

Chinese government defends its response to coronavirus

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The World Health Organization (WHO) announced on Friday that a team of 12 international experts and 12 Chinese counterparts would begin its investigation into the Covid-19 coronavirus outbreak that first made its appearance in Wuhan in late December of 2019 as a pneumonia-like respiratory infection. An open seafood market where live wild animals were sold was thought to be the origin of the infection, though evidence from initial small clinical trials suggest some patients who were infected had no exposure to the seafood market.

The WHO team is being led by Dr. Bruce Aylward, whose work in 2016 included designing and implementing reforms in addressing major infectious disease emergencies. During the Ebola epidemic in West Africa from 2015 to 2016, he served as Special Representative of the Director-General for the Ebola Response. The goals for the mission in China include outbreak prevention in urban and rural areas and attempting to understand the origin of the infection, as well as the severity of the disease it has caused.

The Trump administration's economic adviser Larry Kudlow remarked on Thursday that the US was "disappointed" China had not "invited in" US assistance, despite Americans accounting for 13 of the 25 names that WHO submitted to China for possible participation in the expert team. It remains unclear how many Americans will be included and what their roles will be. Additionally, the teams will be limited to Beijing and the Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Sichuan. Hubei province and Wuhan City are not on their itinerary, raising concerns, according to Kudlow, about "the transparency" of the mission.

The epidemic has raised distrust and political tensions between Washington and Beijing to new heights. Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, has rejected the Trump administration's criticism and instead slammed

the US for not providing "substantive assistance" and for overreacting by instituting a travel ban.

WHO has been under increasing pressure for its delay in declaring the pandemic a global emergency from the start. Beijing has also come under fire by the international community, as well as its citizens, for mishandling the early stages of the outbreak by attempting to downplay the seriousness of the viral outbreak.

Chinese authorities have recently acknowledged that President Xi Jinping had been aware of the developing outbreak as early as January 7. In an internal speech given on February 3, which was subsequently released and published in the party's bimonthly journal *Qiushi* on Saturday, President Xi stated that he had "issued demands about the efforts to prevent and control" during a closed-door secret meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee. He also confirmed that he had authorized the shuttering of Wuhan City and other cities in the Hubei province on January 23. "I have at every moment monitored the spread of the epidemic and progress in efforts to curtail it, constantly issuing oral orders and also instructions," he asserted.

The statement, however, has been mainly commented on as it confirms that Xi and the top leadership did not order public health alerts for over two weeks after being fully aware that a new virus was infecting people in Wuhan. This disclosure comes on top of concerns that the central leadership has remained detached from events that have radically affected the lives of tens of millions of people through strict lockdowns and travel restrictions.

In an attempt to control the fallout on the international stage, China's ambassador to Washington Cui Tiankai attempted to quell concerns and place the Politburo in a favorable light in a lengthy interview

with National Public Radio. He said: “He [President Xi] set up a central government mechanism to fight this virus, and he had made a tour in Beijing, visited two communities, encouraged people, [and] gave people good hope. Without his strong leadership, the nationwide effort would not be that strong. And he also talked with foreign leaders, many of them, including President Trump on the phone. They had a very good conversation on the phone last week.”

Chinese authorities intensified the restrictions on movement in Hubei province over the weekend, ordering all rural villages to stay home until further notice, impacting an additional 24 million people. People returning to Beijing must self-quarantine for two weeks. These restrictions will only further impede Chinese businesses from gearing back to full production.

Rajiv Biswas, APAC chief economist at HIS Markit, wrote in an email: “Even though a significant share of China’s manufacturing plants has resumed operation this week, many plants are still operating at far below capacity due to labor force shortages.” The number of people who have returned to major cities where they are employed is about 25 percent of last year’s figures. China’s efforts to restart its economy is colliding with its efforts to quickly bring an end to the epidemic.

Meanwhile, in Tokyo’s Yokohama harbor, the luxury cruise ship, Diamond Princess, continues to remain in quarantine where it has become an epidemiological nightmare. As of Sunday, 454 people—well over 12 percent of the 3,711 passengers and crew who were on board—have become infected with Covid-19, the largest confirmed cluster outside of mainland China. Countries including Canada, Italy, South Korea and more recently the US, have been getting their citizens off the vessel.

A day before the US was to extract 328 Americans, the embassy in Tokyo had told the passengers that no one infected would be allowed to get on the charter flights back to the US. Yet, as the passengers were being loaded on to buses and taken to the airport, 14 passengers’ test results confirmed they were infected. After a chaotic exchange with health experts, the US government allowed them to board, but isolated them on the aircraft.

The number of Covid-19 cases globally stands at 72,436 and 1,868 fatalities. There have been two additional deaths over the weekend outside of mainland

China—one in France and one in Taiwan. Hubei province reported 1,886 new cases and 98 further deaths on February 18. The number of new cases has continued to drop, suggesting that control measures have had a positive impact on controlling the epidemic. Concerns, however, linger as Singapore and Japan totals continue to climb and the finding of a Covid-19 case in Egypt has raised fears of the impact of the epidemic if it obtained a hold on the African continent.

WHO has been placed in a precarious position as US officials have added fuel to the fire by stating that they “do not have high confidence in the information coming out of China” regarding the data they are sharing about the epidemic. Mike Ryan, executive director of the WHO’s emergencies program, said: “This is a very obviously tense political environment because of the economic issues and because of everything else. Please, let our scientists get on. Let our public health professionals get on. Let them work together.”



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