

Virus fuels dread and angst even as China sees signs of hope

March 2 2020, by Hyung-Jin Kim and Matt Sedensky



A tourist wearing a face mask takes pictures inside the Duomo gothic cathedral as it reopened to the public after being closed due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak in northern Italy, in Milan, Monday, March 2, 2020. Churches in much of Veneto and Lombardy, two of regions hardest hit by the virus, have closed their doors under widespread measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)

The number of new virus cases in China dropped to its lowest level in six weeks Monday and hundreds of patients at the outbreak's epicenter were being released, while a grimmer reality set in elsewhere, with swelling infection numbers and growing dread that no area could fend off the illness.

Clusters of infections in South Korea, Italy and Iran continued to expand and COVID-19 was raising distress and reshaping routines around Europe and across the Atlantic in the United States. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development warned that the world economy risked contracting this quarter for the first time since the international financial crisis more than a decade ago.

Major cities including Jakarta, New York and Berlin grappled with their first recorded cases. Schools emptied across Japan, mobile hospitals were planned in Iran, and the Mona Lisa, accustomed to droves of staring tourists, hung in a vacant room of the shuttered Louvre in Paris.

"Just about everywhere, the cases are rising quite quickly in a number of countries," said Ian Mackey, who studies viruses at the University of Queensland in Australia.

Malaysia and Portugal were the newest places to detect the virus. More than 60 countries around the world—including nine of the 10 most populous— have found infections, with a global count of nearly 89,000 people affected by the illness. Even as alarms grew louder in much of the world, Monday brought positive signs from China, where the outbreak started.



A tourist wearing a mask walks away from the Louvre museum in Paris, Monday, March 2, 2020. The Louvre Museum was closed again Monday as management was meeting with staff worried about the spread of the new virus in the world's most-visited museum. (AP Photo/Christophe Ena)

China's economy delivered hopeful cues, with mainland Chinese stock benchmarks charging back 3% and data showing progress in restoring factory output after weeks of disruptions related to the outbreak.

The country reported 202 new cases of the virus, its lowest daily count since Jan. 21, and the stricken heart of the health crisis, Wuhan, said 2,570 patients were released. At the largest of 16 temporary hospitals that were hastily built in Wuhan in response to the outbreak, worries over the availability of supplies and protective gear abated and pressure

on medical staff eased.

Dr. Zhang Junjian, who leads a temporary hospital at an exhibition center in Wuhan which has a staff of 1,260, said optimism was high that the facility would no longer be needed in the coming weeks.

"If nothing special happens, I expect the operation of our makeshift hospital ... could complete its historical mission by the end of March," Zhang said.



Lee Man-hee, a leader of Shincheonji Church of Jesus, bows during the press conference in Gapyeong, South Korea, Monday, March 2, 2020. In the hastily arranged news conference Lee, the 88-year-old leader of a religious sect which has the country's largest cluster of infections, bowed down on the ground twice and apologized for causing the "unintentional" spread of the disease. (Kim Ju-

sung/Yonhap via AP)

China's sunnier news came two months into its outbreak. In the places the virus has spread more recently, the problems continued to magnify.

South Korea, with the worst outbreak outside of China, said it recorded 599 new cases of the virus Monday, bringing the total to 4,335. The death toll there rose to 26.

To cope, the country said hospitals would be reserved for patients with serious symptoms or preexisting conditions, with mild cases now routed to other designated facilities.

"If we continue to hospitalize mild patients amid the continued surge in infections, we would be risking overworking medical professionals and putting them at greater risk of infections," said the country's vice health minister, Kim Gang-lip.

South Korea said it would keep its schools closed longer than previously announced, with a planned reopening of March 9 delayed another two weeks to March 23. And the leader of a church that's blamed for being the source of the country's largest cluster of infections bowed in apology.



South Korean soldiers wearing protective suits spray disinfectant to prevent the spread of a new coronavirus in front of the Daegu city hall in Daegu, South Korea, Monday, March 2, 2020. (Choi Soo-ho/Yonhap via AP)

"We also did our best but weren't able to contain it fully," said Lee Man-
hee, the 88-year-old leader of the Shincheonji church, which some
mainstream Christian groups reject as a cult.

In the Middle East, a worsening situation in Iran was accompanied by
concern for its top leaders after a member of the council that advises
Iran's supreme leader died of COVID-19.

Iran has confirmed 1,501 cases of the virus and 66 deaths, but many
believe the true number is larger. Its caseload surged more than 250% in

just 24 hours.

Major Shiite shrines remain open despite civilian authorities' calls to close them. The holy cities of Mashad and Qom, where Shiites often touch and kiss shrines in a show of faith, have had high numbers of infections. The Revolutionary Guard said it would install some mobile hospitals in response and authorities have been cleaning the shrines and even spraying down city streets with disinfectant.



Commuters wearing masks stand in a packed train at the Shinagawa Station in Tokyo, Monday, March 2, 2020. Coronavirus has spread to more than 60 countries, and more than 3,000 people have died from the COVID-19 illness it causes. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

"We will have two difficult weeks ahead," said Ali Raibiei, a spokesman for the Iranian government.

Meantime, Israel, an enemy of Iran, was deciding whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stays in power. Among the voting sites were 15 stations especially for quarantined people who may have been exposed to the virus.

In Europe, leaders braced for worsening caseloads after the count surged in France, Italy and to a lesser degree Spain over the weekend. Italy's number of infection ballooned by 50% in 24 hours to 1,694. Health officials in northern Italy sought to bring doctors out of retirement and to accelerate nursing students' graduations to help an overwhelmed public health system.

The Louvre, the world's most popular museum, remained closed as its 2,300 workers expressed fears the site's international appeal could make it a prime target. At Fashion Week in Paris, attendees passed up kisses, instead greeting each other with elbow touches. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel's outstretched hand was rebuffed by her interior minister at a meeting with migrant groups.



Workers wearing protective gear spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a department store in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, March 2, 2020. South Korea has the world's second-highest cases. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



In this photo released by Government Spokesman Office, a health official checks the body temperature of Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha before he delivers policy to the drought management at the Government House in Bangkok, Thailand, Monday, March 2, 2020. Thailand reported its first death form COVID -19 illness on Sunday (Government Spokesman Office via AP)



A worker wearing protective gear sprays disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a department store in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, March 2, 2020. South Korea has the world's second-highest cases. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



Workers wearing protective gear spray disinfectant as a precaution against the new coronavirus at a department store in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, March 2, 2020. South Korea has the world's second-highest cases. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



A thermal camera monitor shows the body temperature of people at the Seoul Railway Station in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, March 2, 2020. South Korea has the world's second-highest cases of the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



A seagull stands in a pole next to parked gondolas at the lagoon on a rainy day in Venice, Sunday, March 1, 2020. Italian tourism officials are worrying a new virus could do more damage to their industry than the Sept. 11 terror attacks. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)



People wearing face masks to prevent the spread of a new coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, March 2, 2020. South Korea has the world's second-highest cases. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



A woman adjusts her protective face mask walks by an office building at the Central Business District in Beijing, Monday, March 2, 2020. China's manufacturing plunged in February as anti-virus controls shut down much of the world's second-largest economy, but companies are confident activity will revive following government stimulus efforts, according to two surveys. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



A woman wearing a protective face mask talks on her phone at the Central Business District in Beijing, Monday, March 2, 2020. China's manufacturing plunged in February as anti-virus controls shut down much of the world's second-largest economy, but companies are confident activity will revive following government stimulus efforts, according to two surveys. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



Saint Raphael Academy stands in the background as Susan Rivet looks on from across the street where she lives in Pawtucket, R.I., Sunday, March 1, 2020, when the state confirmed its first case of the new COVID-19 virus. The Catholic high school posted an online statement Sunday saying students and chaperones who were on a trip to Europe with an infected person will be out of school until March 9. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



A woman wearing a protective face mask walks by rows of bicycles from bike-sharing companies parked outside a subway station in Beijing, Monday, March 2, 2020. China's manufacturing plunged in February as anti-virus controls shut down much of the world's second-largest economy, but companies are confident activity will revive following government stimulus efforts, according to two surveys. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



A woman with a mask shops at a bakery at Shinagawa Station In Tokyo, Monday, March 2, 2020. Coronavirus has spread to more than 60 countries, and more than 3,000 people have died from the COVID-19 illness it causes. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



Lee Man-hee, a leader of Shincheonji Church of Jesus, speaks to the media during the press conference in Gapyeong, South Korea, Monday, March 2, 2020. In the hastily arranged news conference Lee, the 88-year-old leader of a religious sect which has the country's largest cluster of infections, bowed down on the ground twice and apologized for causing the "unintentional" spread of the disease. (Kim Ju-sung/Yonhap via AP)



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A resident receives a temperature check from a security guard as a man collects his online purchased groceries at a pickup point outside a residential apartment buildings which is closed off to the non-resident following the coronavirus outbreak in Beijing, Monday, March 2, 2020. China's manufacturing plunged in February as anti-virus controls shut down much of the world's second-largest economy, but companies are confident activity will revive following government stimulus efforts, according to two surveys. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)



Commuters wearing masks sit on a train in Tokyo, Monday, March 2, 2020. Coronavirus has spread to more than 60 countries, and more than 3,000 people have died from the COVID-19 illness it causes. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

In the United States, authorities have counted at least 80 cases of the virus, two fatal, and concern was driving some to wipe store shelves clean of bottled water, hand sanitizer and other necessities. Both deaths were men with existing health problems who were hospitalized in Washington state.

Investors awaited Wall Street's opening after rallies in Asian markets. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, though, lowered its forecasts for global growth this year and said the world economy could shrink this quarter for the first time in more than a

decade.

"Global economic prospects remain subdued and very uncertain," the agency said.

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