

# New virus cases fall; WHO says China bought the world time

February 15 2020, by Yanan Wang

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A worker wearing a protective suit gestures to a driver outside a tumor hospital newly designated to treat COVID-19 patients in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. The virus is thought to have infected more than 67,000 people globally and has killed at least 1,526 people, the vast majority in China, as the Chinese government announced new anti-disease measures while businesses reopen following sweeping controls that have idled much of the economy. (Chinatopix via AP)

China reported 143 virus deaths and a dip in new cases Saturday while the head of the World Health Organization praised the country's efforts to contain the new disease, saying they have "bought the world time" and that other nations must make the most of it.

France, meanwhile, reported Europe's first death from the new virus, a Chinese tourist from Hubei province, where the disease emerged in December. The United States was preparing to fly home American passengers quarantined aboard a [cruise ship](#) in Japan.

China reported 2,641 new cases in the 24 hours through midnight Friday, raising its total to 66,492. Mainland China's death toll rose to 1,523.

The number of new cases was down from the 5,090 in the previous 24-hour period after authorities changed the basis for counting patients. Numbers of new cases have fluctuated, fueling both optimism the disease might be under control and warnings that such hopes are premature.

The U.N. health agency's director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, urged governments to step up their efforts to prepare for the virus, saying "it's impossible to predict which direction this epidemic will take."

Tedros told a gathering of international foreign and security policy leaders in Germany on Saturday that WHO is encouraged there has not yet been widespread transmission outside China and that "the steps China has taken to contain the outbreak at its source appear to have bought the world time."



Travelers wear face masks and goggles as they use their smartphones outside the Beijing Railway Station in Beijing, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. People returning to Beijing will now have to isolate themselves either at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation, said a notice from the Chinese capital's prevention and control work group published by state media late Friday. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

"We're encouraged that an international team of experts is now on the ground working closely with Chinese counterparts to understand the outbreak," Tedros told the Munich Security Conference.

But he said the agency is "concerned by the continued increase in the number of cases in China," and by reports about the number of health workers who have been infected or died.

"We're concerned by the lack of urgency in funding the response from the international community," Tedros said.

"We must use the window of opportunity we have to intensify our preparedness," he added. "China has bought the world time. We don't know how much time."

China's government suspended most access to Wuhan, the city at the center of the outbreak, on Jan. 23. Restrictions have expanded to cities with a total of 60 million people in the broadest anti-disease measures ever imposed. Restaurants, shops and other businesses nationwide were ordered to close.



In this photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, a traffic policeman wearing a face mask checks a car during a snowfall in Xiaogan in central China's

Hubei Province, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. The virus is thought to have infected more than 67,000 people globally and has killed at least 1,526 people, the vast majority in China, as the Chinese government announced new anti-disease measures while businesses reopen following sweeping controls that have idled much of the economy. (Hu Huhu/Xinhua via AP)

The Lunar New Year holiday was extended to keep factories and offices closed, but now officials have been ordered to revive business activity as economic losses mount.

Authorities have announced measures to try to curb new infections as millions of workers crowd into planes, trains and buses to return to densely populated cities.

Under the new measures, people returning to Beijing will have to isolate themselves at home for 14 days, according to a notice published Friday. It said people who fail to comply will face legal consequences but gave no details.

COVID-19, a disease stemming from a new form of coronavirus, has spread to more than two dozen countries.

The 80-year-old Chinese tourist who died in France was hospitalized Jan. 25 with a lung infection, according to Health Minister Agnes Buzyn. His daughter also fell ill but authorities say she is expected to recover.



A worker sprays disinfectant outside the Beijing Railway Station in Beijing, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. People returning to Beijing will now have to isolate themselves either at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation, said a notice from the Chinese capital's prevention and control work group published by state media late Friday. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

In Japan, the U.S. Embassy said a chartered aircraft will arrive late Sunday to fly home Americans aboard the cruise ship Diamond Princess in Yokohama, near Tokyo. The passengers have been quarantined aboard the ship since Feb. 5, but they will face another two-week quarantine after arriving in the United States.

Those who return to the U.S. will fly to Travis Air Force Base in California and some will fly onward to Lackland Air Force Base in

Texas, said an embassy statement. It said no one with symptoms would be allowed aboard the flight.

So far, 285 people from the cruise ship have tested positive for the virus. Japan's Health Ministry allowed 11 passengers to disembark Friday. It said passengers above 80 years of age, those with underlying medical conditions and those who stayed in windowless cabins during the 14-day quarantine could move to a facility on shore.



Policemen wear face masks as they march in formation outside the Beijing Railway Station in Beijing, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. People returning to Beijing will now have to isolate themselves either at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation, said a notice from the Chinese capital's prevention and control work group published by state media late Friday. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

On Thursday, the number of new cases reported by authorities in Hubei spiked to 15,152, mainly because China has changed the way it is counting. That included 13,332 that were diagnosed with doctors' analyses and lung imaging instead of the previous standard of laboratory testing. Health authorities said the new method would facilitate earlier treatment.

Nine more temporary hospitals have opened in gymnasiums and other public buildings, with 6,960 beds in Hubei, the National Health Commission announced. It said 5,606 patients with mild symptoms were being treated.

The ruling Communist Party is trying to restore public confidence following complaints leaders in Wuhan suppressed information about the disease. The party faced similar criticism after the 2002-03 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS.





A station worker wears a face mask and goggles as she waits to check passengers' tickets at the Beijing Railway Station in Beijing, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. People returning to Beijing will now have to isolate themselves either at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation, said a notice from the Chinese capital's prevention and control work group published by state media late Friday. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

The party should "strengthen areas of weakness and close up loopholes" after the epidemic exposed "shortcomings and deficiencies," President Xi Jinping said at a meeting of party leaders Friday, according to state media.

Extended closures of factories and businesses prevented a flood of travel after the Lunar New Year holiday, normally the Chinese industry's

busiest season, officials said at a news conference.

Total volume of daily travelers is down 80% from last year, according to a deputy transportation minister, Liu Xiaoming.

Business losses are so severe that forecasters have cut their outlooks for China's economic growth.

The state-owned banking industry has provided more than 537 billion yuan (\$77 billion) in credit to industries such as retail, catering and tourism that have been hurt most, according to Liang Tao, vice chairman of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission.



Travelers wear face masks as they walk outside the Beijing Railway Station in Beijing, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. People returning to Beijing will now have to

isolate themselves either at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation, said a notice from the Chinese capital's prevention and control work group published by state media late Friday. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



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A traveler wearing face a mask, goggles, and a plastic poncho stands outside the Beijing Railway Station in Beijing, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. People returning to Beijing will now have to isolate themselves either at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation, said a notice from the Chinese capital's prevention and control work group published by state media late Friday. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



Policemen wear face masks as they march in formation outside the Beijing Railway Station in Beijing, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. People returning to Beijing will now have to isolate themselves either at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation, said a notice from the Chinese capital's prevention and control work group published by state media late Friday. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)





Travelers wearing face masks embrace outside the Beijing Railway Station in Beijing, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. People returning to Beijing will now have to isolate themselves either at home or in a concentrated area for medical observation, said a notice from the Chinese capital's prevention and control work group published by state media late Friday. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



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In this photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, an ambulance drives along a road during a snowfall in Xiaogan in central China's Hubei Province, Saturday, Feb. 15, 2020. The virus is thought to have infected more than 67,000 people globally and has killed at least 1,526 people, the vast majority in China, as the Chinese government announced new anti-disease measures while businesses reopen following sweeping controls that have idled much of the economy. (Hu Huhu/Xinhua via AP)

This weekend, a team of WHO experts were due to begin a mission in China.

A WHO official, speaking at the conference in Munich, defended China's handling of the outbreak.

"Some of the rhetoric for me has not been helpful, not been helpful at all. China has a strong public health and health system," said Dr. Michael Ryan, WHO's chief of emergencies. "I think we as the global community need to change our narrative if we're going to work successfully with China and other countries to stop this disease."

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