reported cases. The data, however, has been muddled by another change in how the country's health authorities count cases.

China last week began recording cases without waiting for lab results, which caused a big spike in cases. On Thursday, health officials returned to counting only lab-confirmed positive cases, discounting some cases where lab tests came back negative.

The National Health Commission earlier reported almost 900 newly confirmed cases in the previous 24 hours, with the death toll rising by 118.

The 25-member body said the outbreak has been "preliminarily contained" and urged party committees and governments at all levels to carry out prevention and control work without any relaxation to "win the

people's war against the epidemic."

In the latest cause for alarm, officials in Hubei Province, the epicenter of the outbreak since December, more than 500 cases were diagnosed in prisons, Justice Ministry official He Ping told reporters at a daily briefing.

Seoul bans rallies, curbs church meetings over virus scare

The Seoul city government on Friday said it will ban rallies at three major public squares in the city center and close down churches operated by the Shincheonji religious movement in a bid to thwart any spread of the coronavirus in South Korea.

Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon said the aim was "to protect the elderly who are susceptible to contagious diseases," according to the Yonhap news agency. Violators could be fined up to the equivalent of \$2,500.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun, declaring the country in an "emergency phase," said in a televised statement the central government will concentrate its support to the southeastern region to ease a shortage in sickbeds, medical personnel and equipment.

South Korea, which has reported 204 cases, recorded its second virus-related death Friday. Many of the cases have been clustered around Daegu, a southeastern city, raising fears that the outbreak is getting out of control.

Most of the new cases there are linked to the Shincheonji church, which claims about 200,000 followers in South Korea. It said it has closed all of its 74 sanctuaries around the nation and told followers to instead

watch its worship services on YouTube.

Villagers in Ukraine block roads in virus protest

Some residents in Ukraine's Poltava region blocked roads, burned tires and threw stones at buses because of the state's plan to house more than 70 evacuees from China in a sanatorium in the village of Novi Sanzhary, according to local media reports. The 45 Ukrainians and 27 foreign evacuees had been airlifted from Wuhan.

Nine [police officers](#) and one civilian were hospitalized as a result of Thursday's turmoil, and 24 protesters were detained.

In a bid to reassure local residents, Ukrainian Health Minister Zoryana Skaletska voluntarily joined the evacuees for their 14-day quarantine.

The incident coincided with the circulation of a phony email that Ukrainian intelligence officials said originated outside the country, the Washington Post reported. The fraudulent missive claimed there were five cases of coronavirus in the county, although only two Ukrainians, who had been in a cruise ship, have been infected and both recovered while in quarantine.

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