

France cancels mass gatherings over virus fears

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France on Saturday cancelled all gatherings of 5,000 people or more in a bid to contain the coronavirus outbreak that is rapidly spreading across the world, as the World Health Organization raised its risk alert to its

highest level.

The virus has now hit 59 countries across the globe, with more than 2,900 people killed and over 85,000 infected since it was first detected in the central Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

Its rapid spread beyond China's borders in the past week has caused stock markets to sink to their lowest levels since the 2008 [global financial crisis](#) over fears that the disease could wreak havoc on the [world economy](#).

The vast majority of infections have been in China but more daily cases are now logged outside the country, with South Korea, Italy and Iran emerging as major hotspots.

South Korea, which has the most infected people outside China, reported its biggest surge in new cases on Saturday with 813 more patients confirmed, bringing its total to 3,150.

The virus has also spread to previously untouched areas in recent days, reaching nine new countries including Azerbaijan, Mexico and New Zealand, as well as the first case in sub-Saharan Africa with Nigeria reporting a case.

Qatar and Ecuador both confirmed their first cases on Saturday.

"We have now increased our assessment of the risk of spread and the risk of impact of COVID-19 to very high at global level," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters on Friday.

European nations are scrambling to contain the outbreak—with many cases been linked to virus hotspot northern Italy—including in France where a surge of new cases was confirmed Saturday.

The country cancelled all gatherings of more than 5,000 people in close quarters after 16 new cases were confirmed Saturday, bringing the country's total to 73.

The Paris half-marathon scheduled for Sunday and an agricultural symposium were axed in line with the new guidelines, though football matches will not be cancelled.

"These measures are provisional and they will no doubt evolve. We want them to last a little, because it will allow us to contain the spread of the virus," health minister Olivier Veran said.

Economy, events hit

In the US, [health officials](#) reported three more cases of the new coronavirus transmitted to people who did not travel overseas or come in contact with anyone known to be ill, indicating the disease was spreading in the country.

There are now four such cases in the United States, all on the Pacific seaboard, in addition to some 60 other infections in the country.

"The virus is here, present at some level, but we still don't know to what degree," said Sara Cody, director of public health for California's Santa Clara County, the heart of Silicon Valley where tech giants like Apple and Google are based.

US Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell said the central bank was ready to intervene if needed, given the "evolving" risks to the world's largest economy posed by the outbreak.

Official data released in China on Saturday showed the extent of the damage caused to the world's second-largest economy, with

manufacturing activity falling to its lowest level on record as key industries ground to a standstill under drastic containment measures.

More global events were disrupted due to the epidemic, with the United States delaying a regional summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations due in Las Vegas next month.

"This is not a time for panic. It is time to be prepared—fully prepared," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said.

South Korean cases

South Korea's epidemic is centred in its fourth-largest city, Daegu, whose streets have been largely deserted for days, apart from long queues at the few shops with masks for sale.

Three women in the Daegu area died of the illness, taking the national toll to 17, authorities said Saturday.

South Korea's total is expected to rise further with screening of more than 210,000 members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a secretive entity often accused of being a cult that is linked to around half of the country's cases.

While China reported 47 more deaths on Saturday, it recorded 427 infections—fewer new cases than South Korea—following unprecedented quarantine efforts locking down tens of millions of people in the worst-hit cities.

In Iran, unnamed health sources told the BBC that at least 210 people had died of the [coronavirus](#)—far beyond the official death toll, but Tehran angrily denied that figure.

The death toll in Iran jumped to 43 on Saturday.

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