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Thais who drove Chinese tourists among new virus cases

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Two Thai drivers who came into contact with Chinese tourists were among six new cases of coronavirus reported Tuesday, bringing to 25 the number of infected in the kingdom.

A Thai married couple recently returned from Japan and two Chinese tourists were the remaining new cases, according to Suwanchai Wattanayingcharoenchai of the disease control department.

Thailand is struggling to balance control of a burgeoning health crisis with a lucrative travel sector that attracts more than 10 million Chinese tourists a year.

The jump brings the total number of cases in the country to the highest outside China where more than 400 people have died since the outbreak emerged in Wuhan in December.

Of Thailand's 25 cases, three were drivers who have had contact with Chinese visitors.

"One driver was picking up sick (Chinese) tourists from Hua Hin," Suwanchai said, referring to a popular beach town three hours south of Bangkok.

A South Korean traveller who passed through Thailand also contracted the virus, but it remains unclear where she got it.

So far, eight patients have recovered fully and been discharged, while 17 remain in hospital.

Several countries have closed their borders or temporarily barred Chinese visitors, but some states closer to home have avoided similar measures during the peak travel season.

Thailand now requires visitors from China to show medical certificates stating they are healthy.

But it has not adopted a blanket travel or visa ban, and insists it has the health situation under control.

Still, after days of diplomatic back-and-forth and public pressure, Bangkok moved ahead with an evacuation of its nationals from Wuhan.

Officials dressed in full-body protective suits and respirator masks lined up on the tarmac to greet the more than 100 people repatriated late Tuesday, according to photos released by the Royal Thai Navy.

They arrived at a naval base after 8:30 pm (1300 GMT) in a borrowed Air Asia plane, and will be put under a standard 14-day quarantine.

Six of the 138 Thais repatriated had fevers and were immediately transferred to a hospital—though health minister Anutin Charnvirakul cautioned that it could be due to "excitement".

Two were denied departure from Wuhan due to their high temperatures, while another had overstayed their visa, officials said.

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