

Asia urges vigilance to maintain hard-won infection drops

March 16 2020, by Foster Klug



A woman wearing a face mask walks near workers wearing protective gears preparing to spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, March 16, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

Millions of people began holing up at home, stocking up on supplies and keeping a wary eye on how close they get to friends and neighbors as fear of the coronavirus spread to more places around the world Monday.

Resorts closed on the Las Vegas strip. Many restaurants offered only takeout, if they were open at all. Schools, concerts, sporting events—even small-scale St. Patrick's Day parties—were canceled.

It's a reality Northeast Asia has been living with for months, but while the focus of the pandemic appears to be shifting away from its original epicenter, many in Asia continue to urge vigilance against anything that might hurt hard-won gains.

"If we loosen our grip on the quarantine, it could be a matter of time for the embers of small-scale cluster infections to be revived," the South Korean mass-circulation Dong-a Ilbo newspaper said in an editorial Monday.

China, where the virus was first detected in December, now accounts for less than half of the world's 169,000 cases, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. China has also been surpassed in deaths.

A shutdown of public gatherings and a quarantine of the hardest-hit central region has steadied China's caseload as the virus spreads rapidly elsewhere. Most of the world's 77,000 recovered patients are in China.



A worker wearing a protective gear prepares to spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, March 16, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

Traffic has begun returning to Beijing. Office buildings, however, enforced strict screenings for fever, and many restaurants only offered take-out. Children usually snowed under with classes and homework found themselves glued to screens, shopping, chatting and watching video clips.

As the world inched toward a shutdown of much of public life—bars,

restaurants, school, work—Asian cities have become increasingly worried about importing cases of the virus from abroad after making inroads containing its spread at home.

Starting Monday, travelers arriving in Beijing from overseas will be quarantined for 14 days in designated facilities at their own expense. Previously, people without symptoms could self-quarantine at home.

In the latest tally, China's National Health Commission reported 16 new cases of the [coronavirus](#) in the previous 24 hours. Twelve of them were imported from overseas, including four in Beijing.



People wear face masks as they walk down the street in Chinatown in New York, on Sunday, March 15, 2020. President Donald Trump on Sunday called on Americans to cease hoarding groceries and other supplies, while one of the

nation's most senior public health officials called on the nation to act with more urgency to safeguard their health as the coronavirus outbreak continued to spread across the United States.(AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

China now has 80,860 confirmed cases. The health commission said that 67,749 patients have recovered and been discharged from hospitals. Fourteen more deaths were reported in the last 24 hours, raising the toll to 3,213.

Though China still has the most infections, a dozen other countries have more than 1,000 cases, mostly in Europe.

Religious leaders gave sermons to empty pews or to the faithful watching online Sunday after public worship was curtailed in many places. The Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City was being closed indefinitely, and the Vatican closed off next month's Holy Week services to the public. Still, 83-year-old Pope Francis ventured out of the Vatican to visit two churches in Rome to pray for the sick.

In the United States, [health officials](#) recommended a limit to groups of 50 or more people and a government expert said a 14-day national shutdown may be needed. Americans returning from abroad encountered chaotic airport health screenings and closed-down communities.



A man reads his book in Prospect Park in the Brooklyn borough of New York on Sunday, March 15, 2020. President Donald Trump on Sunday called on Americans to cease hoarding groceries and other supplies, while one of the nation's most senior public health officials called on the nation to act with more urgency to safeguard their health as the coronavirus outbreak continued to spread across the United States. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

There are signs that the coronavirus outbreak in South Korea is slowing down, but officials are still scrambling to prevent infections from exploding again.

South Korea on Monday reported 74 more cases over the past 24 hours, a day after it announced 76 new cases. The figures are the lowest daily increase in new infections in about 25 days. That's a stark contrast with

the more than 900 new cases reported on one day in late February.

There are still worries that new infections might surge again from those returning from Europe or from locals who are reportedly resuming attending mass gatherings like church services. There have been calls for authorities to further postpone the new school year, which was to begin on March 23 after two rounds of delays.

South Korean Prime Minister Chung Se-kyun said the country's decline in virus cases was a "hopeful sign" but urged caution over widening outbreaks across Europe and the United States.



A delivery driver leaves a Domino's Pizza restaurant in downtown Seattle on a bike, Sunday, March 15, 2020. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said Sunday night that he would order all bars, restaurants, entertainment and recreation facilities in

the state to temporarily close to fight the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Inslee said that restaurants could continue take-out and delivery services. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

Chung said South Korea should "never loosen its guard."

On the first day of Spain's quarantine, long lines formed for food as police patrolled. Soldiers and police sealed off the Philippines' densely populated capital, Manila, from most domestic travelers. Austria planned to limit people's movement, and Lebanon was put on lockdown, closing down Beirut's famed seaside corniche.

As the public curtailed their daily lives, governments also adjusted.

The prime ministers of Australia and Singapore announced on Monday that they will meet by video conference after Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong canceled an Australian visit this week.

"Business and governments can carry on even through the midst of all this," Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison told Seven Network television.

Several Australian states Monday declared public health emergencies that create punishments for failing to comply with self-isolation orders. Australia's most populous state, New South Wales, has suspended new jury trials because of the virus.



People wearing face masks walk at a down town street in Hong Kong Monday, March 16, 2020. For most, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. But for a few, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illnesses, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

In Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government secured a law allowing him to declare a state of emergency in case things worsen, though he says it still hasn't reached that point.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough, and those with mild illness recover in about two weeks. But severe illness including pneumonia can occur, especially in the elderly and people with existing health problems, and

recovery could take six weeks in such cases.

Efforts to stop the virus from spreading to the most vulnerable and to not overwhelm health care systems with sick patients are pushing calls for people to avoid public crowds or just stay home.

"I think Americans should be prepared that they are going to have to hunker down significantly more than we as a country are doing," Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health told NBC's "Meet the Press."



People wear face masks at a down town street in Hong Kong Monday, March 16, 2020. For most, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. But for a few, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illnesses, including pneumonia. (AP

Photo/Vincent Yu)

Ireland ordered all pubs and bars to close for two weeks—including on Tuesday, St. Patrick's Day—and urged people not to hold house parties. Two pub industry groups had warned of the "real difficulty" in keeping people apart in the country's famous watering holes.

Italy on Sunday reported its biggest day-to-day increase in infections—3,590 more cases in a 24-hour period—for a total of almost 24,747. And 368 more deaths brought its toll to 1,809, more than a quarter of the global death toll.

"It's not a wave. It's a tsunami," said Dr. Roberto Rona, who's in charge of intensive care at Italy's Monza hospital.

Governors in California, Illinois and Ohio told all bars and restaurants to close or reduce their number of customers. New York City will shutter the nation's largest public school system as early as Tuesday, sending over 1.1 million children home.



A man wearing a face mask walks on a downtown street in Hong Kong Monday, March 16, 2020. For most, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. But for a few, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illnesses, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)



A member of Indonesian Red Cross looks through her fogged up goggles as she and her team disinfect in a school in the wake of coronavirus outbreak in Jakarta, Indonesia, Monday, March 16, 2020. Indonesia's capital city announced a lockdown of all tourist destinations and entertainment as well as the closing all of its public schools for the next 14 days amid the global outbreak. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some, it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)



Staff douse praying mats with disinfectant in the wake of coronavirus outbreak at Al Akbar mosque in Surabaya, Indonesia, Monday, March 16, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some, it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (AP Photo/Trisnadi)



A member of Indonesian Red Cross sprays disinfectant in the wake of coronavirus outbreak at a school in Jakarta, Indonesia, Monday, March 16, 2020. Indonesia's capital city announced a lockdown of all tourist destinations and entertainment as well as the closing all of its public schools for the next 14 days amid the global outbreak. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some, it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)



A man walks near a Seattle Times newspaper box in front of the building that houses the Times' newsroom, Sunday, March 15, 2020 in Seattle, as the headline "Silence in Seattle" is displayed. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said Sunday night that he would order all bars, restaurants, entertainment and recreation facilities in the state to temporarily close to fight the spread of coronavirus, as Washington state has by far the most deaths in the U.S. from the disease. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

With fears increasing that the pandemic will depress U.S. economic growth, the Federal Reserve took emergency action by slashing its benchmark interest rate to near zero and deciding to buy \$700 billion in Treasury and mortgage bonds.

Spain was under lockdown amid a two-week state of emergency. Spain's

Health Ministry said the country has recorded 288 deaths, up from 136 on Saturday. The number of infections rose to 7,753 from 5,700.

"From now, we enter into a new phase," said Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whose wife tested positive. "We won't hesitate in doing what we need must to beat the virus. We are putting health first."

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