

Unknowns of the new virus make global quarantines a struggle

February 5 2020, by Kim Tong-Hyung



In this Jan. 24, 2020, file photo, an employee sprays disinfectant on a train as a precaution against a new coronavirus at Suseo Station in Seoul, South Korea. Halting the spread of a new virus that has killed hundreds in China is difficult in part because important details about the illness and how it spreads are still unknown. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)

Health authorities are scrambling to halt the spread of a new virus that has killed hundreds in China, restricting visitors from the country and confining thousands on cruise ships for extensive screening after some passengers tested positive. But with important details about the illness and how it spreads still unknown, officials and medical personnel are struggling.

Governments have rushed to get their citizens out of China, which is orchestrating history's largest anti-viral campaign by blocking 50 million people from leaving Wuhan, the center of the outbreak, and nearby areas. A growing number of Chinese cities are discouraging people from even leaving their apartments. Villages have blocked entry points with piles of dirt and rubble, while businesses and offices remain closed indefinitely.

As Beijing's authoritarian leadership faces questions over having kept its citizens in the dark for weeks before infections started to explode, other countries are trying to set up effective quarantines to stop a possible pandemic.

Those efforts have not always been smooth, with violent protests near quarantine centers, banishment to remote islands, and some citizens allowed to leave quarantine early.

A look at the world's sometimes-wobbly efforts to stop the crisis:

SOUTH KOREA

South Korea has confirmed 19 cases of infection with the new type of coronavirus and there are fears of a broader local spread.

The country has banned entry to all foreigners who traveled to China's Hubei province, where Wuhan is located, after Jan. 21. The government says it will consider stopping South Korean tourist visits to China if the outbreak worsens.

Officials have acknowledged missteps in monitoring visitors from China and in tracing the contacts of those infected.

Anxiety abounds. Movie theaters, shopping malls and restaurants have closed. A large church in Seoul skipped Sunday services because a virus patient had attended earlier. Parents have kept schoolchildren at home. Stores are running out of face masks and hand sanitizers.

Residents of central South Korea threw eggs and other objects at government officials over plans to quarantine about 700 evacuees from Wuhan at government facilities in their neighborhoods.

AUSTRALIA

Australia has been criticized over its decision to quarantine about 300 Wuhan evacuees on a remote island used in the past to banish asylum seekers and convicts.

Critics say a quarantine center on the Australian mainland would be preferable to Christmas Island. Some inhabitants of the island say the government is turning their home into a "leper colony."

The government argues that the location strikes a balance between supporting Australians stranded in China and protecting the wider Australian population from the disease.



In this Feb. 1, 2020, file photo, State Commission of Quality Management staff in protective gear disinfects a ground transportation area at the Pyongyang Airport in Pyongyang, North Korea. Halting the spread of a new virus that has killed hundreds in China is difficult in part because important details about the illness and how it spreads are still unknown. (AP Photo/Jon Chol Jin, File)

People on the Australian mainland who might have caught the virus are not placed in quarantine, but are advised to self-isolate for 14 days, which scientists say is the longest incubation period of the virus. The 13 confirmed cases are being treated in hospitals.

Starting this month, Australia has banned foreigners without permanent residency from entering the country if they had visited mainland China

in the previous 14 days. China's national women's soccer team has been quarantined at a Brisbane hotel since arriving last week.

JAPAN

Japan, which has reported 33 cases, stepped up quarantine measures after officials were criticized last week for allowing two evacuees from Wuhan to leave early from a hotel where they had been quarantined.

Officials say 518 evacuees have been placed under a 14-day quarantine at a hotel and three government facilities near Tokyo. Those with symptoms have been treated in isolation rooms at hospitals.

On Tuesday, the government confirmed at least 10 cases on a cruise ship and are quarantining its 3,700 crew and passengers on board.

Starting Saturday, Japan banned the entry of foreigners who have visited Hubei province in the previous 14 days.

Social media is overflowing with comments calling for a ban on all visitors from China.

"I'm afraid Japan will be soon criticized for taking less measures than other countries," said Mitsunori Okamoto, an opposition lawmaker.

NORTH KOREA

North Korea has yet to report a case, but it's still pushing a tough campaign to prevent the spread of the virus, which state media have

called a matter of "national existence."

The country has blocked tourists, reduced flights and strengthened screening at borders, harbors and airports. State media say 30,000 health workers have been mobilized across the country for preventive measures.

Rival South Korea last week withdrew dozens of officials from an inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong after North Korea insisted on closing it until the epidemic is controlled.

Because fighting the virus is crucial "for defending the security of the country and the life and safety of people, all the workers in the anti-epidemic field set up rapid reaction teams ... so as to promptly counter any slightest situation," Pyongyang's official Rodong Sinmun newspaper said.



In this Jan. 28, 2020, file photo, employees disinfect ticket gates in hopes to prevent the contraction of the coronavirus at a subway station in Seoul, South Korea. Halting the spread of a new virus that has killed hundreds in China is difficult in part because important details about the illness and how it spreads are still unknown. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)

UNITED STATES

Two planeloads of Americans arrived in the U.S. early Wednesday on a charter flight from Wuhan.

The passengers—about 350—will be quarantined for two weeks at military bases outside San Francisco and in San Diego. The first 195 evacuees are under quarantine another Southern California base. None

of the evacuees at that base has shown signs of the illness.

Other planes carrying Americans from Wuhan will arrive Thursday at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas and Eppley Airfield in Omaha, Nebraska, where they will be quarantined, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control said.

The new U.S. rules, any U.S. citizens who have traveled in China within the last two weeks are being routed to 11 designated airports for extra health screenings. Those who have been in Hubei province, where the outbreak is centered, will be subject to a mandatory quarantine.

Most non-U.S. citizens who have traveled in China within the last two weeks will be denied entry into the U.S., except for immediate family members of U.S. citizens, permanent residents and flight crews.

LATIN AMERICA

Mexico says 10 citizens who were flown from China to France on Saturday are in good health. The government hasn't restricted travel to Wuhan but advises against nonessential trips.

Venezuela has started to monitor incoming passengers for symptoms at its largest airport near the capital, Caracas, and plans to expand screening to other airports.

Argentina hasn't placed restrictions on visitors from China. But two hospitals in Buenos Aires and Ezeiza have been designated for possible isolation and treatment of patients.

HONG KONG, SOUTHEAST ASIA

Hong Kong said Wednesday more than 3,600 people on board a cruise ship that was turned away from a Taiwanese port will be quarantined until health checks are completed. The ship was refused entry at Kaohsiung port after three passengers on an earlier voyage later tested positive for the virus.

An AirAsia plane carrying 107 Malaysians and their non-Malaysian spouses and children from Wuhan arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday. They will be quarantined for two weeks.

Indonesia moved 240 evacuees on Sunday from Wuhan to the remote island of Natuna, where they will be quarantined. Health workers in protective gear sprayed the evacuees with disinfectant as they stepped off their jet.

Thailand on Tuesday night admitted 138 people just flown in from Wuhan to its first dedicated quarantine facility, inside a Navy compound in the east of the country.



In this Jan. 28, 2020, file photo, a worker wearing a face mask sprays disinfectant along a path in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province. Halting the spread of a new virus that has killed hundreds in China is difficult in part because important details about the illness and how it spreads are still unknown. (AP Photo/Arek Rataj, File)

Evacuees were screened in a six-hour process at the airport in Wuhan before boarding with none showing definitive signs of the virus. They landed at U-Tapao airport and were taken to the Sattahip Navy Lodge, which normally serves as a guest house. They will be kept there two to a room for 14 days, with family members allowed to visit them if they are still not showing symptoms after three days' stay.

Quarantining of confirmed cases was already being done at various

hospitals and around the capital, Bangkok.

EUROPE

Britain has quarantined dozens of people evacuated from China at Arrowe Park Hospital in northwest England. One evacuee has been isolated at a separate hospital for further tests.

"It's quite weird being home but not being home, and also being sort of locked in, almost like being back in Wuhan really," Kharn Lambert, a teacher who worked in Wuhan, told Sky News about being isolated at Arrowe Park.

France used two flights to bring back about 400 people from China. They are being quarantined at two different sites in southern France. Italy and Spain have quarantined dozens of evacuees at military facilities.

There have been no confirmed cases in the Netherlands, where the government is allowing citizens who were repatriated from Wuhan over the weekend to be quarantined in the comfort of their own homes.

The justice ministry said Wednesday that 15 Dutch citizens who were repatriated along with two Chinese family members spent their first night home at a military facility before being given the option of completing their two-week quarantine in their own homes or at a quarantine center. It did not say how many chose to head home.

AFRICA

Quarantine measures are a serious concern in Africa, where health systems on the 54-country continent vary dramatically. John Nkengasong, head of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said there could be undetected infections on the continent.

A plane carrying 167 Moroccan passengers, mostly students, arrived Sunday near Casablanca. They will be quarantined for 20 days in two hospitals in Rabat and Meknes.

In Lagos in Nigeria, authorities asked people arriving from China or other affected countries to practice "unsupervised self-quarantine," which means staying home, minimizing contact with family members and monitoring for symptoms.

The Chinese Embassy in Kenya says it is requiring Chinese companies to quarantine employees returning to the East African country from China for two weeks, with or without symptoms.

South Sudan, with one of the world's most fragile health systems following a five-year civil war, recently celebrated the installment of a single thermal scanner at the arrival area of its airport in its capital, Juba.

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Citation: Unknowns of the new virus make global quarantines a struggle (2020, February 5) retrieved 1 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-unknowns-virus-global-quarantines-struggle.html>

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