

China virus deaths rise past 800, overtaking SARS toll

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The death toll from the novel coronavirus surged past 800 in mainland China on Sunday, overtaking global fatalities in the 2002-03 SARS epidemic, even as the World Health Organization said the outbreak

appeared to be stabilising.

With 89 more people dying—most in Hubei, the province at the centre of the outbreak—the toll is now higher than the 774 killed worldwide by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), according to official figures.

The latest data came after the WHO said the last four days had seen "some stabilising" in Hubei, but warned the figures can still "shoot up".

Almost 37,200 people in China have now been infected by the virus, believed to have emerged late last year in Hubei's capital Wuhan, where residents are struggling to get daily supplies.

The epidemic has prompted the government to lock down whole cities as anger mounts over its handling of the crisis—especially after a whistleblowing doctor fell victim to the virus.

With much of the country still not back at work after an extended Lunar New Year holiday, cities including financial hub Shanghai ordered residents to wear masks in public.

Michael Ryan, head of the WHO's Health Emergencies Programme, said the "stable period" of the outbreak "may reflect the impact of the control measures."

While the death toll has climbed steadily, new cases have declined since Wednesday's single-day peak of nearly 3,900 people nationwide.

On Sunday, the number of new cases was just over 2,600.

Public anger

Millions of people are under lockdown in Hubei in a bid to stop the virus spreading.

"The local government asked people to stay at home as much as possible, but there is not enough goods in shops each time we get there, so we have to go out frequently," a woman surnamed Wei in Wuhan told AFP.

Wang Bin, from the ministry of commerce, said challenges included poor logistics, price increases and labour shortages.

"It is difficult for the market supply to reach normal levels," he admitted at a press conference Sunday.

In Hubei, there's a five day supply of pork and eggs, and a three day supply of vegetables, he said.

China's central bank said from Monday it would offer up a 300 billion yuan (\$43 billion) boost to help businesses involved in fighting the epidemic.

Melissa Santos, a student from the Dominican Republic living in Wuhan, said she "worried" about going out to buy food for the first time in a week.

"I have read that the virus can be transmitted very fast, in a few seconds," she said.

China drew international condemnation for covering up cases during the SARS outbreak, whereas the measures it has taken this time have been praised by the WHO.

But anger erupted after the death of a Wuhan doctor who police silenced when he flagged the emerging virus in December.

The doctor, 34, died early Friday, after contracting the virus from a patient.

Chinese academics were among those angered by his death, with at least two open letters posted on social media demanding more freedoms.

"Put an end to the restrictions on freedom of speech," one letter demanded.

'Percolating along'

Beijing responded by sending its anti-graft body to launch an investigation, attempting to ease the anger.

But Ian Lipkin—a professor at Columbia University who worked with China on the SARS outbreak—said earlier intervention could have made a key difference.

"This virus was percolating along without anyone realising it was there," he said.

If the quarantine measures have been effective, the epidemic should peak within the next fortnight, Lipkin added—but he warned there is also the risk of a "bump" in numbers when people return to work.

"If, in fact, the methods for containment have been adequate or effective at all... I think we will start to see some dramatic reduction in China around the third week of February," he said.

Lipkin also said warmer weather would help to slow the number of cases.

Global fears

Wuhan has converted public buildings into makeshift medical centres, and built two new field hospitals.

But Wuhan resident Chen Yiping told AFP her 61-year-old mother has severe symptoms and is still waiting for a hospital bed because "there are too many people in need of treatment".

The first foreign victim in China was confirmed this week when an American diagnosed with the virus died in Wuhan.

The only fatalities outside the mainland have been a Chinese man in the Philippines and a 39-year-old man in Hong Kong.

Seventy people on board the Diamond Princess cruise ship off Japan's coast have tested positive, with all passengers told to stay inside their cabins to prevent further infection.

Several countries have banned arrivals from China while major airlines have suspended flights, and Air China cancelled some of its flights to the US.

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