China stutters back to work as virus deaths rise

February 10 2020, by Helen Roxburgh, Jing Xuan Teng

A medical worker wearing protective clothing monitors rail passengers arriving in Shanghai

Millions of people in China returned to work Monday after an extended holiday aimed at slowing the spread of a coronavirus, with the extra

travel deepening contagion concerns as the death toll climbed above 900.

At least 40,000 have been infected by a new pathogen believed to have emerged late last year at a market in the central city of Wuhan.

And although the World Health Organization (WHO) has said there are signs the epidemic is stabilising, the agency's chief warned Monday there could be more infections abroad in people who have never travelled to China.

The comments from Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus came as a team of WHO experts departed for China, led by Bruce Aylward, a veteran of previous health emergencies.

In an attempt to contain the virus, cities in Hubei province at the epicentre of the outbreak have been locked down and many transport links countrywide have been cut to stop the movement of hundreds of millions of people who usually visit family during the annual Lunar New Year break.

The holiday was officially extended by only three days but many cities and provinces pushed the date to February 10.

The unprecedented measures have turned cities into ghost towns as people stay inside.
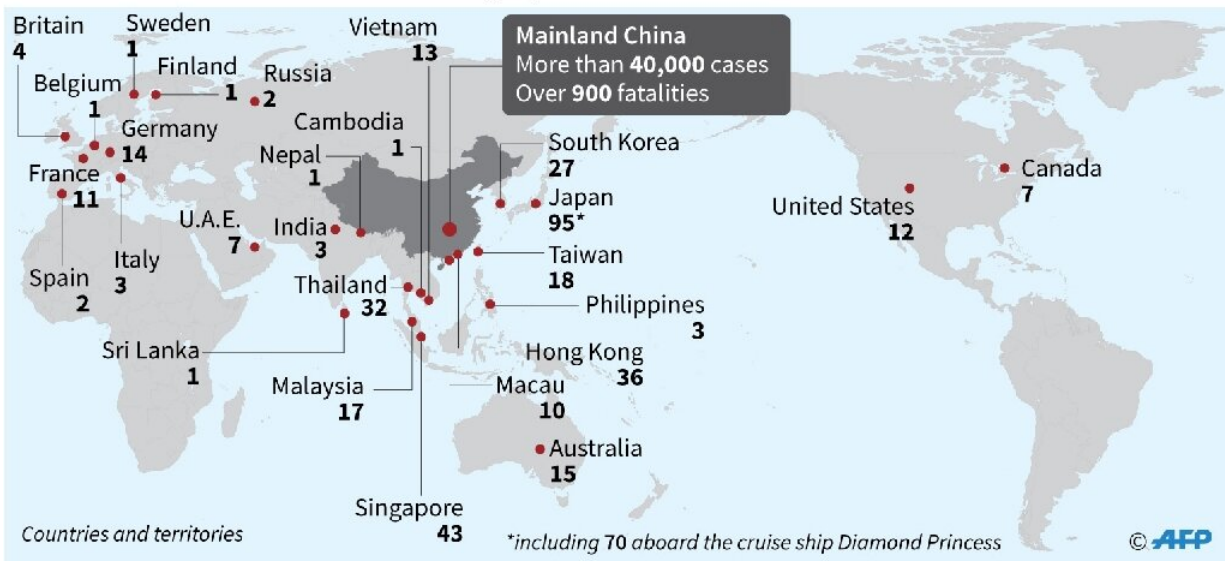
But there were some signs of normality Monday.

Roads in Beijing and Shanghai had significantly more traffic and the southern city of Guangzhou said it would start to resume normal public transport.

However, for those at work, it was not an easy balance to strike.

The spread of the coronavirus

Confirmed cases of 2019-nCoV as of February 10, at 02:00 GMT

Britain
4

Sweden
1

Belgium
1

Finland
1

Germany
14

France
11

U.A.E.
7

Spain
2

Italy
3

Sri Lanka
1

Russia
2

Vietnam
13

Cambodia
1

Nepal
1

India
3

Thailand
32

Malaysia
17

Mainland China
More than **40,000** cases
Over **900** fatalities

South Korea
27

Japan
95*

Taiwan
18

Philippines
3

Hong Kong
36

Macau
10

Australia
15

Singapore
43

United States
12

Canada
7

Countries and territories

*including **70** aboard the cruise ship Diamond Princess

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Countries or territories with confirmed cases of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus as of Feb 10, 0200 GMT.

"Of course we're worried," said a 25-year-old man surnamed Li in a Beijing beauty salon that reopened Monday.

"When customers come in, we first take their temperature, then use disinfectant and ask them to wash their hands."

Ma Cunmei, a Beijing estate agent, told AFP she wanted to be ready for work because she believed many workers would have leases about to expire after being out of the city so long on the extended break.

Work, interrupted

Tens of millions of people in Hubei did not return to work Monday as the province remained under lockdown.

Even outside the quarantine region, many companies were limiting staff.

The Shanghai government suggested staggered work schedules, avoiding group meals and keeping at least one metre away from colleagues.

Many were encouraged to work from home and some employers simply delayed work for another week.

State media reported that passenger numbers on the Beijing subway were down by about 50 percent Monday compared to a normal work day.

Large shopping malls in the capital were deserted and many banks remained closed.

The death toll from the novel coronavirus has overtaken global fatalities in the 2002-03 SARS epidemic

One bank employee in Shanghai was heading to work for a half-day, with other workers due to take over in the afternoon.

The rest of the day he would work from home.

"It makes our work more difficult because we need to access the systems in our office," he told AFP.

Schools and universities across the country remained shut.

Difficult journeys

Those returning to work faced fresh travel difficulties.

The eastern city of Wuxi said anyone trying to enter the city from provinces with high numbers of cases would be "persuaded to go back", while Suzhou near the financial hub of Shanghai suspended all passenger transport to surrounding counties.

"I just checked and it would take 18 hours for me to go to work by bicycle," wrote one frustrated commuter on China's Twitter-like social media site Weibo.

On Saturday travel authorities said there had been 11 million journeys by train, road or plane—84 percent down on the same day last year.

The tourism industry remains in the doldrums, with several countries banning arrivals from China, major airlines suspending flights and international and domestic tour groups halted.

The Chinese foreign ministry said 27 foreigners had been infected in the country.

Experts have warned of the risk of a bump in infection cases when people return to work

'Tip of the iceberg'

The death toll has overtaken global fatalities in the 2002-03 SARS epidemic when China drew international condemnation for covering up cases.

The WHO has this time praised the measures Beijing has taken while warning that infection figures could still "shoot up".

WHO chief Tedros said there had been some "concerning instances" of cases overseas in people with no travel history to China.

"We may only be seeing the tip of the iceberg," he tweeted.

Meanwhile in Hong Kong, thousands of people stranded aboard the World Dream cruise ship for five days were allowed to disembark Sunday after its 1,800 crew tested negative for the coronavirus.

But as many as 130 people were infected on board the quarantined Diamond Princess moored off Japan, according to Japanese broadcaster NHK.

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