US evacuates Americans from quarantined cruise ship in Japan

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The Covid-19 virus is continuing to spread on the cruise ship Diamond Princess, which has been anchored in Yokohama harbor and held in quarantine since February 3. At least 542 cases have now been confirmed out of a total count of 3,711 passengers and crew on board.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institute of Health, bluntly stated: “I’d like to sugar-coat it and try to be diplomatic about it, but it failed. People were getting infected on that ship. Something went awry in the process of the quarantining on that ship. I don’t know what it was, but a lot of people got infected.”

The cohort of cases aboard the Diamond Princess is by far the largest outside of mainland China and has highlighted the contagiousness of the virus.

On Sunday evening, 328 Americans were flown back to Travis Air Force Base in California and to Texas. As they were beginning to leave by bus from the harbor to Haneda airport, Japanese health authorities informed US officials that 14 passengers had tested positive for the coronavirus. At the last moment, after a chaotic exchange of communications, US officials allowed the infected evacuees to board the planes because “they were not yet exhibiting symptoms.”

US health officials defended their actions by explaining that they had no indication from their Japanese counterparts that test results were going to be provided prior to departure and therefore had to make critical decisions on evacuating people. Once the evacuees had arrived at Haneda, the 14 passengers were isolated to makeshift containment areas built out of plastic sheets. The back of the cabin of the aircraft returning to the US were rigged with an isolation box, where the infected people were placed to separate them from the rest of the passengers.

The two planes touched down in California and Texas, where the passengers will stay for two weeks in quarantine. A select number of “high-risk” cases were then flown to Omaha, Nebraska. Other countries, including Australia, Canada and South Korea, are in the process of working with Japanese authorities to fly their citizens home after they have been cleared to disembark from the ship.

There are now more than 1,000 cases outside of mainland China, including over 600 in Japan, 81 in Singapore and 62 in Hong Kong. The WHO and other medical agencies are concerned over the possibility of the outbreak taking hold in another country and heightening the danger that it develops into a global pandemic. WHO officials have particularly raised fears of the virus spreading within populations where the health system is poorly equipped to deal with a sudden and large number of patients requiring intensive care.

Dr. Michael Ryan of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) health emergencies program has complained that crucial information regarding the spread of the coronavirus outside of mainland China has been difficult to obtain from many countries. “We continually ask [national health authorities] that they share with us the core data that we need, and I would say that it hasn’t been smooth sailing with any country so far because we’ve had to request a number of countries to speed up data sharing,” he stated

Scientists such as epidemiologist Ian Lipkin of Columbia University, Edward Holmes of the University of Sydney and Kristian Anderson from Scripps Research have affirmed that the genetic structure of the virus indicates it developed naturally, and not in a laboratory. This work has been carried out, in part, to quell rumors that the virus was genetically engineered.

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US Senator Tom Cotton, a Republican from Arkansas, suggested in a Fox interview, without any evidence, that the coronavirus could have come from a biosafety level-4 facility in China, designed to work with extremely dangerous viral contagions.

As of yesterday morning, 75,182 cases have been confirmed internationally, of which 74,185 have been diagnosed in mainland China. Hubei province, the epicenter of the outbreak, has suffered 61,682 cases and 1,921 of 2,009 deaths caused by the virus so far.

An initial study in China has found that 80.9 percent of infected people had experienced only mild symptoms,13.8 percent were suffering severe illness and 4.7 percent were assessed as critical. The overall fatality rate is currently estimated at around 2.3 percent. Most of those who have died were elderly and/or had pre-existing medical conditions.

At least 10 percent of China's population, some 150 million people, are now under some form of government restriction on their movements, as part of strict quarantine measures to limit the spread of the virus.

The economic impact is becoming more severe, with large manufacturers and financial corporations reporting concerns over their future earnings. Apple released a statement on February 17 to their investors that resumption of work after the Lunar New Year holidays in China has been severely affected by the epidemic. The corporation reported: "Work is starting to resume around the country, but we are experiencing a slower return to normal conditions than we had anticipated. As a result, we do not expect to meet the revenue guidance we provided for the March quarter." Apple had forecast up to $67 billion in revenues.

Though iPhone manufacturing sites are located outside of Hubei province, its facilities have not resumed normal production, leading to a contraction in the global supply. Demand in China for Apple products has also slowed, due to store closures and very low customer traffic at those few stores that are open. China is Apple's third-largest market with $43 billion in revenue in 2019.

HSBC's Chief Financial Officer Ewan Stevenson told Reuters that it might have to take $600 million in additional provisions against loan losses if the pandemic persists into the second half of this year. HBSC is a British transnational investment bank and financing services holding company with large operations in Hong Kong and China. It is planning to cut 35,000 jobs and slash $4.5 billion in costs due to the impact of the epidemic and the months of political unrest in Hong Kong.

On Tuesday, the Dow slipped on Apple's report on iPhone production and the sharp fall in Chinese demand in opening sessions but recouped some of the losses by the afternoon. Apple stocks fell 2 percent. Shares fell in most Asian markets. Uncertainties are partially being driven by the global reliance on factories in China returning to full capacity and concerns about the running down of inventories. Japan and Germany, in particular, are facing slowdowns or declines in their GDP.

The Covid-19 epidemic is expected to lower global economic growth by 0.2 percent to an anemic annual rate of 2.3 percent. This would be the slowest growth since the global financial crisis of 2008.

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