

World Health Organisation officially declares coronavirus a “global health emergency”

James Cogan
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The World Health Organisation (WHO) yesterday decided to formally declare the outbreak of 2019-nCoV, the new coronavirus first identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan, as a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).” The PHEIC classification was only established by WHO in 2005 following the 2002–2003 SARS pandemic. It has been declared on five occasions since, in response to the 2009 Swine Flu, the outbreaks in 2014 of Ebola and polio, the 2016 Zika virus and the 2019 resurgence of Ebola in central Africa.

Chinese authorities reported last night that the number of confirmed cases of 2019-nCoV has reached at least 8,100. The virus has spread from its source in Wuhan across mainland China and now around the world. At least 100 cases—predominantly people either from or who had visited Wuhan—have been diagnosed in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia, South Korea, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, France, Finland, the United States and Canada. Dozens of suspected cases are under investigation in other countries.

The number of deaths directly linked to 2019-nCoV infection, which can lead to severe pneumonia that cannot be treated with antibiotics or existing antiviral drugs, currently stands at 171. All of the fatalities were in China and, according to Chinese authorities, were mainly older people with existing medical conditions. The fatality rate, at around 2.7 percent, is low in comparison with other coronavirus outbreaks such as SARS and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). As with any virus, there is the possibility that as it spreads it could mutate into a far more deadly strain.

Like SARS and MERS, 2019-nCoV is an animal virus that has migrated to infect humans, most likely originating in either bats or snakes. At present, scientists postulate that it is being transmitted between people via respiratory “droplets” spread by coughing, so most likely can only be contracted if someone is in close and protracted proximity to an infected individual. By way of comparison, the common influenza

virus, which spreads between people far more easily, has infected at least 15 million Americans and caused at least 8,200 deaths just in the 2019–2020 flu season.

In designating 2019-nCoV a global public health emergency, WHO officials took into account the evidence that the rate of human-to-human transmission outside China is increasing.

WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a press conference last night: “The main reason for this declaration is not because of what is happening in China, but because of what is happening in other countries. Our greatest concern is the potential for the virus to spread to countries with weaker health systems, and which are ill-prepared to deal with it.”

The media has generally interpreted this statement as a reference to so-called underdeveloped or “Third World” countries. In fact, the United States—where there is now one reported case of human-to-human transmission in Chicago—would be high on the list of concern. Tens of millions of people live in extreme poverty and lack any health insurance, while the public health system is drastically under-resourced. If several thousand patients sought treatment at the same time for severe respiratory illnesses in a major American city, it would completely overwhelm the medical system. A comparable situation exists in virtually all the so-called “advanced” capitalist countries.

The dangers are heightened by the likelihood that a vaccine for 2019-nCoV will not be developed for at least four months and would most likely not be available for roll-out to the general population for well over a year. One factor in the time length is the lack of collaboration between dozens of rival medical clinics internationally, which will be striving to patent a vaccine so their corporate owners can profit from its sale.

The international unpreparedness for serious pandemics—in terms of adequate medical facilities, dedicated quarantine wards and coordinated research teams—is reflected in the panicked responses to the coronavirus being announced

around the world.

In China, health workers have reportedly had to deal with insufficient testing kits to diagnose the virus and shortages of protective suits to guarantee their own safety. In one Wuhan hospital, a nurse told CNN that at least 30 of the 500 staff are now infected. Hospitals have run out of beds and are telling people to go home unless they are displaying severe symptoms. Chinese authorities have rushed 1,800 additional doctors and specialists to Hubei province, while two temporary hospitals with a combined 2,300 beds are being rapidly built to cope with the number of patients.

Since January 22, the Chinese government has attempted to seal off Wuhan and other cities in Hubei province to try and stem the spread the virus. In total, some 50 million people are living under travel bans. As with all such blanket measures, however, those with wealth and power easily circumvent them. Moreover, 2019-nCoV was first identified in late December. By the time the quarantine was declared, as many as five million people had moved in and out of Wuhan, the largest city in central China, including thousands who travelled overseas. A factor in the spread of the virus was that people travelled elsewhere in China because they could not get treatment in the city.

Long after the virus has well and truly gone global, most airlines have now suspended or reduced their flights in and out of China. Airports internationally have erected elaborate screening measures to try and identify potential carriers of the virus, though infected people do not exhibit any symptoms for as long as seven to 10 days. Russia and North Korea have sealed their borders with China. In Italy, panicked authorities refused to allow thousands of people aboard a cruise ship to disembark due to suspicion that two passengers may have been infected. Test results came back negative.

A number of countries have organised flights to evacuate their citizens from the Wuhan region, but then placed them in quarantine in often substandard conditions. The Australian government stands out for its callousness. It is seeking to charge hundreds of Australian nationals \$1,000 to be evacuated and intends to isolate them on the remote Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean and house them in the bleak facilities built to imprison so-called illegal refugees.

Amid the geostrategic and economic tensions between the United States and its allies and China, various demagogues are seizing the opportunity presented by the virus outbreak to stoke anti-Chinese xenophobia and sing nationalist praise of their own countries.

The *Washington Post* lambasted the Chinese government in the headline of an editorial yesterday for having “put everyone at risk” due to the lag between when the virus was identified and health warnings and drastic quarantine

measures were announced. The *Post* implied that in the US, the “free press” would have ensured that information emerged more quickly. In fact, as has emerged time and again, the major American newspapers and networks collaborate just as intimately to censor information, on behalf of the government and the corporate ruling class, as their Chinese counterparts.

The Rupert Murdoch-owned *Australian* published today a particularly obscene piece by right-wing academic Salvatore Babones. He implied that the reason why coronaviruses have migrated from animals to humans in China and not in Australia was because Chinese—due to Confucianism and “communism”—relied on the state and did not “self-organise” to ensure sanitation and public health.

Babone wrote: “Australian civil society accomplishes what 100 million bureaucrats cannot—it ensures good public health by promoting safe practices broadly, across every niche of the economy, nearly all of the time.”

The utter stupidity of such nationalist assertions can be seen in the way that decades of Australian government indifference and inaction have left the population totally unprepared for the devastating impact of climate-change linked droughts, fires and floods. People have had to “self-organise” in fire-affected towns and regions over recent weeks because the emergency services and social support networks have been so deprived of resources that they are unable to provide the needed assistance.

The virus outbreak, like the climate change-linked natural disasters wreaking havoc on the lives of millions of people, starkly poses the necessity of international scientific planning and organisation and the investment of hundreds of billions of dollars into health and safety infrastructure, emergency services and preventive measures. The obstacle is the capitalist system, which subordinates economic and social life to the accumulation of private profit for a minority and maintains the division of the integrated and interdependent global economy into competing national states.



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