

Fall in new cases raises hope in virus outbreak in China

February 12 2020, by Ken Moritsugu



A man walks through a disinfectant spray in order to return home at a residential complex in northern China's Tianjin Municipality Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020. China's daily death toll from a new virus topped 100 for the first time and pushed the total past 1,000 dead, authorities said Tuesday after leader Xi Jinping visited a health center to rally public morale amid little sign the contagion is abating. (Chinatopix Via AP)

The number of new cases of the coronavirus in China dropped for a second straight day, health officials said Wednesday in a possible glimmer of hope amid the outbreak that has infected over 45,000 people worldwide and killed more than 1,100.

Chinese President Xi Jinping, meanwhile, promised tax cuts and other aid to industry as the ruling Communist Party tries to limit the mounting damage to the economy. And in Japan, 39 new cases were confirmed on a cruise ship quarantined at Yokohama, bringing the total to 174 on the Diamond Princess.

A look at the latest developments in the crisis, which started in December in the city of Wuhan:

NEW CASES DECLINE

The number of new cases has trended down in the past week, raising hopes that the epidemic may be plateauing.

China's National Health Commission said 2,015 new cases had been tallied on Tuesday, the second straight daily decline and down from nearly 3,900 a week ago. Commission spokesman Mi Feng said the situation is still grim but "we have seen some positive changes."

"I'm going to be optimistic that is a sign that their aggressive actions have been effective, but I really do think it's too soon to say that for sure, not having hands on the data ourselves," said Dr. Nancy Messonnier of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



In this photo released by Xinhua News Agency, a worker cleans the floor of a temporary hospital with 1,100 beds converted from the Wuhan Sports Center in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province, Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2020. Without enough facilities to handle the number of cases of viral infection, Wuhan has been building prefabricated hospitals and converting a gym and other large spaces to house patients and try to isolate them from others. (Xiao Yijiu/Xinhua via AP)

She said she is hopeful an advance team now in China from the World Health Organization will be able to examine the findings: "It would certainly be reassuring if we were now seeing at least a slowdown of this outbreak in China."

All but one of the deaths recorded so far have been in China, as have

more than 99% of all reported infections in the world. The country has put an unprecedented 60 million people in a near quarantine.

ECONOMIC FALLOUT

China is struggling to restart its economy after the annual Lunar New Year holiday was extended to try to curb the spread of the virus. Traffic remained light in Beijing, and many people were still working at home.

Xi's announcement of tax cuts came as companies face increasing losses because of the closing of factories, offices, shops and other businesses in the most sweeping anti-disease measures ever imposed.



Customer has lunch with a transparent plastic panel setup on the table to isolate her from others in hopes of stopping the spread of the coronavirus in a Hong

Kong, Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2020. China's ruling Communist Party needs to make a politically fraught decision: Admit a viral outbreak isn't under control and cancel this year's highest-profile official event. Or bring 3,000 legislators to Beijing next month and risk fueling public anger at the government's handling of the disease. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

A large cluster of cases in Tianjin, a port city southeast of Beijing, has been traced to a department store, Chinese state media said. One-third of Tianjin's 104 confirmed cases are in Baodi district, where the store is situated, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

A salesperson in the store's home appliance section was the first diagnosed on Jan. 31, Xinhua said, and a series of cases followed. None of those infected had visited Wuhan recently, and with the exception of one married couple, they worked in different sections of the store and did not know one another.

Elsewhere around the world, DBS bank in Singapore cleared its office, telling 300 employees to work from home after it learned that an employee had been infected. The city-state has 50 confirmed cases.

A Formula One race in Shanghai in April became the latest event canceled because of the virus. Nokia, Vodafone and Deutsche Telekom became the latest companies to pull out of a major wireless trade fair this month in Spain that usually draws 5,000 to 6,000 Chinese visitors.



In this Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020, photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, a police officer operates a drone carrying a QR code placard near an expressway toll station in Shenzhen in southern China's Guangdong Province. As a measure to help prevent and control novel coronavirus, an online register system for vehicles coming back to Shenzhen has been put into use since Feb. 8. To increase the efficiency, local police officers used drones to carry a QR code at the expressway exits for drivers to get registered with less contact with other people. (Lai Li/Xinhua via AP)

CITIZEN JOURNALIST DISAPPEARS

A citizen journalist reporting on the epidemic in Wuhan has disappeared, activists said, becoming the second to vanish in recent days amid tightening controls on information in China.

Fang Bin, a seller of traditional Chinese clothing, stopped posting videos or responding to calls and messages on Sunday, activists Gao Fei and Hua Yong said, citing Fang's friends. His phone was turned off Wednesday.

Fang had posted videos of Wuhan's overcrowded hospitals, including bodies in a van waiting to be taken to a crematorium. The last video he posted was of a piece of paper reading, "All citizens resist, hand power back to the people."

Another citizen journalist, Chen Qiushi, vanished on Friday. Non-sanctioned reporting on the outbreak by activists is challenging the Communist Party's tightly policed monopoly on information on an unprecedented scale.



A man uses his phone as he walks through an empty mall district in Beijing, China Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2020. China on Wednesday reported another drop in the number of new cases of a viral infection and 97 more deaths, pushing the total dead past 1,100 even as the country remains largely closed down to prevent the spread of the disease. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

CRUISE SHIP WOES

Passengers aboard a cruise ship that has been barred from docking by four governments may finally set foot on land again.

Holland America Line said the MS Westerdam will arrive Thursday morning in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. The ship has been turned away by the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan and Thailand, though its operator said no cases of the disease have been confirmed among the more than 2,200 passengers and crew.

TWO RUSSIANS FLEE QUARANTINE

Two Russian women who were kept in isolation for possible infection by the virus say they escaped from Russian hospitals because of uncooperative doctors, poor conditions and fear they would become infected.

Both women said their hospital ordeals began after returning from Hainan, a tropical island in southern China popular with Russian tourists. One said she jumped out of a hospital window to escape her quarantine, while the other broke out by disabling an electronic lock.



In this Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020, photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, a drone carries a QR code placard near an expressway toll station in Shenzhen in southern China's Guangdong Province. As a measure to help prevent and control novel coronavirus, an online register system for vehicles coming back to Shenzhen has been put into use since Feb. 8. To increase the efficiency, local police officers used drones to carry a QR code at the expressway exits for drivers to get registered with less contact with other people. (Lai Li/Xinhua via AP)



Security guards hold the curtain for a cyclist to past through a disinfectant spray in order to return home at a residential complex in northern China's Tianjin Municipality Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020. China's daily death toll from a new virus topped 100 for the first time and pushed the total past 1,000 dead, authorities said Tuesday after leader Xi Jinping visited a health center to rally public morale amid little sign the contagion is abating. (Chinatopix Via AP)



Passengers stand on the deck of the Diamond Princess cruise ship anchored at Yokohama Port in Yokohama, near Tokyo, Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2020. Japan's health ministry said Wednesday that 39 new cases of a virus have been confirmed on the cruise ship quarantined at the Japanese port. (Yuta Omori/Kyodo News via AP)



In this undated photo distributed on Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2020, by the North Korean government, North Korean Premier Kim Jae Ryon, right top, has a meeting at the emergency anti-epidemic headquarter in Pyongyang, North Korea. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. (Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP)



Workers pack bottles of alcohol disinfectant in a factory in Suining in southwest China's Sichuan province Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020. China's daily death toll from a new virus topped 100 for the first time and pushed the total past 1,000 dead, authorities said Tuesday after leader Xi Jinping visited a health center to rally public morale amid little sign the contagion is abating. (Chinatopix Via AP)



In this photo released by Xinhua News Agency technicians work on a second generation disinfection robot in a technological company in Qingdao, eastern China's Shandong Province on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020. Qingdao has called on technological companies to research, develop and refit disinfection robots which can replace human in disinfection operations for possible use in isolation wards of hospitals. (Li Ziheng/Xinhua via AP)



In this photo released by Xinhua News Agency, a worker inspects the operation of a 3D printer at the additive manufacturing research and application center of the Hunan Vanguard Group Co., Ltd. in the economic development zone of Changsha city in central China's Hunan Province, on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020. The company has been producing goggles for medical use with more than 50 3D printers working day and night for use in hospital fighting the novel coronavirus outbreak. (Xue Yuge/Xinhua via AP)

Many of those quarantined in Russian hospitals have complained about conditions in the isolation rooms and lack of cooperation from doctors who are uncertain about quarantine protocols.

Two cases of the virus have been reported in Russia.

NO EVIDENCE YET OF MOTHER-TO-BABY SPREAD

In a study published Wednesday in the journal Lancet, Chinese scientists reported there is no evidence so far to suggest the virus can be passed from mother to baby.

The study looked at nine pregnant women who all had the COVID-19 virus and delivered via cesarean section in a hospital in Wuhan, the epicenter of the outbreak. After the babies were born, scientists tested samples from the newborns, including the amniotic fluid, cord blood and throat swabs. All tested negative for the virus.

But the scientists acknowledged the study was small.

To date, two cases of the virus have been confirmed in babies, including a newborn diagnosed just 36 hours after birth. It is unknown how the child was infected.

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