Coronavirus cases continue to increase and spread internationally

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On Friday morning, Chinese health authorities announced 5,090 new cases of Covid-19, the coronavirus that emerged in Hubei province's capital Wuhan in December, raising the total across mainland China to 63,581. The death total climbed to 1,380, with 121 additional deaths reported. Worldwide, the total case number stood at 64,453, with 1,383 total deaths. There have been only three fatalities outside of China. The latest was in Japan, where an 80-year-old woman from Kanagawa died. She had been on board the Diamond Princess cruise ship, that is moored in Yokohama with over 3,700 passengers and crew being held under strict quarantine.

On Thursday, confusion arose internationally when officials in Hubei announced 14,840 previously undeclared cases and 242 additional deaths—dramatically increasing the numbers. Provincial authorities explained that testing kits to confirm a coronavirus infection were in such severe shortage that many individuals suffering from respiratory infections or who may have perished could not be tested. A decision was therefore made to change the criteria for designating someone with Covid-19 using clinical judgments or imaging diagnostics.

If the more than doubling in fatalities noted on Thursday implies cases are now being reclassified that were otherwise missed, the total number of deaths across mainland China may be far higher than the current estimate. According to Alessandro Vespignani, a physicist and director of the Laboratory for the Modeling of Biological and Socio-technical Systems at Northeastern University, various models suggested on February 5 that there were far more infections than the official figure. He said: "I believe every modeling approach [was] pointing to something that [was] over 100,000 cases in the best-case scenario."

With Covid-19 registering a 2 percent fatality index, a more robust estimate of the death toll would therefore be over 2,000.

More worrisome has been signs of growing rates of infections in countries bordering or within the geographic boundaries of mainland China. Singapore now has 67 confirmed cases. Two recent confirmed cases occurred in Singaporeans who developed symptoms on February 1 and February 3, respectively. Assuming a virus incubation period of two to three weeks, it raises the possibility that many more infections outside of China will be diagnosed over the next several weeks, as people appear to be able to infect others before symptoms surface.

Changi Airport in Singapore is one of the busiest hubs in the world. Just in 2019, it handled 68,300,000 passengers, making it the third busiest airport in Asia and seventh internationally. Several of the international cases in the United Kingdom and South Korea have been traced back to Singapore.

Apparently, a gas meter sales meeting held in January at the Grand Hyatt, a luxury hotel in Singapore, adjacent to a beehive of racy nightclubs and busy restaurants, may have been the nexus for the international spread of the coronavirus. Global health authorities are seeking to confirm this possibility.

Dale Fisher, chair of the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network that is coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO), said: "We do feel uncomfortable obviously when we diagnose a patient with the illness and we can't work out where it came from… the containment activities are less effective."

China National Pharmaceutical Group, also known as Sinopharm, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, announced on Friday that it has been able to recover neutralizing antibodies from patients who have recovered from Covid-19. Their press agents reported that, in laboratory trials, they were able to show that these antibodies effectively killed the virus. Additionally, they have successfully prepared plasma from patients and have used

it in the treatment of 11 others in critical condition and noted significant results. The first phase of the trial occurred on February 8.

Sinopharm stated: "The plasma product to treat the novel coronavirus is made from plasma loaded with antibodies donated by recovered patients. It went through virus inactivation and was tested against virus-neutralizing antibodies and multiple pathogenic microorganisms."

The containment of the epidemic, however, let alone its end, remains unpredictable. In a concerning development, the first case in Africa was confirmed today in Egypt, with the patient reported only as a "foreigner." Suspected cases are under quarantine in several other African countries.

The World Health Organization is particularly alarmed about the implications of the virus taking hold in populations where the medical system is vastly ill-prepared to cope with a sudden rush of people requiring intensive care.

Michel Yao, WHO Africa program manager for emergency operations, told the *Lancet* journal: "We all know how fragile health systems [are] in the African continent, they are already overwhelmed by many outbreaks. For us, it is critical to detect coronavirus earlier [so] that we can prevent spreading within communities that can trigger a number of cases that can overwhelm the treatment capacity."

In China, the national government is seeking to placate widespread popular outrage at the belated response of authorities to the virus outbreak. Beijing has sacked two senior officials from Hubei Province. Zhang Jin, the Communist party chief of the health commission in Hubei province, and Liu Yingzi, the director of the health commission, were both removed for their "failures" to act decisively early in the epidemic or to offer appropriate care to their people. They have been replaced by close allies of President Jinping.

According to the *Guardian*, "337 officials in Hubei were 'penalized,' including six officials who were fired for dereliction of duty. Officials from the Red Cross Society in Hubei were also removed. A team from China's anti-corruption agency, the national supervisory commission, has been sent to Hubei to investigate Dr. Li Wenliang's death."

Chinese authorities have confirmed 1,716 health care workers have been infected, many during the early course of the epidemic when there was a shortage of special protective gear and clothing, and no warnings that they were dealing with a new virus. At least six have died, including Doctor Li Wenliang, who was threatened by police in December for raising concerns.

President Xi Jinping has called for an overhaul of the health emergency response system and a review of laws on infectious disease prevention and treatment, including wildlife protection. He admitted: "There is not enough preparation for a catastrophe, the risk assessments, research, and in-depth management for emergencies are not in place. There are inadequate monitoring and early warning systems, and the foundations of emergency management need to be strengthened."

Borrowing from the populism of Chairman Mao, Xi has declared a "grassroots people's war" against the virus. China's vice premier Sun Chunlan proclaimed: "Hubei and Wuhan must not delay in taking decisive measures to identify all suspected and confirmed cases without compromise and ensure all those who must be rounded up are rounded up." Authorities have launched a campaign to enforce mass quarantine of the infected and feverish, including those with close contacts with the afflicted.

Trump administration's economic adviser Larry Kudlow asserted that they were disappointed with China's response to the coronavirus and that China had not invited US health officials to help with the outbreak. "We thought there was better transparency coming out of China, but it doesn't appear to be."

Kudlow's remarks come on the heel of US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross's gloating comment that the Covid-19 epidemic will weaken China and "help accelerate the return of jobs to North America." Such statements are attempts to exploit a human tragedy to undermine the perceived main economic rival of US capitalism in the eyes of financial investors.

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