

Coronavirus cases outside China are alarming, global health officials say

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As of February 21, 76,825 cases of coronavirus, or Covid-19, have been diagnosed. This week Chinese health officials reported they would revert to confirming cases of Covid-19 using test kits, further adding to the confusion on the actual trends in the epidemic being reported in mainland China.

The true infection rate will probably not be known for some time until positive serological tests can be performed on the population. Some epidemiologists have compared the 2019-nCoV epidemic to a very severe flu season, indicating that we may be facing coronavirus seasons like the flu in years to come. There is great urgency to develop a vaccine or antiviral therapy.

There have also been 2,250 deaths attributed to the 2019-nCoV, with 18,903 people who have recovered from their infection. The bulk of these fatalities have occurred in Hubei province, the epicenter of the epidemic. Data for 19,047 “closed cases” indicated that 16,917 (89 percent) recovered and were discharged, while 2,130 (11 percent) succumbed to Covid-19. Health officials have warned that recovered patients who have undergone nucleic testing of nasal swabs are demonstrating that they continue to harbor the coronavirus. They have speculated that these patients may still be capable of infecting others.

According to Worldmeter, there are presently 55,905 active cases, down from a peak of 58,622 on February 18. Of these cases, 79 percent are considered mild, presenting with flu-like symptoms. The rest of the cases numbering 12,064 patients (21 percent) are in serious condition and require hospitalization and a higher level of care, which can include supplemental oxygen and possibly intensive care with ventilator support. Overall, about five percent were in critical condition, of which a little more than two percent have died.

The Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC) recently published its data on 44,000 cases of Covid-19. The death rate reported in Hubei province stands at 2.9 percent, while in the rest of the country it remains much lower, with 0.4 percent dying from complications related to the infection. Elderly with medical conditions are at a significant risk of dying from acquiring the infection. The absolute case fatality rate for those over 80 years of age approached 15 percent.

Admittedly, the Chinese medical staff is at the highest risk of becoming infected due to their close contact with the afflicted and also because of frequent lack of adequate protective supplies. The recent report of the demise of Dr. Lie Zhiming, the 51-year-old neurosurgeon and director of the Wuchang Hospital in Wuhan, has again provoked outrage and frustration. Over 1,700 Chinese health care workers have been infected.

The trend in the total number of cases in China has continued to plateau with reports of daily confirmed cases declining now for more than a week, although confirmation of recent Covid-19 cases in prison populations caused a spike in new cases yesterday. Also, the trend in the number of deaths attributed to Covid-19 has appeared to have reached its inflection point.

However, cases outside of mainland China have been steadily climbing, standing presently at 1,361. World Health Organization health officials’ sentiments remain mixed. While there are assurances that the epidemic is being contained on mainland China now with the lowest reported daily case counts, there are also troubling signs that the epidemic may be advancing in other countries.

Though Japan has the highest count in the “other countries” category, the majority of these have been attributed to the growing cluster of cases on the Diamond Princess luxury cruise ship harbored in Yokohama, now standing at 634 out of 742 total cases in the country. Two infected Japanese passengers, who were recently evacuated to local hospitals, have died. Both were in their 80s and suffered from chronic medical ailments. Travel advisories to Japan have now been issued, while the government has begun suspending major public events.

As of Friday morning, Japanese officials have called the two-week quarantine on the luxury cruise liner over, and those who were testing negative, approximately 500 individuals, have disembarked. Virologists are studying the catastrophe on board to attempt to understand why the virus was so contagious. They speculate that a super spreader phenomenon was at play or that the virus can survive on multiple surfaces. They will also study the infectivity of the contagion and its distribution of severity to compare with those being reported in Hubei province.

The fallout from the returning 14 infected Americans from Japan has garnered attention in major news outlets. The

Washington Post reported that Trump administration health officials were in a fierce debate with the CDC who disagreed with the State Department, contending that those individuals posed a considerable risk for infecting those who remained disease-free. According to the *Post*, “Efforts to prevent the new pathogen from spreading have revealed the limits of the world’s readiness for an unprecedented public health emergency.” At certain times of social crisis, the mainstream media can express the simple truth but is unable to offer a suitable antidote.

In a show of international disunity, another luxury liner, the *MS Westerdam*, which had left port from Hong Kong to Japan on February 1 for a 14-day excursion, found itself left a castaway in open waters as four countries refused it harbor over concerns of Covid-19, though all passengers were reportedly well. Finally, after two weeks at sea, Cambodia offered a berth at the port of Sihanoukville. The ship was carrying 1,455 passengers and 802 crew members.

In a precarious maneuver, Cambodian President Hun Sen allowed passengers to disembark with little else than having their temperatures taken to prove they were not ill. He greeted them as they set foot on the ground for a photo opportunity prohibiting any face masks or wearing protective gear. Though Cambodia is a strong ally of China, with their economies closely linked, analysts speculated that this stunt was an attempt by the Cambodian president to ingratiate himself with the US.

Approximately 650 of those who had been on board were Americans. One of those passengers, an 83-year-old female, who flew to Malaysia along with 144 others, developed a high fever upon landing in Kuala Lumpur. She was tested, and it was confirmed she had Covid-19. Cambodia then proceeded to quarantine the remaining passengers, but by then, however, hundreds had already left the country.

Though the number of cases in Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan has stabilized, South Korea recently noted a rapid escalation of cases over three days, tripling the previous number of cases. Presently there are 204 documented cases of Covid-19.

With the sudden spike in cases, South Korean Prime Minister Sye-Kyun declared the Covid-19 epidemic an emergency. The cities of Daegu and Cheongdo have been declared “special care zones.” The military bases are also on lockdown as three soldiers were found infected. The 2.5 million population of Daegu has been told to stay home, initiating an essential lockdown.

Iran has also now confirmed a total of 13 new cases, bringing their total to 18, with two additional deaths. Lebanon and Israel have confirmed their first cases, indicating that Covid-19 may be getting a foothold in the Middle East. Ukraine’s Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that on Thursday, clashes occurred between residents resisting efforts by the government to quarantine 45 Ukrainians and 27 foreign citizens at a facility at

Poltava region.

Meanwhile, Chinese officials are reeling from a cluster of Covid-19 cases taking place in cramped prisons across three provinces, affecting more than 500 prisoners. Beijing has sent in a team of law enforcement personnel to begin investigating the fiasco that has caught the news media by storm.

He Ping, head of the ministry’s Bureau of Prison Administration, said, “With a heavy heart and sense of responsibility, I am reporting to you that as of February 20, five prisons in Hubei, Shandong and Zhejiang have reported infections among their populations.” Beside several guards becoming infected, authorities suspect that the infection has spread to a juvenile detention center in Zhejiang province.

South China *Morning Post* reported that Xie Wijun, Communist Party secretary of the province’s Department of Justice, and seven prison officials were summarily relieved of their posts for mismanagement. These are a series of political fallouts that continue as China and the world are thrown into a social turmoil.

Speaking on behalf of the financial oligarchs of the world, President Xi Jinping at a meeting of the Communist Party Politburo said, “Priority should be given to ensure leading companies that are important in the global supply chain restore production and supply, maintaining the stability of the supply chains. It is necessary to help key export enterprises resume work and production as soon as possible.”

According to Oxford Economics’ Global Economic Model forecast, the rapid spread of the coronavirus infection will weaken China’s GDP growth sharply in the short term, having a ripple effect on the rest of the globe. The global growth rate for quarter 1 of 2020 is expected to slow to just 1.9 percent and for the year down from 2.5 percent to 2.3 percent. GDP in 2019 stood at 2.6 percent. In practical terms, this amounts to \$1.1 trillion in lost income.



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