

China's virus center vows no patient unchecked as cases fall

February 19 2020, by Yanan Wang



In this Tuesday, Feb. 18, 2020, photo, shoppers look at antiseptic gel on sale at the 7Fresh supermarket in Beijing. Stores that offer online purchases are enjoying brisk sales as residents avoid going out during the current viral outbreak with authorities last week requiring people returning to the capital to self-quarantine at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation.(AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Protective suit-clad inspectors in the epicenter of China's viral outbreak went door-to-door Wednesday to find every infected person in the central city suffering most from an epidemic that is showing signs of waning as new cases fell for a second day.

Wuhan, where the new form of coronavirus emerged, is on the final day of a campaign to root out anyone with symptoms whom authorities may have missed so far.

"This must be taken seriously," said Wang Zhonglin, the city's newly minted Communist Party secretary. "If a single new case is found (after Wednesday), the district leaders will be held responsible."

His remarks were published on Hubei's provincial website, alongside the declaration, "If the masses cannot mobilize, it's impossible to fight a people's war."

Mainland China reported Wednesday 1,749 new cases and 136 additional deaths. While the overall spread of the COVID-19 illness has been slowing, the situation remains severe in Hubei province, which has Wuhan as its capital. Infections in Hubei constitute more than 80% of the country's 74,185 total cases and 95% of its 2,004 deaths, according to data from China's National Health Commission.

Cities in Hubei with a combined population of more than 60 million have been under lockdown since the Lunar New Year holiday last month, usually the busiest time of the year for travel. Authorities put a halt to nearly all transportation and movement except for quarantine efforts, medical care and delivery of food and basic necessities.

"Wartime" measures were implemented in some places where residents were prevented from leaving their apartments altogether.



In this Tuesday, Feb. 18, 2020, photo, a staff at the 7Fresh supermarket disinfects the shopping trolleys in Beijing. Stores that offer online purchases are enjoying brisk sales as residents avoid going out during the current viral outbreak with authorities last week requiring people returning to the capital to self-quarantine at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation.(AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

The stringent measures have followed public fury over Hubei authorities' handling of the epidemic when it began in December. The risk of human-to-human transmission was downplayed, and doctors who tried to warn the public were reprimanded by police. Wuhan residents reported overcrowding in hospitals and futile attempts to seek treatment.

Many countries have also set up border screenings and airlines have

canceled flights to and from China to prevent further spread of the disease, which has been detected in around two dozen countries and caused about 1,000 confirmed cases outside mainland China. Five deaths have been reported outside the mainland, in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and France.

In Hong Kong, a spokesman for Princess Margaret Hospital reported the city's second death out of 62 cases. Media reported the victim was a 70-year-old man with underlying illnesses.



A passenger exercises using two water bottles on the quarantined Diamond Princess cruise ship Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2020, in Yokohama, near Tokyo. Passengers tested negative for COVID-19 will start disembarking Wednesday. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

The much-criticized quarantine of a cruise ship in Japan ends later Wednesday. The Diamond Princess' 542 virus cases were the most in any place outside of China, and medical experts have called its quarantine a failure.

South Korea evacuated six South Koreans and a Japanese family member from the ship, and they began an additional 14-day quarantine Wednesday. More than 300 American passengers were evacuated earlier and are quarantined in the United States, including at least 14 who had tested positive for the virus.

On Tuesday, the U.S. government said the more than 100 American passengers who stayed on the ship or were hospitalized in Japan would have to wait for another two weeks before they could return to the U.S.

Passengers from the MS Westerdam, another cruise ship, have tested negative for the virus, Cambodia's Health Ministry announced Wednesday.



In this Monday, Feb. 17, 2020, photo released by Xinhua News Agency, patients infected with the coronavirus take rest at a temporary hospital converted from Wuhan Sports Center in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province. China reported thousands new virus cases and more deaths in its update Tuesday on a disease outbreak that has caused milder illness in most people, an assessment that promoted guarded optimism from global health authorities. (Xiao Yijiu/Xinhua via AP)

Seven hundred of the Westerdam's passengers had already left Cambodia after the ship docked last week, only to have one woman test positive for the virus when she arrived in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The discovery that the 83-year-old American woman harbored the virus caused the suspension of plans to send home the other passengers still in Cambodia.

The dispersal of those who had already left for various countries has caused concern that they might be undetected carriers of the virus, and health authorities in several nations were tracing them to take protective measures.

"Prevention and control work is at a critical time," Chinese President Xi Jinping said during a phone call Tuesday evening with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, according to Chinese state media.

Likewise, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told The Associated Press in an interview in Lahore, Pakistan, that the viral outbreak "is not out of control, but it is a very dangerous situation." He said that "the risks are enormous and we need to be prepared worldwide for that."



A security guard stands at the entrance to Yokohama port as the quarantined Diamond Princess cruise ship is seen in the background Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2020, in Yokohama, near Tokyo. Passengers tested negative for COVID-19 will start disembarking Wednesday. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Outside Hubei, other localities have imposed quarantine measures to varying degrees. Residential neighborhoods in Beijing have placed limits on the number of people per household who can go out, and those who do must carry exit-entry cards. In Shanghai, police detained a man for 10 days for repeatedly leaving the house and taking public transportation when he was supposed to be under quarantine at home.

Despite such warnings, Beijing was showing signs of coming back to life this week, with road traffic at around a quarter of usual, up from virtually nothing a week ago. While most restaurants, stores and office buildings remained closed, others had reopened.

The country may postpone its biggest political meeting of the year, the annual congress due to start in March, to avoid having people travel to the capital while the virus is still spreading. One of the automotive industry's biggest events, China's biannual auto show, was postponed, and many sports and entertainment events have been delayed or canceled.



A woman wearing masks, stretches her arms in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2020. Russia says it will temporarily ban Chinese nationals from entering the country amid the outbreak of the new virus centered in China that has infected more than 73,000 people. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

The U.S. also upgraded its travel advisory for China to Level 4, telling its citizens not to travel to anywhere in the country and advising those currently in China to attempt to depart by commercial means.

"In the event that the situation further deteriorates, the ability of the U.S. Embassy and Consulates to provide assistance to U.S. nationals within China may be limited. The United States is not offering chartered evacuation flights from China," the notice said.

"We strongly urge U.S. citizens remaining in China to stay home as much as possible and limit contact with others, including large gatherings. Consider stocking up on food and other supplies to limit movement outside the home," the notice said. The U.S. previously flew out scores of its citizens on charter flights from Wuhan but does not have any further plans to do so, it said.



Officials monitor as passengers disembark from the quarantined Diamond Princess cruise ship Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2020, in Yokohama, near Tokyo. Passengers tested negative for COVID-19 started disembarking Wednesday. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



A man sits in front of the bull statues in Central, a business district in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2020. Russia says it will temporarily ban Chinese nationals from entering the country amid the outbreak of the new virus centered in China that has infected more than 73,000 people. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)



People wearing masks, walk on street in Central, a business district in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2020. Russia says it will temporarily ban Chinese nationals from entering the country amid the outbreak of the new virus centered in China that has infected more than 73,000 people. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

Also on Wednesday, China said it was expelling three Wall Street Journal reporters over the headline for an opinion column which referred to the current virus outbreak in China and called the country the "Real Sick Man of Asia."

In a statement Wednesday, foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said the Feb. 3 op-ed by Bard College Professor Walter Russel Mead "smears the efforts of the Chinese government and people on fighting (the virus) epidemic."

Long sensitive to its portrayal in global media, China has been pushing a narrative of transparency and tight control over the current outbreak, while emphasizing the sacrifices made by its health workers and ordinary citizens.

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