Beds run out at Beijing hospital as COVID brings more sick

January 5 2023

A woman looks after her elderly relative lying on a stretcher as patients receive intravenous drips in the emergency ward of a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing.

The Chuiyangliu hospital in the city's east was packed with newly arrived patients on Thursday. By midmorning beds had run out, even as ambulances continued to bring those in need.

Hard-pressed nurses and doctors rushed to take information and triage the most urgent cases.

The surge in severely ill people needing hospital care follows China abandonment of its most severe pandemic restrictions last month after nearly three years of lockdowns, travels bans and school closures that weighed heavily on the economy and prompted street protests not seen since the late 1980s.

It also comes as the the European Union on Wednesday "strongly encouraged" its member states to impose pre-departure COVID-19 testing of passengers from China.

Over the past week, EU nations have reacted with a variety of restrictions toward travelers from China, disregarding an earlier commitment to act in unity.

Italy—where the pandemic first exacted a heavy toll in Europe in early 2020—was the first EU member to require coronavirus tests for airline passengers coming from China, but France and Spain quickly followed with their own measures. That followed the imposition by the U.S. of a requirement that all passengers from China show a negative test result obtained in the previous 48 hours before departure.

A man pushes his relative in pain on a wheelchair as patients receive intravenous drips in the emergency ward of a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

China has warned of "countermeasures" if such policies were to be imposed across the bloc.

Still, World Health Organization head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Wednesday he was concerned about the lack of outbreak data from the Chinese government.

At a daily briefing Thursday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson

Mao Ning said Beijing has consistently "shared information and data with the international community in an open and transparent manner."

"At present, China's COVID-19 situation is under control," Mao said. "Also, we hope that the WHO secretariat will take a science-based, objective and impartial position to play a positive role in addressing the pandemic globally."

The terse language between China and the WHO contrasts sharply with what critics in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere called an overly friendly relationship between the two as the U.N. organization sought to probe the origins of the pandemic.

A medical worker talks to a woman as elderly patients receive intravenous drips along a corridor in the emergency ward of a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5,

2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

While the first cases were reported in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, China has claimed the virus originated in the U.S. or Europe and has been accused of withholding data that could help narrow the search for the cause.

In dealing with the latest outbreak, China has sought to get more of its elderly population vaccinated, but those efforts have been hampered by past scandals involving fake medications and previous warnings about adverse reactions to the vaccines among older people.

China's domestically developed vaccines are also considered less effective than the mRNA jabs used elsewhere.

Meanwhile, local authorities in some areas are appealing to the public to avoid traveling during this month's Lunar New Year holiday, as the last formal restrictions on movement are lifted.

People wearing face masks browse their phones as they look after their elderly relatives rest along a corridor of the emergency ward to receive intravenous drips at a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

Elderly patients rest along a corridor of the emergency ward as they receive intravenous drips in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

A woman attends to her elderly relative at a corridor of the emergency ward to receive intravenous drips at a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

A medical worker checks on an elderly woman on a stretcher at the emergency ward of a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

An elderly patient receives an intravenous drip while using a ventilator in the hallway of the emergency ward at a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

An elderly patient receives an intravenous drip while using a ventilator in the hallway of the emergency ward in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

An elderly patient rests near a medicine collection counter as people wait in the emergency ward of a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

Patients receive intravenous drips at the emergency ward of a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

An elderly patient wearing a face mask looks as patients wait to see a doctor at the emergency ward of a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

A man listens to his phone as he attends to his elderly relative at a corridor of the emergency ward to receive intravenous drips at a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

A man talks to a medical worker as elderly patients rest along a corridor of the emergency ward to receive intravenous drips at a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong
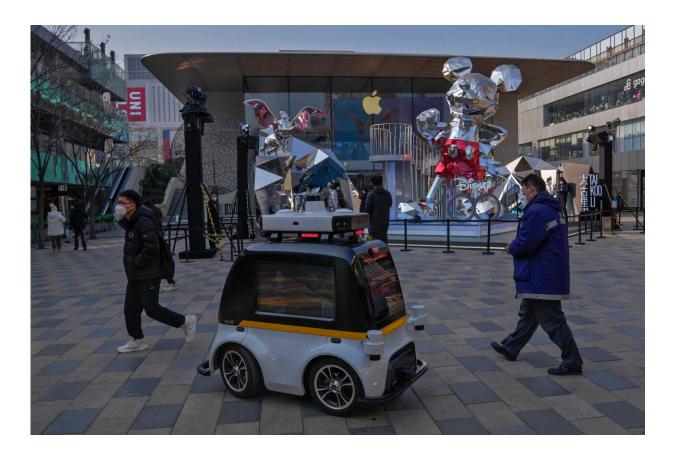
A medical worker talks to a woman as elderly patients receive intravenous drips along a corridor in the emergency ward of a hospital in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. Patients, most of them elderly, are lying on stretchers in hallways and taking oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as COVID-19 surges in China's capital Beijing. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

Visitors wearing face masks tour past an outdoor shopping center displaying a Mickey Mouse statue commemorating the Disney 100th anniversary in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. As COVID-19 rips through China, other countries and the WHO are calling on its government to share more comprehensive data on the outbreak, with some even saying many of the numbers it is reporting are meaningless. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

A woman takes a selfie as visitors wearing face masks tour past an outdoor shopping center displaying a Mickey Mouse statue commemorating the Disney 100th anniversary, in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. As COVID-19 rips through China, other countries and the WHO are calling on its government to share more comprehensive data on the outbreak, with some even saying many of the numbers it is reporting are meaningless. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

A police robot vehicle patrols past masked visitors at an outdoor shopping center in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. As COVID-19 rips through China, other countries and the WHO are calling on its government to share more comprehensive data on the outbreak, with some even saying many of the numbers it is reporting are meaningless. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

A woman and a child wearing face masks walk by a Mickey Mouse statue on display at an outdoor shopping center commemorating Disney 100th anniversary, in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023. As COVID-19 rips through China, other countries and the WHO are calling on its government to share more comprehensive data on the outbreak, with some even saying many of the numbers it is reporting are meaningless. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

"We recommend that everyone not return to their hometowns unless necessary during the peak of the outbreak," the government of Shaoyang county in Hunan province in central China said in a notice dated Thursday. "Avoid visiting relatives and traveling between regions. Minimize travel."

Similar appeals were issued by Shouxian county in Anhui province

southeast of Beijing and the cities of Qingyang in Gansu province in the northwest and Weifang in Shandong on the east coast.

The Weifang government notice said residents should celebrate the holiday with video and phone gatherings.

"Avoid visiting relatives and friends to protect yourself and others," it said.

Despite such concerns, Hong Kong announced it will reopen its border with mainland China on Sunday and allow tens of thousands of people to cross from each side every day without being quarantined. It was unclear what restrictions people traveling to the mainland side would face.

The city's land and sea border checkpoints with the mainland have been largely closed for almost three years and the reopening is expected to provide a much-needed boost to Hong Kong's tourism and retail sectors.