Hong Kong to impose first Covid-19 lockdown on virus-hit district: reports

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Thousands of Hong Kongers will be ordered to stay in their homes for the city's first coronavirus lockdown, local media reported Friday, as authorities battle an outbreak in one of its poorest and most densely packed districts.

The order bans anyone from leaving their apartment unless they can

show a negative test where cases have surged in recent days, and will last until everyone within the designated area has been tested, the reports said.

The South China Morning Post said the measures would come in at midnight Friday into Saturday with some 1,700 police ready to enforce the lockdown covering some 150 housing blocks and up to 9,000 people.

Health officials declined to comment on the proposal at an afternoon press briefing but multiple local outlets reported the lockdown citing government officials throughout Friday.

Hong Kong was one of the first places to be struck by the coronavirus since it burst out of central China.

It has kept infections under 10,000 with some 170 deaths by imposing effective but economically punishing social distancing measures for much of the last year.

Over the last two months it has been hit by a fourth wave of infections with authorities struggling to bring the daily numbers down.

Stubborn clusters have emerged in neighbourhoods within Yau Tsim Mong, a low-income district notorious for some of the world's most cramped housing.

On paper Hong Kong is one of the richest cities in the world.

But it suffers from pervasive inequality, an acute housing shortage and eye-watering rents that successive governments have failed to solve.

The average flat in Hong Kong is about 500 square feet (46 metres squared).

But many squeeze themselves into subdivided flats—cubicles that can be as small as 50-square feet or even less, with shared bathrooms and showers inside ageing walk-up buildings.

It is these kind of buildings where clusters have been located in recent weeks, prompting the first lockdown order.

In recent days health officials began carrying out mandatory testing in some 70 buildings in the area but the government has now decided to test everyone.

"The purpose is to identify those hiding who have not received COVID-19 tests," SCMP quoted an unnamed official involved in the plan as saying on Friday.

The area is also home to many ethnic minorities, mainly South Asian Hong Kongers, a community that often faces discrimination and poverty.

Earlier in the week a senior health official sparked anger when he suggested ethnic minority residents might be spreading the virus more readily because "They like to share food, smoke, drink alcohol and chat together".

Critics countered that poverty and a lack of affordable housing forcing people to live in cramped conditions was to blame for the virus spreading more easily in those districts—not race or culture.

The health official's remarks also came as a video of predominantly white migrants dancing at a packed brunch on the more affluent Hong Kong Island sparked anger.

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