

Multiple countries curtail travel to mainland China as fears mount over coronavirus

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International concern is growing over the 2019-nCoV coronavirus that was identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December of last year. The number of person-to-person transmissions being reported is increasing. With 7,183 confirmed cases in less than a month—of which just 68 are outside China—the number of people infected has already surpassed the 2003 SARS coronavirus pandemic during the same time frame. The lethality of the present epidemic is lower at this point, however, with SARS causing 349 deaths in mainland China compared with 170 deaths thus far caused by 2019-nCoV.

On January 23, the Chinese government took the extraordinary step of effectively placing the entire city of Wuhan and its population of 11 million under quarantine. It has since extended the measure to neighboring cities in Hubei province, restricting the movement of up to 50 million people.

According to the mayor of Wuhan, however, as many as five million people had already left the city before the quarantine, primarily to visit family in other parts of China or the world for the Lunar New Year celebrations. In some cases, it is believed that people who were infected with 2019-nCoV left to seek medical care because they could not get treatment in overwhelmed hospitals and clinics.

The governor of Hubei province, Wang Xiadong, informed reporters that the epidemic was now severe in Huanggang, a city of 7.5 million neighboring Wuhan, with over 1,000 confirmed and suspected cases. He echoed previous officials who have reported significant shortages in medical supplies. Medical teams are being deployed and makeshift hospitals are being erected to handle the growing number of infected individuals.

Cases have now been confirmed in at least 17 countries, including a number of Asian countries, the United States, Canada, Australia, France and Germany. The United Arab Emirates has reported the first case of 2019-nCoV in the

Middle East.

Dr. Michael Ryan, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) Health Emergencies Program, told a press conference yesterday: “The continued increase in cases and the evidence of human-to human transmission outside China are of course most deeply concerning. Although the numbers outside China are still relatively small, they hold the potential for a much larger outbreak.”

The United Nations’ agency UNICEF has rushed six tons of respiratory masks and protective suits for use by the Chinese medical workers on the front line of treating victims. UNICEF executive director Henrietta Fore stated in a press release: “This coronavirus is spreading at a breakneck speed and it is important to put all the necessary resources into halting it. We may not know enough about the virus’s impact on children or how many may be affected, but we do know that close monitoring and prevention are key. Time is not on our side.”

The 16-person WHO expert committee that has been monitoring the virus will meet again today to consider whether to officially declare the outbreak a global public health emergency. Prior to such a declaration, however, countries and international airlines have moved to restrict movement in and out of China.

On Tuesday, Hong Kong placed a ban on entry for anyone traveling from the mainland. Cross-border transit has been severely limited and ferry and rail services to China halted. British Airways has suspended all flights to China while the UK government has warned British citizens against unnecessary travel during the epidemic. South Korea’s Seoul Air and Singapore’s Jetstar Asia have suspended or curtailed flights.

American Airlines has been the latest US carrier to announce it will cut back on flights between the US and China until the end of March. The White House is considering a complete ban on travel, while the US State Department has escalated its travel advisory warning for

travel to Hubei province, the epicenter of the outbreak.

The governments of a number of countries have already, or are preparing to, evacuate their citizens from Wuhan. US diplomats and selected citizens who were flown out of China were cleared through Anchorage, Alaska, and arrived in California. European states are arranging flights for their citizens, while the European Union is partially paying for two flights.

The Australian government has announced that its citizens in Wuhan can leave if they choose one dedicated flight, but they will be taken and quarantined on the remote Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean. The island has become infamous around the world as it is the location of a detention center where refugees seeking to reach Australia were imprisoned.

On Monday, markets tumbled due to fears of the economic impact of the spread of the epidemic. These include forecasts by Forbes that there will be at least a 75 percent decline in passenger traffic between the US and China. San Francisco can expect 344,000 fewer passengers and Los Angeles, 702,000, if the restrictions on flights last for six months. The disruption to economic activity across China has already led to production shutdowns by major transnational corporations and export industries and is likely to slash its overall growth—which accounts for one-third of all global economic expansion each year.

The head of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Alex M. Azar II, told a press briefing on January 28: “The president and I have been speaking regularly about this outbreak, and I have been speaking with the senior officials at HHS and the White House multiple times each day since the outbreak began to represent an international threat. ... We are working hard to keep you safe, we are constantly preparing for the possibility that the situation could worsen, and your health and safety has been and will be our top priority.”

These remarks are contradicted by the fact that President Trump’s federal budget proposal has recommended huge cuts across the federal government, including a 12 percent cut to the HHS and a 10 percent cut to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

The disregard and unpreparedness of national governments for the threat of global pandemics poses immense dangers to the world’s population. The cholera pandemic of 1910–1911 killed more than 800,000 people. The Spanish flu of 1918 claimed anywhere from 20 to 50 million lives. The Asian flu in the mid-1950s killed more than two million. The flu pandemic of 1968 took another

one million lives. At least 36 million people have died from HIV/AIDS and the disease continues to claim lives despite the achievements in retroviral drug treatment, because the cost is so high people in less developed countries cannot afford it.

While the coronaviruses that have broken out over recent decades—such as SARS, MERS and now 2019-nCoV—have not caused such massive death tolls, scientists expect they will continue to emerge and there is always the potential for a severe strain to develop.

Zheng-Li Shi, a Wuhan Institute Virologist and expert on the SARS pathogen, and her colleague Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, a private research organization based in New York, told the *New York Times*: “We’ve been raising the flag on these viruses for 15 years, ever since SARS.” Their work demonstrated that the SARS pathogen was common to local bats but had been able to move into people and use them as hosts.

At this point, 2019-nCoV is believed to have originated in either bats or snakes that were sold for human consumption at live food markets in Wuhan and then mutated to transmit from human to human.

With the sheer scale of the movement that takes place of people between regions and countries in a globally integrated and interdependent economy, the premium must be on international scientific collaboration to identify new viruses as quickly as possible and develop vaccines that can be made freely available as rapidly as possible. The chief obstacle to such work is the capitalist profit system and nation-state divisions.



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