

Scramble to contain coronavirus as infections spread in Europe

February 26 2020



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Governments worldwide were scrambling to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus Wednesday after fresh infections emerged linked to European hotspot Italy amid dire warnings that countries are not ready to

contain the outbreak.

Giving most concern on that score in the Middle East, Iran emerged as a major hotspot, with 44 further infections reported across the country in the past 24 hours.

In another crucial hotspot, South Korea, the COVID-19 epidemic appeared to pick up speed, with the most infections—more than 280—recorded in a day.

Meanwhile, the number of new cases and deaths declined at the disease epicentre in China although experts warned against being too optimistic on that count.

Italy has become the latest major cause for concern after France, Austria, Croatia and Switzerland all reported infections in people who had recently been to its worst-hit Lombardy region.

France additionally reported a second death—this time of one of its nationals after a Chinese tourist died earlier this month.

French authorities are investigating how the man contracted the virus.

Algeria also reported its first case, an Italian national who had arrived in the country last week.

Hundreds of tourists on the Spanish island of Tenerife were confined to a hotel after an Italian tourist was hospitalised as a suspected case.

Several governments are now advising people against travel to Italy, in particular to the regions worst affected in the north, as well as introducing checks for passengers arriving from the country.

Italian authorities have taken drastic measures to contain the outbreak which has seen 11 deaths and more than 320 cases within the country.

Eleven towns have been put in isolation and tens of millions people have been affected by school closures and the cancellation of cultural and sporting events.

'Simply not ready'

At World Health Organization headquarters in Geneva, Bruce Aylward, who headed an international expert mission to China, hailed the drastic quarantine and containment measures taken by Beijing.

But he told reporters on Tuesday that other nations were "simply not ready" to contain the outbreak.

"You have to be ready to manage this at a larger scale... and it has to be done fast," Aylward said.

The virus has killed 2,715 people and infected over 78,000 in China. There were 52 more deaths reported on Wednesday—the lowest in three weeks—with no fatalities outside the epicentre in central Hubei province.

The National Health Commission also reported a drop in new infections to 406, with only five outside Hubei—a figure that will boost confidence that the rest of the country is at least containing the epidemic.

In the rest of the world, there have been more than 40 deaths and 2,700 cases.

The epidemic's disruption has also grown, with stock markets tumbling around the world, restrictions imposed on travellers and sporting events

cancelled.

The WHO has called for countries to "prepare for a potential pandemic"—a term used to describe an epidemic that spreads throughout the world.

Poor countries are particularly at risk, the WHO has warned.

South Korea surge

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) reported 284 new infections Wednesday—its largest daily increase to date—taking the overall national tally to 1,261, with the death toll rising to 12.

A 23-year-old US soldier stationed at Camp Carroll in Daegu was also infected. Some 28,500 American troops are deployed in South Korea.

The vast majority—90 percent—of the new infections were in Daegu, the country's fourth-largest city and the epicentre of the outbreak, and the neighbouring province of North Gyeongsang.

The streets of Daegu—which has a population of 2.5 million—have been largely deserted for days, apart from long queues at the few shops with masks for sale.

Authorities urged the public to exercise extra caution, advising citizens to stay home if they have a fever or respiratory symptoms.

China quarantined 94 air passengers arriving in Nanjing from Seoul after three people, all Chinese, on the flight were discovered to have fevers on Tuesday.

Iran hotspot

In the Middle East, Iran has emerged as a major hotspot, with 44 further infections reported on Wednesday.

Four further deaths brought the [death](#) toll there to 19.

Even the country's deputy health minister Iraj Harirchi has said he has contracted the virus.

The country has been straining to contain the epidemic since last week when it announced its first two deaths in Qom, a centre for Islamic studies and pilgrims that attracts scholars from all over the world.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, whose country came to the brink of war with Iran earlier this year, said Washington is deeply concerned Tehran "may have suppressed vital details" about the outbreak there.

Gulf countries announced new measures to cut links with Iran in an attempt to stop the spread.

In the United States, which has a few dozen cases, health authorities urged local governments, businesses, and schools to develop plans like cancelling mass gatherings or switching to teleworking as the country braces for the virus to spread further.

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Citation: Scramble to contain coronavirus as infections spread in Europe (2020, February 26) retrieved 7 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-scramble-coronavirus-infections-europe.html>

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