

New China virus cases drop for third day as toll passes 1,600

February 16 2020, by Helen Roxburgh and Beiyi Seow



Chinese authorities have taken drastic measures, including lockdowns, to try and stop the spread of the new coronavirus

The number of new cases from China's coronavirus epidemic dropped for a third consecutive day on Sunday, as the World Health Organisation

chief warned it was "impossible" to predict how the outbreak would develop.

Global concern remains high about the spread of the virus, which first emerged in China's central Hubei province in December, with the first death outside Asia reported in France this weekend.

The death toll jumped to 1,665 in mainland China on Sunday after 142 more people died from the virus. More than 68,000 people have now been infected—but the number of new cases of the COVID-19 strain continued to decline.

In hardest-hit Hubei, the number of new cases slowed for a third consecutive day and at 139, the number of deaths was level with Saturday's toll.

The number of new cases in other parts of the country has dropped for twelve straight days.

Mi Feng, National Health Commission spokesman, said Sunday that the figures were a sign that China was controlling the outbreak.

"The effects of epidemic prevention and control in various parts of the country can already be seen," he told reporters.

But the WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has warned that it was "impossible to predict which direction this epidemic will take".

"We ask all governments, companies, and news organisations to work with us to sound the appropriate level of alarm without fanning the flames of hysteria," he said, speaking at the Munich Security Conference.



The WHO chief has said it is 'impossible' to predict the direction of the outbreak

The UN health body has asked China for more details on how diagnoses are being made.

An international team of WHO experts will arrive in Beijing this weekend for a joint mission with Chinese counterparts.

Quarantined cruise ship

The scale of the epidemic ballooned on Thursday after authorities in Hubei changed their criteria for counting cases, retroactively adding

14,000 cases in a single day.

Chinese authorities have placed some 56 million people in Hubei and its capital Wuhan under quarantine, virtually sealing off the province from the rest of the country in an unprecedented effort to contain the virus.

Even as China insisted the epidemic was under control, Hubei authorities announced Sunday a tightening of movement across the province.

This includes broad instructions that residential compounds and villages are "sealed off" from unnecessary visitors, with tenants' outings "strictly managed", as well as recommending bulk purchases of daily necessities.

All non-essential public spaces will also be closed, and residential areas and workplaces with confirmed cases should implement a 14-day quarantine.

Local authorities elsewhere in China have also introduced measures to try and stop the virus spreading.



The biggest cluster of infections outside China is on a quarantined cruise ship off Japan

Beijing's municipal government has enacted a rule requiring people coming to the capital to self-quarantine for 14 days, according to official media.

Outside mainland China, an 80-year-old Chinese tourist in France was the fourth person to die from the new coronavirus, with the other deaths in the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Japan.

The biggest cluster outside China is on a quarantined cruise ship off Japan, with 355 infections confirmed.

The US, Canada, and Hong Kong said they will evacuate their citizens from the ship, and quarantine them on home soil.

Several countries have banned arrivals from China and major airlines have cut services to the country.

Malaysia said Sunday it would not allow any cruise ships departing or transiting Chinese ports to enter the country, following the discovery of a US citizen with the coronavirus.

Social stability

The virus spread last month as millions travelled across China for the Lunar New Year holiday, which was extended to try and prevent more infections.

People have slowly started to return to work in the past two weeks, though many are doing their jobs from home and schools remain closed.



People in China have slowly started to return to work after the coronavirus outbreak forced an extension of the Lunar New Year holidays

With the government facing criticism over its handling of the crisis, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for tighter policing to protect social stability.

The government must "increase use of police force and strengthen the visible use of police" during the crisis, Xi said in a February 3 speech published by state media on Saturday.

A number of local officials have been sacked for their role in mishandling the outbreak—including Hubei's top two health officials, and the political chiefs of the province and Wuhan who were replaced

with Xi loyalists.

On Sunday, a host of new reprimands were made against officials in the virus-hit region, including one who "cut corners and worked around the centralised quarantine order," according to Hubei authorities.

"When a crisis like this happens it becomes politically important—it's about China's international image, it's about the Party's legitimacy," said Zhou Xun, a historian of modern China at the University of Essex.

"But in general the post-Mao government did very little to really build up its health system, so the Chinese health system is very weak, it's overloaded, inefficient, expensive and chaotic," she said.

"That's one of the things (that) made the current crisis even worse."

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