

# World harshens its virus response as epidemic worsens by day

February 28 2020, by Matt Sedensky and Jon Gambrell

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Students arrives at their elementary school in Sendai, northern Japan, Friday morning, Feb. 28, 2020, a day after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's announcement. Abe asked all elementary, middle and high schools nationwide on Thursday to close until late March from March 2 to help control the spread of the new virus in the country. (Hironori Asakawa/Kyodo News via AP)

Saudi Arabia cut travel to Islam's holiest sites, South Korea toughened penalties for those breaking quarantines and airports across Latin America looked for signs of sick passengers as a new virus troubled places around the globe.

With the number of sick and dead rising, the crisis gave way to political and diplomatic rows, concern that bordered on panic in some quarters, and a sense that no part of the world was immune.

"Viruses don't know borders and they don't stop at them," said Roberto Speranza, the [health minister](#) in Italy, where northern towns were on army-guarded lockdowns and supermarket shelves were bare.

As outbreaks grew sharply Europe and the Middle East, air routes were halted and border control toughened. But for an illness transmitted so easily, with its tentacles reaching into so many parts of the world, leaders seemed willing to try anything to keep their people—and economies—safe.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for schools across the country to close for weeks, a decision that impacted 12.8 million students.

"The most important thing is to prevent infections," said Norinobu Sawada, vice principal of Koizumi primary school, "so there aren't many other options."

In South Korea, the hardest-hit country outside China, four Busan markets known for colorful silks and a dizzying array of other wares were shuttered while the military sent hundreds of its doctors and soldiers to aid in treatment and quarantines. K-pop superstar band BTS canceled a series of Seoul concerts planned for April.



Elementary school students go to their school in Osaka, western Japan, Friday morning, Feb. 28, 2020, a day after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's announcement. Abe asked all elementary, middle and high schools nationwide on Thursday to close until late March from March 2 to help control the spread of the new virus in the country. (Yoshihiko Imai/Kyodo News via AP)

The global count of those sickened by the virus exceeds 82,000, with China still by far the hardest-hit country. Recent days have seen sharp spikes in South Korea, Italy and Iran.

South Korea reported 256 additional cases Friday, raising its total to 2,022, with most occurring in the region around the city of Daegu. Many cases there have connections to a church and [health workers](#) are testing

thousands of its members.

China's National Health Commission reported 327 new cases and 44 deaths over the previous 24 hours, most of them in Wuhan, the city where the COVID-19 illness emerged in December. Mainland China's total cases are now 78,824 with 2,788 deaths.

Even the furthest reaches of the globe were touched by the epidemic, with a woman testing positive in Tromsø, the fjord-dotted Norwegian city with panoramas of snow-capped mountains. Health officials said the woman had traveled to China.



Residents of Jongno-Gu wearing face masks spray disinfectant as a precaution against the coronavirus at the Jogyesa Buddhist temple in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. South Korea and China each reported hundreds more

virus cases Thursday as the new illness persists in the worst-hit areas and spreads beyond borders. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

In Iran, the front line of Mideast infections, officials loosened rules barring the import of many foreign-made items to allow in sanitizers, face masks and other necessities, and removed overhead handles on Tehran's subways to eliminate another source of germs. Peru put specialists on round-the-clock shifts at its biggest airport, Argentina took the temperature of some new arrivals and El Salvador added bans for travelers from Italy and South Korea.

The holy city of Mecca, which able-bodied Muslims are called to visit at least once in their lives, and the Prophet Muhammad's mosque in Medina were cut off to potentially millions of pilgrims, with Saudi Arabia making the extraordinary decision to stop the spread of the virus.

With the monarchy offering no firm date for the lifting of the restrictions, it posed the possibility of affecting those planning to make their hajj, a ritual beginning at the end of July this year.



South Korean army soldiers wearing protective suits spray disinfectant to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus on a street in Daegu, South Korea, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. As the worst-hit areas of Asia continued to struggle with a viral epidemic, with hundreds more cases reported Thursday in South Korea and China, worries about infection and containment spread across the globe. (Lee Moo-ryul/Newsis via AP)

"We ask God Almighty to spare all humanity from all harm," the country said in announcing the decision.

Disease has been a constant concern surrounding the hajj, with cholera outbreaks in the 19th century killing tens of thousands making the trip. More recently, another coronavirus that caused Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS, prompted increased public health measures, but no

outbreak resulted.

It wasn't just governments that were taking action: Cologne Cathedral, one of Germany's main religious sites, was emptying its basins of 'holy water' to prevent the spread of infection. And Facebook canceled its annual conference for developers.

COVID-19's global creep had some countries warning people to obey containment measures.

Singapore charged a former Wuhan resident who has the virus and his wife for allegedly lying about their whereabouts as officials tried to stem further infections. In Colombia, which has yet to report any cases, officials reminded residents they could be jailed for up to eight years if they violate containment measures. And in South Korea, the National Assembly passed a law strengthening the punishment for those violating self-isolation, more than tripling the fine and adding the possibility of a year in prison.



Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, center, speaks during a meeting of a task force on the new coronavirus at his official residence in Tokyo Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Abe was asking all elementary, middle and high schools to remain shut until spring holidays begin in late March. (Kyodo News via AP)





A horse race is held without spectators amid growing concern about the spread of a new coronavirus, in Tokyo Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. (Yuta Omori/Kyodo News via AP)



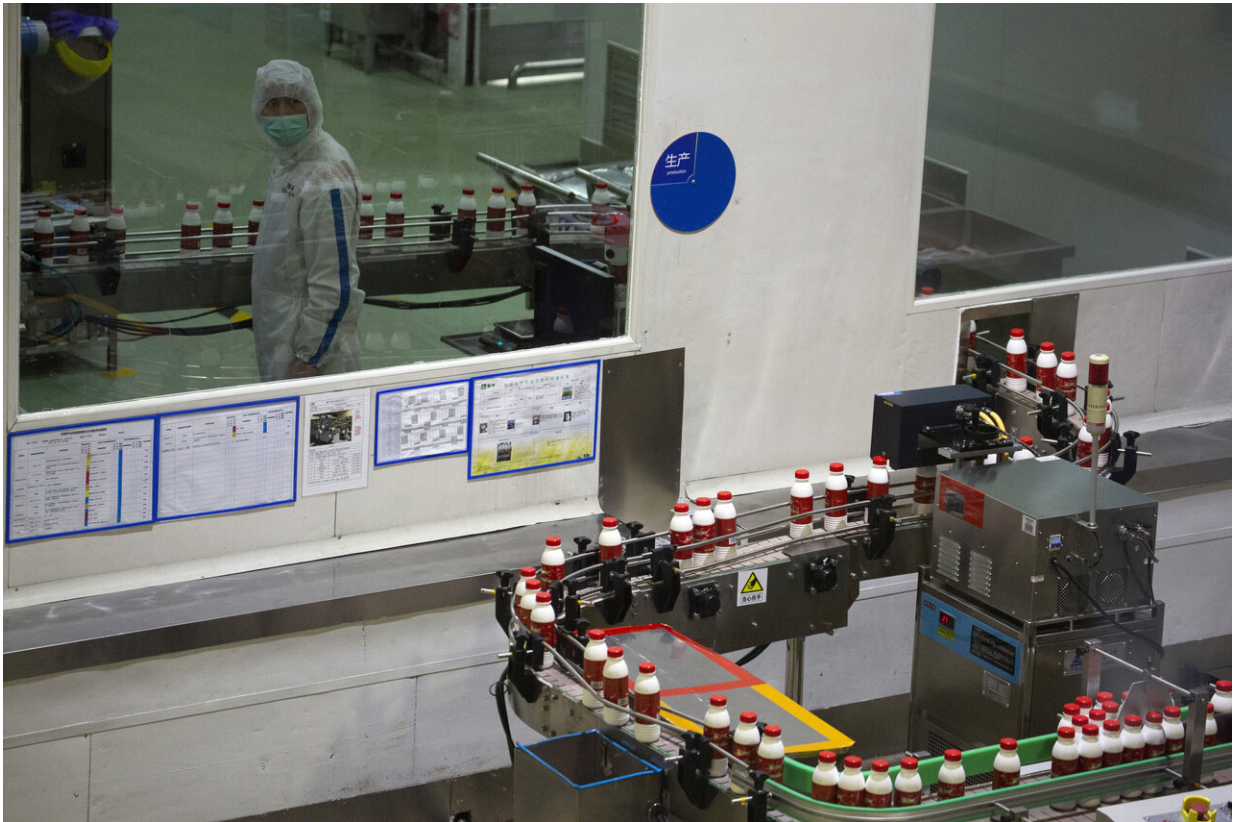
A woman wearing a face mask as a precaution against the COVID-19 while using smartphone in a subway train in Hong Kong, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. As the worst-hit areas of Asia continued to struggle with a viral epidemic, with hundreds more cases reported Thursday in South Korea and China, worries about infection and containment spread across the globe. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)



A paramedic wearing a mask gets out of a tent set up by the Italian Civil Protection outside the emergency ward of the Piacenza hospital, northern Italy, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Italy is changing how it reports coronavirus cases and who will get tested in ways that could lower the country's caseload even as an outbreak centered in northern Italy spreads in Europe. (Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP)



Pedestrians walk as some of them wear masks in downtown Tehran, Iran, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Amid fear and uncertainty caused by the spread of a new virus, Iranians are taking extra caution to avoid getting infected, as authorities canceled Friday prayers in Tehran, Qom and other cities. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)



A worker looks out at the production line at the Mengniu dairy factory in Beijing on Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. The state-owned dairy company Mengniu has suffered 20% sales decrease since the beginning of February due to the COVID-19 outbreak, said a Communist Party official overseeing the company during a tour of the plant organized by the State Council Information Office for foreign media. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

"It came later than it should have," said Lee Hae-shik, spokesman for the ruling Democratic Party, calling for further non-partisan cooperation to address the outbreak.

Countries' efforts to contain the virus opened up diplomatic scuffles. South Korea fought prohibitions keeping its citizens out of 40 countries, calling them excessive and unnecessary. China warned Russia to stop

discriminatory measures against its people, including monitoring on public transit. Iran used the crisis to rail against the U.S., which it accused of "a conspiracy" that was sowing fear.

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Citation: World harshens its virus response as epidemic worsens by day (2020, February 28) retrieved 15 August 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-world-harshens-virus-response-epidemic.html>

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