

More Chinese cities shut down as virus death toll rises

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Millions more people have been ordered to stay indoors as China battles to curb the spread of a new virus that authorities said Wednesday has already killed nearly 500 people.

With more than 24,000 cases in China, a growing number of cities have been imposing a range of restrictions in recent days far from central Hubei province, the epicentre of the outbreak, as authorities struggle to contain the virus.

Global concerns have risen as cases continue to spread abroad, with 10 people testing positive for the virus on a ship quarantined off the coast of Japan.

Italy announced that passengers from every international flight would be scanned for fevers.

Vietnam, which has detected 10 cases, joined a growing list of countries banning arrivals from China, and it was setting up field hospitals with thousands of beds to handle a potential spike in coronavirus patients in the country.

And Hong Kong, which reported its first coronavirus death this week, said anyone arriving from the mainland will face a mandatory two-week quarantine from Saturday.

In Hangzhou, some 175 kilometres (110 miles) southwest of Shanghai, fences blocked streets near the headquarters of Chinese tech giant Alibaba—one of the world's most valuable companies—as a fighter jet circled overhead.

The building appeared to be shut down, while deliverymen moved in and out of nearby fenced-in residential areas to drop off groceries. Many people were also seen going out.

The firm is based in one of three Hangzhou districts subject to new restrictions that allow only one person per household to go outside every two days to buy necessities.

"Please don't go out, don't go out, don't go out!" blared a message on a loudspeaker urging people to wear masks, wash their hands regularly and report any people who are from Hubei—reflecting a common fear that people from the province might infect others.

At least three other cities in Zhejiang province—Taizhou, Wenzhou and parts of Ningbo—have imposed the same measures, affecting 18 million people.

Similar restrictions have been put in place as far away as Heilongjiang province on the Russia border, and in the central city of Zhumadian authorities said one person would be allowed to leave each household only every five days.

Residents of the city of seven million were also offered cash rewards for informing on people from neighbouring Hubei who were in the city.

Jitters

The disease is believed to have emerged in December in a Wuhan market that sold wild animals, and spread rapidly as people travelled for the Lunar New Year holiday in January.

The Ministry of Public Security said "political security" was the "top priority" in confronting the epidemic.

"We should take strict precautions against and crack down on all kinds of disruptive activities by hostile forces," ministry secretary Zhao Kezhi said in a briefing.

The statement came days after the top leadership admitted "shortcomings" in its handling of the outbreak, for which authorities have been criticised for withholding information.

The death toll has steadily increased, rising to 490 in China on Wednesday after Hubei reported 65 more people had died.

Most deaths have been in the province and officials have noted that the death rate, at around two percent, is below the mortality rate of SARS, which killed some 800 people in 2002-2003.

Two fatalities have been reported outside the mainland, in Hong Kong and the Philippines.

The outbreak has prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a global health emergency, several governments to institute travel restrictions, and airlines to suspend flights to and from China.

United and American Airlines said Wednesday they have added Hong Kong to their China flight suspensions.

China has reacted angrily against travel bans, noting that the WHO does not advise imposing them.

It has accused the US of spreading "panic" in its response to the coronavirus, including its ban on Chinese travellers, and on Wednesday it took another swipe.

"Panic is more deadly and contagious than any virus," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said at a press briefing.

'Window of opportunity'

The WHO said Tuesday that dramatic measures taken by China offered a chance to halt transmission.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the great majority of

cases are in China.

"That doesn't mean that it won't get worse. But for sure we have a window of opportunity to act," he said.

Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand all reported new infections not imported from China on Tuesday.

Semi-autonomous Hong Kong has closed all but two land crossings with the Chinese mainland.

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