

# More virus deaths outside China raise pandemic fears

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Fresh deaths and a surge in new coronavirus cases in Iran, Japan and South Korea on Tuesday fuelled fears of a pandemic, as the disease took root in some of the world's poorest—and worst-equipped—countries.

The rapid spread abroad came as the World Health Organization announced that the epidemic had peaked at its epicentre in China, where

it has killed more than 2,600 people and infected over 77,000 others.

But the situation has worsened elsewhere with nearly 2,700 other cases and more than 40 deaths globally, prompting restrictions on travellers from infected nations, the cancellation of football matches and national efforts to isolate suspected patients.

South Korea, Italy and Iran have each logged sharp increases in infections and deaths, while several Middle Eastern countries also reported their first confirmed COVID-19 cases.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus insisted the virus could still be contained, praising China's drastic quarantine measures in several cities for helping to prevent an even bigger spread.

"For the moment we are not witnessing the uncontained global spread of this virus and we are not witnessing large-scale deaths," Tedros told reporters in Geneva on Monday.

He added, however, that countries should do everything they can to "prepare for a potential pandemic"—a term is used to describe an illness that spreads across numerous communities.

The White House plans to spend \$2.5 billion to combat the epidemic, according to US media. There are 53 cases in the United States so far.

## **Iran hotspot**

Iran has emerged as a major hotspot with the [death](#) toll rising to 15 on Tuesday as three more people succumbed to the disease.

The country has been scrambling 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 abroad.

Iran has confirmed 61 cases so far, making its mortality rate exponentially higher than anywhere else in the world and raising suspicion that many more people have contracted the disease there.

A WHO team was due in Iran on Tuesday.

Several neighbours have enacted measures to block arrivals from Iran but the virus has already spread to Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East.

The WHO has warned that [poorer countries](#) with weak health care systems are the most at risk.

## Games off

South Korean President Moon Jae-in warned that the outbreak was "very grave" as the country's death toll rose to 10 and the number of confirmed infections approached 1,000—the largest total outside China.

Scores of events have been cancelled or postponed as the outbreak has spread in the world's 12th-largest economy, from K-pop concerts to the World Team Table Tennis championship.

Parliament closed for cleaning Tuesday after confirmation a person with the coronavirus had attended a meeting last week.

More than 80 percent of the infections have been in and around Daegu, South Korea's fourth-largest city.

Streets there have been largely deserted for days, apart from long queues at the few shops with masks for sale.

Most of the country's infections are linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, an entity often accused of being a cult.

The US Centers for Disease Control warned Americans against "all nonessential travel to South Korea".

In Japan, a fourth former passenger of the coronavirus-stricken Diamond Princess cruise ship died, according to local media. The man was in his 80s.

Nearly 700 people from the quarantined ship have tested positive for the illness so far.

Infections have also spiked inside Japan, with at least 160 cases including one death.

The government has expanded the number of hospitals that can receive suspected patients and asked people with moderate symptoms to stay home.

Businesses were asked to "let people stay away from offices, to avoid rush hour commuting hours, and to encourage telecommuting," Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said.

Italy—which has reported seven deaths and over 200 cases—has locked down 11 towns, while upcoming football matches in its Serie A and the Europa League will be played behind closed doors.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has said that residents could face weeks of lockdown.

## **China cases slow**

In China, 508 new cases were reported, with all but nine at the outbreak's epicentre in central Hubei province.

The death toll nationwide reached 2,663 on Tuesday after 71 more people died, the lowest rise in almost three weeks.

Reassured by the official numbers, the country is gingerly returning to business.

Beijing is seeing more cars on the street, factories are resuming work, Apple is reopening several stores, and some regions are relaxing traffic restrictions.

But schools remain closed, the capital has a mandatory 14-day quarantine for returning residents, and authorities are keeping some 56 million people in Hubei under lockdown.

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