

S. Korea hunts sick beds as West braces for long virus fight

March 4 2020, by Matt Sedensky and Lori Hinnant



A traveler has his temperature checked upon arrival from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, at Husein Sastranegara Airport in Bandung, Indonesia, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. Indonesia confirmed its first cases of the coronavirus this week in two people who contracted the illness from a foreign traveler. (AP Photo/Kusumadireza)

South Korea struggled to find enough beds for its sick, Italy grappled with a rising number of deaths and concern grew over an expanding outbreak in the United States on Wednesday as the new virus that tormented China expanded elsewhere.

As the number of new cases drops precipitously in China, attention has shifted to South Korea, Italy and Iran, sites of major clusters of contagion that the World Health Organization says account for 80% of new cases outside China.

"People are afraid and uncertain. Fear is a natural human response to any threat," said WHO's leader, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "But as we get more data, we are understanding this virus and the disease it causes more and more."

WHO said the death rate from COVID-19 was about 3.4%, making it more fatal than the common flu, though data suggest it's not as easy to catch.

In Daegu, the South Korean city at the center of that country's outbreak, a shortage of hospital space meant about 2,300 patients were being cared for in other facilities while they awaited a hospital bed. Attending a meeting on quarantine strategies in Daegu, Prime Minister Chung Se-Kyun assured his country, saying "We can absolutely overcome this situation. ... We will win the war against COVID-19."

South Korea reported 435 new infections Wednesday, far smaller than its high of 851 a day earlier.



Health officials check a baby's temperature in hopes of preventing the spread of the Covid-19 virus at the Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok, Thailand, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

A total of 5,621 people in South Korea have contracted the virus and 32 have died.

Italy reported 45 fatalities Tuesday, bringing its total to 79, the worst outside of China. The outbreak in Italy has been concentrated in the northern region of Lombardy, but fear over the virus' spread led even the Vatican to insist Pope Francis was not infected.

The pontiff became ill last week, but the Vatican said Francis only had a

cold.

The expanding problem in Europe and beyond has led some governments to try to control supplies of necessities. The governments of the Czech Republic, Russia and Germany announced bans Wednesday covering various protective gear like masks.

India, meantime, tightened the export of 26 key drug ingredients used in pharmaceutical manufacturing, a potentially disruptive move taken as its caseload rose to 28 Wednesday from an earlier tally of just 5.



Army soldiers wearing protective suits spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a shopping street in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The coronavirus epidemic shifted increasingly westward toward the Middle East, Europe and the United States on Tuesday, with governments

taking emergency steps to ease shortages of masks and other supplies for front-line doctors and nurses. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

China reported 119 new cases Wednesday, all but five in the outbreak's epicenter of Wuhan. In a sign of the shifting threat, Beijing's health commissioner said two new cases in the Chinese capital were apparently infected abroad, in Iran and Italy.

The state-run Xinhua News Agency said Hubei province, where Wuhan is located, was expected to gradually shut down its hastily built temporary hospitals, where thousands of beds were empty.

"We believe this decline is real," WHO outbreak expert Maria Van Kerkhove said of China. The country has reported 80,270 infections and 2,981 fatalities. It has about 85% of the world's cases and 95% of deaths from the COVID-19 illness.

Doctors working in Wuhan told reporters by video conference Wednesday that hospitals there have an increasing number of empty beds but cautioned there is always the possibility of a new spike of infections.



Tourists wearing protective gear against the Covid-19 virus arrive at the Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok, Thailand, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

"The war is not over," said Dr. Cao Bin, who specializes in respiratory research. "The disease is not only a Wuhan disease, and not only a China disease, but also a global disease."

The outbreak was blamed for market instability around the globe. Asian stock markets were mixed Wednesday after Wall Street continued its zigzag performance, despite an interest rate cut by the Federal Reserve. Businesses of all types were experiencing pain as travel and tourism were

spurned and worried consumers changed their habits.

"People are afraid to touch anything or take anything from us," said Maedeh Jahangiri, a perfume seller at an upscale mall in the Iranian capital of Tehran. "Everyone is at a loss."

Iran has counted 2,336 cases of the virus, reportedly even infecting at least 23 members of parliament.



Medical staff wearing protective suits check documents as they wait for people with suspected symptoms of the new coronavirus, at a testing facility in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The coronavirus epidemic shifted increasingly westward toward the Middle East, Europe and the United States on Tuesday, with governments taking emergency steps to ease shortages of masks and other supplies for front-line doctors and nurses. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-

joon)



A cashier counts money behind bottles of hand sanitizers at a medical supply shop in Jakarta, Indonesia, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. Indonesia confirmed its first cases of the coronavirus Monday in two people who contracted the illness from a foreign traveler. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)



Workers wearing protective gears spray disinfectant inside an airplane for New York as a precaution against the new coronavirus at Incheon International Airport in Incheon, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The coronavirus epidemic shifted increasingly westward toward the Middle East, Europe and the United States on Tuesday, with governments taking emergency steps to ease shortages of masks and other supplies for front-line doctors and nurses. (Suh Myoung-geon/Yonhap via AP)



A Metropolitan Transportation Authority worker sanitizes surfaces at the Coney Island Yard, Tuesday, March 3, 2020, in the Brooklyn borough of New York. The MTA is stepping up efforts to sanitize cars and stations as fears mount over the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Kevin Hagen)



South Korean army trucks spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus on a road in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The coronavirus epidemic shifted increasingly westward toward the Middle East, Europe and the United States on Tuesday, with governments taking emergency steps to ease shortages of masks and other supplies for front-line doctors and nurses. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



South Korean army soldiers wearing protective gears gather to spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a shopping street in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The coronavirus epidemic shifted increasingly westward toward the Middle East, Europe and the United States on Tuesday, with governments taking emergency steps to ease shortages of masks and other supplies for front-line doctors and nurses. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



Vehicles move on a disinfected road as a precaution against the new coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The coronavirus epidemic shifted increasingly westward toward the Middle East, Europe and the United States on Tuesday, with governments taking emergency steps to ease shortages of masks and other supplies for front-line doctors and nurses. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



A woman passes by South Korean army soldiers wearing protective gears as they spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a shopping street in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The coronavirus epidemic shifted increasingly westward toward the Middle East, Europe and the United States on Tuesday, with governments taking emergency steps to ease shortages of masks and other supplies for front-line doctors and nurses. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



Metropolitan Transportation Authority worker S. Williams works to sanitize surfaces at the Avenue X subway station, Tuesday, March 3, 2020, in the Brooklyn borough of New York. The MTA is stepping up efforts to sanitize cars and stations as fears mount over the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Kevin Hagen)



A worker wearing a face mask sprays disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a subway station in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



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South Korean army soldiers wearing protective gears spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a shopping street in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The coronavirus epidemic shifted increasingly westward toward the Middle East, Europe and the United States on Tuesday, with governments taking emergency steps to ease shortages of masks and other supplies for front-line doctors and nurses. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



Workers wearing face masks disinfect as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a subway station in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. The letters read "Corona 19, Disinfection." (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



A worker wearing a face mask sprays disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a subway station in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, March 4, 2020. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



A stairwell and hallway are empty at the European Parliament in Brussels, Wednesday, March 4, 2020, as the European Parliament is limiting access to its premises to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The legislative body of the EU institutions said on Tuesday that all its core functions are maintained but that other activities including cultural events, hearings, seminars or informal meetings of political groups and lawmakers are suspended for three weeks. (AP Photo/Olivier Matthys)

In Spain, dozens of health workers were quarantined or being monitored after at least five were infected with the [new virus](#). In France, the Louvre did not open as scheduled Wednesday as workers fret about catching the virus from visitors. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned cases could spread, unveiling a 25-page plan for a worst-case scenario in which retired doctors and nurses would be called back to

work and police could stop investigating minor crimes to help deal with an outbreak.

"We're committed to doing everything possible ... to prepare for all eventualities," Johnson said.

In the U.S., more than 120 cases have been reported. Nine people have died, all in and around Seattle, Washington. On Capitol Hill, lawmakers were expected to finalize an agreement Wednesday on a \$7.5 billion emergency bill to fund work on a virus vaccine and other measures.

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