

WHO says window of opportunity to stem virus 'narrowing' as cases soar

February 21 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The World Health Organization warned Friday that the window to stem the deadly coronavirus outbreak was shrinking, amid concern over a surge in cases with no clear link to China.

The warning came as Italy moved to close public spaces in ten towns, in a move with echoes of China's lockdown of entire cities in the province at the centre of the outbreak.

Over 50,000 people have been asked to stay at home in the areas concerned in northern Italy while all public activities such as carnival celebrations, church masses and sporting events have been banned for up to a week.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has for weeks insisted the low number of cases of COVID-19 outside the epicentre of the deadly outbreak in China's central Hubei province presented a "window of opportunity" to contain the international spread.

But as cases surged across the Middle East and in South Korea Friday, he cautioned for the first time that while "we are still in a phase where containment is possible... our window of opportunity is narrowing."

He warned that if countries did not quickly mobilise to fight the spread of the virus, "this outbreak could go in any direction. It could even be messy."

The outbreak which began in December has already killed more than 2,200 people and infected more than 75,500 in China.

More than 1,150 people have also been infected and more than a dozen have died across 27 other countries.

On Friday, cases of the deadly virus were reported in a range of countries in the Middle East, including in Israel and Lebanon for the first time, while Iran said four people there had died and 18 been infected in the outbreak.

Infections also nearly doubled in South Korea to 204, making it the hardest-hit country outside China.

The US advised citizens to avoid travelling by cruise liner in Asia

because it said the vessels acted as amplifiers of the virus.

The world modern pentathlon championships were also been moved from the Chinese city of Xiamen to Cancun in Mexico as a consequence of the deadly outbreak

Tedros stressed though that the number of cases outside of China still remained "relatively small".

But he voiced concern "about the number of cases with no clear epidemiological link, such as travel history to or contact with a confirmed case," urging countries worldwide to be "very, very serious" about preventing the spread of the virus.

"We must not look back and regret that we failed to take advantage of the window of opportunity we have."

China has meanwhile pointed to official figures showing new cases in the country slowing this week as evidence that its drastic containment measures are working, but fresh infections emerged at two Beijing hospitals, and more than 500 others were reported in prisons across the country.

Chinese authorities have placed tens of millions of people under quarantine in hard-hit central Hubei province, restricted movements in other cities far from the epicentre and closed schools nationwide.

At a Politburo meeting chaired by Chinese President Xi Jinping Friday, the leadership said the epidemic's peak "has not yet arrived", and the situation in Hubei and Wuhan remains "grim and complex," according to state media.

Many nations have banned travellers from China and airlines have

suspended flights to and from the country.

South Korean sect

In hard-hit South Korea, more than 120 members of Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a religious sect in the southern city of Daegu, have now been infected.

The mayor of Daegu—South Korea's fourth-biggest city, with a population of over 2.5 million—has advised residents to stay indoors.

Most people on the streets were wearing masks Friday, but many businesses were closed and workers sprayed disinfectant outside the church.

"With so many confirmed cases here I'm worried that Daegu will become the second Wuhan," said Seo Dong-min, 24, referring to Hubei's capital, where the virus first emerged.

Two Australians and an Israeli evacuated from the Diamond Princess cruise ship meanwhile tested positive for coronavirus on returning to their home countries, despite being cleared in Japan.

The cases will fuel questions about Tokyo's policy of allowing former Diamond Princess passengers to return home after testing negative.

Two former passengers, both Japanese and in their 80s, died in Japan on Thursday.

Prisons and hospitals

China reported 118 more deaths on Friday, raising the toll to 2,236, most

of them in Hubei.

The National Health Commission also said in its daily update that China tallied 889 new cases, up from the previous day when it reported the lowest number of new infections in nearly a month, fuelling hopes that the epidemic is nearing its peak.

But Hubei's figures have raised questions as officials have changed methods of counting cases twice and amended their figures.

A 29-year-old Wuhan doctor died on Thursday, making him one of the youngest known fatalities of the epidemic and the eighth among medical workers.

New hotspots were found in several prisons and hospitals, prompting the firing of a number of officials.

© 2020 AFP

Citation: WHO says window of opportunity to stem virus 'narrowing' as cases soar (2020, February 21) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-window-opportunity-stem-virus-narrowing.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.