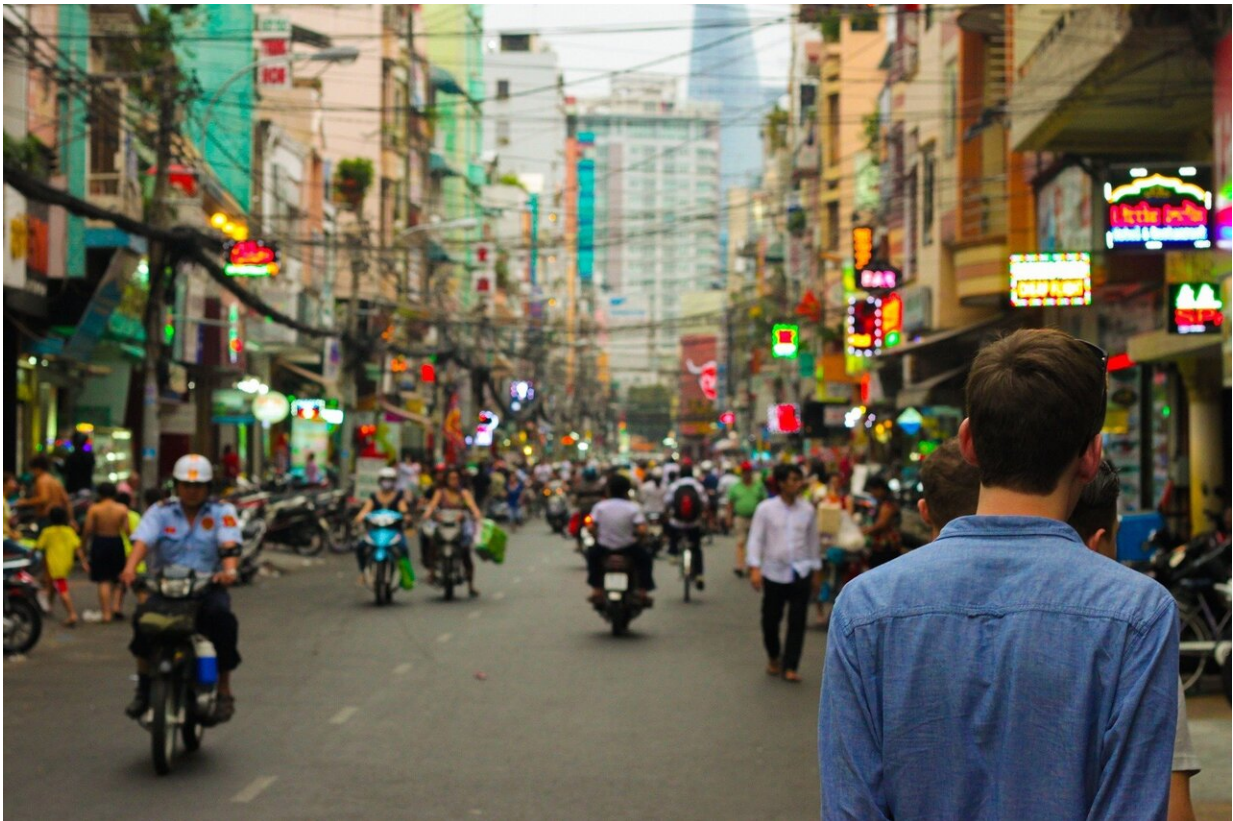


Xi urges steps to 'protect' lives as China battles Covid wave

December 26 2022



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Chinese President Xi Jinping urged officials on Monday to take steps to protect lives in his first public remarks on COVID-19 since Beijing dramatically loosened hardline containment measures this month.

Having mostly cut itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic, China is now experiencing the planet's biggest surge in infections after abruptly lifting restrictions that torpedoed the economy.

Studies have estimated that around one million people could die over the next few months. Many in the population are now grappling with shortages of medicine, while emergency [medical facilities](#) are strained by an influx of undervaccinated elderly patients.

"At present, COVID-19 prevention and control in China are facing a new situation and new tasks," Xi said in a directive, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

"We should launch the patriotic health campaign in a more targeted way... fortify a community line of defence for epidemic prevention and control, and effectively protect people's lives, safety and health," Xi said.

Hospitals and crematoriums across the country have been overflowing with COVID patients and victims, while China's National Health Commission on Sunday announced it would stop publishing daily nationwide infection and death statistics.

The decision to scrap the daily virus count comes amid concerns that the country's blooming wave of infections is not being accurately reflected in official statistics.

Beijing has admitted the scale of the outbreak has become "impossible" to track following the end of mandatory mass testing, as people are now not obliged to declare test results to authorities.

And last week, Beijing narrowed the criteria by which COVID-19 fatalities were counted—a move experts said would suppress the number of deaths attributable to the virus.

The winter surge comes ahead of two major public holidays next month, in which millions of migrant workers are expected to travel to their hometowns to reunite with relatives.

Authorities are bracing for the virus to hit under-resourced rural areas hard, and on Monday called for the guaranteed supply of drugs and medical treatment during New Year's Day and the week-long Lunar New Year holiday, which begins January 21.

The ruling Communist Party and State Council issued a notice calling on officials to "ensure the smooth and orderly adjustment and transition of epidemic prevention and control measures".

Millions infected per day

In recent days, [health officials](#) in the wealthy coastal province Zhejiang estimated that one million residents were being infected per day, while the coastal city of Qingdao predicted roughly 500,000 new daily infections and the southern manufacturing city of Dongguan eyed 250,000 to 300,000.

Unofficial surveys and modelling based on search engine terms suggest that the wave may have already peaked in some major cities, including Beijing and Chongqing.

A poll of over 150,000 residents of the southwestern province of Sichuan organised by disease control officials showed that 63 percent had tested positive for COVID, and estimated that infections peaked Friday.

Only six COVID deaths have been officially reported since Beijing unwound most of its restrictions earlier this month.

But crematorium workers interviewed by AFP have reported an unusually high influx of bodies, while hospitals have said they are tallying multiple fatalities per day, as emergency wards fill up..

The main funeral service centre in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou postponed all ceremonies until January 10 to focus on cremations due to the "large workload", according to a notice published online Sunday.

China's censors and mouthpieces have been working overtime to spin the decision to scrap strict travel curbs, quarantines and snap lockdowns as a victory, even as cases soar.

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