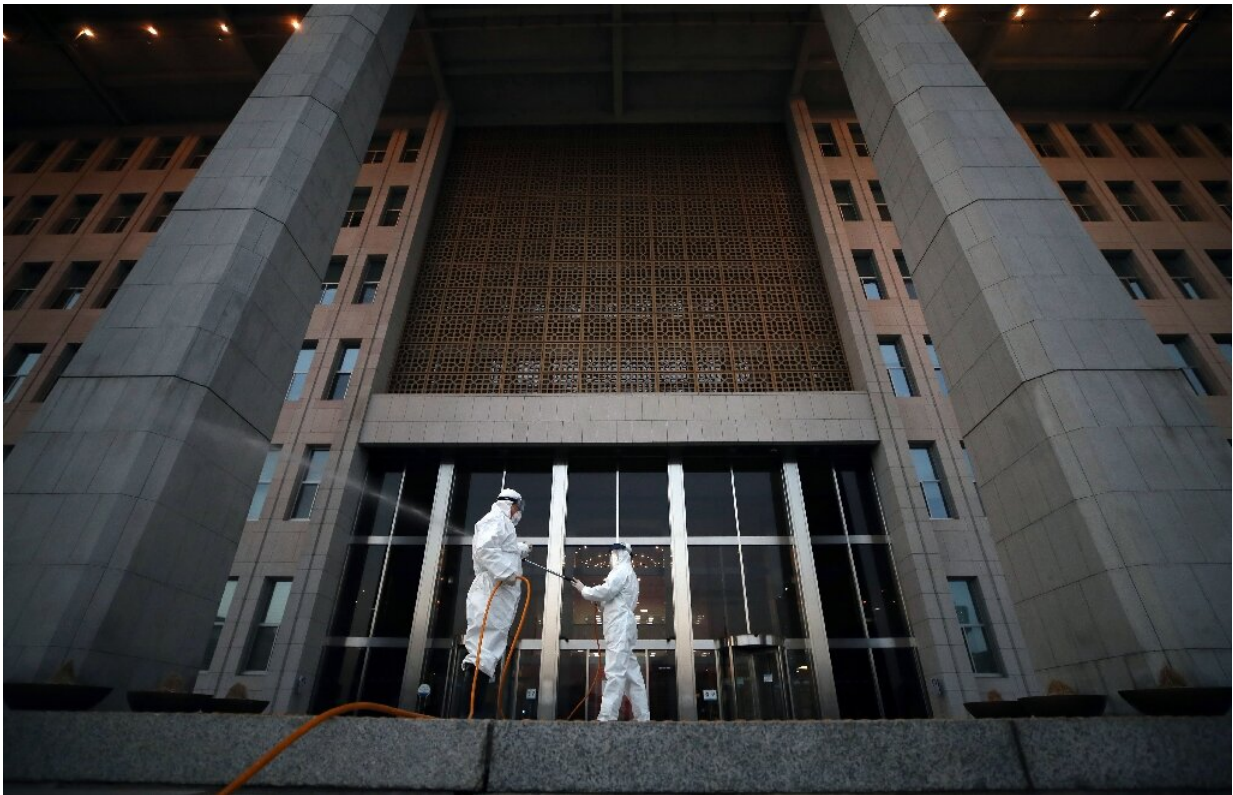


# Virus 'peaked' in China but could trigger global pandemic: WHO

February 24 2020

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Workers spray disinfectant outside the National Assembly in Seoul, as the number of coronavirus infections continued to rise

The World Health Organization on Monday said the new coronavirus epidemic had "peaked" in China but warned that a surge in cases elsewhere was "deeply concerning" and all countries should prepare for a

"potential pandemic".

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the peak in China occurred between January 23 and February 2 and the number of new cases there "has been declining steadily since then".

"This virus can be contained," he told reporters in Geneva, praising China for helping to prevent an even bigger spread of the disease through unprecedented lockdowns and quarantines in or near the outbreak's epicentre.

An acceleration of cases in other parts of the world has prompted similar drastic measures. Italy has locked down 11 towns and South Korea ordered the entire 2.5 million residents of the city of Daegu to remain indoors.

It also caused falls of more than three-percent in several European stock markets—with Milan plunging 5.4 percent—and a boost for safe-haven gold amid fears the epidemic could hit a global economic recovery.

The spread of the disease—officially known as COVID-19—continued unabated with Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait and Oman announcing their first cases on Monday.

China also continued its preventive measures against the virus, on Monday postponing its agenda-setting annual parliament meeting for the first time since the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

## **Cover-up allegations**

In Iran, the death toll climbed on Monday by four to 12—the highest number for any country outside China.







A gondolier steers tourists in facemasks along a canal in Venice

But there were concerns the situation might be worse than officially acknowledged. The semi-official ILNA news agency quoted one local lawmaker in hard-hit Qom—a religious centre—who said 50 people had died there.

The Iranian government denied the report, and pledged transparency.

Even so, authorities have only reported 64 infections in Iran, an unusually small number that would mean an extremely high mortality rate.

In China, 2,592 people have died out of 77,000 infections.

Michael Ryan, head of WHO's health emergencies programme, said a team from the UN agency would be arriving in Iran on Tuesday.

But he cautioned against drawing any conclusions about the mortality rate. Iran "may only be detecting severe cases" because the epidemic was still at an early stage, he said.

"We need to understand the exact dynamics of what has happened in Iran, but clearly there have been gatherings for religious festivals, and then people coming and then moving afterwards," he said.

## **Avoid 'public panic'**

South Korea has also seen a rapid rise in infections since a cluster



sprouted in a religious sect in Daegu last week.



Global airline travel has dropped off, particularly in Asia, due to the virus

South Korea reported more than 200 infections and two more deaths on Monday, bringing the total cases to more than 830—by far the most outside China.

Eight people have died from the virus there, and President Moon Jae-in over the weekend raised the country's virus alert to the highest "red" level.

As part of the containment efforts, school holidays were extended nationally while the 2.5 million people of Daegu were told to remain indoors.

Authorities in Hong Kong announced that from Tuesday it would not allow arrivals from South Korea other than returning residents.

Mongolia earlier announced it would not allow flights from South Korea to land.

Speaking in Geneva, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa warned governments against "taking action that would fan public panic".

"I am deeply concerned at incidents of xenophobia and hatred, discriminatory immigration controls and arbitrary repatriation," she said.

## **Football, fashion curbed**

Fears were also growing in Europe, with Italy reporting four more deaths Monday, bringing the total to seven.



Chinatowns across the world have seen a drop-off in business due to fears over the virus

More than 200 people have been infected there, and several Serie A football games were postponed over the weekend.

The famed Venice Carnival was also cut short, and some Milan Fashion Week runway shows were cancelled.

More than 50,000 people in about a dozen northern Italian towns have been told to stay home, and police set up checkpoints to enforce a blockade.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has said that residents could face weeks



of lockdown.

## **Economic toll**

The virus is taking an increasingly heavy toll on the global economy, with many factories in China closed or subdued due to the quarantines.

The International Monetary Fund warned Sunday that the epidemic was putting a "fragile" global economic recovery at risk, while the White House said the shutdowns in China will have an impact on the United States.

Bruce Aylward, leader of an international mission of experts, said it was time for China to start lifting some of the restrictions.

"Obviously they want to get society back to a more normal semblance of what probably is the new normal, because this virus may be around... for months," Aylward said.

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