

Fears grow of pandemic as coronavirus takes hold internationally

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Health officials sounded the alarm over the weekend due to the sudden and rapid rise of new cases of COVID-19 infections in South Korea, Italy and Iran. Of particular concern to the World Health Organization (WHO) and other agencies, many of the cases lack an epidemiologic link to China, where the virus outbreak began last December in the city of Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province.

In response, global stock markets plummeted on opening yesterday. The Dow fell over 1,000 points by closing. The Nikkei 225 fell 4 percent on opening. Among the stocks that suffered the largest falls were those of airlines and technology companies. The price of Brent crude fell almost 5 percent to slightly over 55 dollars a barrel. The market turbulence provoked by fear over the impact of the virus spread came on the heels of the sour economic news that Japan's GDP has fallen 6.3 percent and Eurozone growth has slowed to 0.1 percent.

The 2019-nCoV virus has proven to be a much more complex pathogen than virologists have experienced in the past. Scientists are still attempting to understand why it is so highly contagious and whether the virus is being transmitted via surfaces, water pipes, and ventilation ducts. The SARS epidemic in 2003 infected 8,000 people in 10 months. In contrast COVID-19 has caused 80,000 infections in just over two months—and many cases may have been undiagnosed.

Though the overall fatality index is much lower than SARS, registering at between 1 to 2 percent of people infected, COVID-19 deaths are already triple the number caused by the 2003 outbreak. The incubation period of the virus is estimated at around 14 days, but there have been confirmed cases of people not displaying symptoms for as long as three to four weeks. Further confounding health authorities, there are

indications that people who have recovered may continue to carry and spread the virus.

China's efforts to contain the virus through unprecedented quarantine measures and harsh travel restrictions appear to have brought the epidemic in Hubei and surrounding provinces under a degree of control. On Monday, 509 new cases were reported across China, of which 499 are in Hubei. The number of confirmed cases in mainland China stood at 77,658 as of yesterday and the number of deaths at 2,663.

But as the WHO warned, the actions of the Chinese government only bought the world some time to prepare. That time appears to have run out, as infections rates accelerate dramatically in countries like Iran, Italy and South Korea. Though the WHO has still not classified COVID-19 as a global pandemic, it appears likely it will make that decision in the near future.

Ahmad Amirabadi Farahani, a lawmaker in the Iranian city of Qom, contradicted the government's toll of 12 deaths from COVID-19 and stated that at least 50 people had died and more than 250 people were in quarantine. Qom is known as a center for religious studies, with many people from across Iran and surrounding countries traveling there to study. Kuwait, Bahrain and Afghanistan have now confirmed cases, with officials indicating that the victims were people infected in the Iranian city of Mashhad. In rapid succession, Turkey, Iraq and Pakistan have shut their borders with Iran.

Reports indicate that health care workers in Iran have limited access to protective gear, placing them in great danger of infection. There have been criticisms that city and government officials have done little to confront the stark reality that Iran is facing an epidemic of large-scale proportions. Parliamentary national elections

went ahead last Friday, but turnout was significantly affected by fear of contagion.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has rebuked Washington over the coronavirus threat. Iran is being subjected to crippling sanctions by the US over its nuclear program, which have had a devastating impact on its national health system. Doctor Chen Xi, assistant professor of health policy and economics at the Yale School of Public Health, stated: "The sanctions over decades have also intensified a shortage of medical supplies. Their diagnostic technologies are also lagging behind. I think the international community should work together to transparently share passengers' travel data, standardize the accuracy of test kits, and allow humanitarian aid to ship to Iran."

Washington, however, will more than likely politicize the epidemic by doubling down on sanctions and demanding that Iran submit to US diktats in exchange for "humanitarian support."

The northern Italian regions of Veneto and Lombardy have become a hotbed for the virus, with 10 towns now under quarantine, affecting more than 50,000 people. The number of cases jumped from 152 to 219 in twenty-four hours. Two more people have died raising the total to six, with 26 patients still in intensive care. The renowned Venice carnival, which draws visitors from around the world, has been canceled. Milan, the country's main commercial and economic center, is under threat of a quarantine. Panic buying has led to supermarket shelves being emptied. Authorities have deployed the military to enforce quarantine regulations.

South Korea has reported 231 new cases over the past several days, raising the total to 833 as of Tuesday. President Moon Jae-in has placed the country on the highest alert, giving the government the ability to use sweeping police-state tactics to enforce a massive lockdown. In an emergency meeting, Moon stated: "The coming few days will be a critical time for us. The central government, local government, health officials and medical personnel and the entire people must wage an all-out, concerted response to the problem."

Over the weekend, the World Health Organization held an Emergency Ministerial Meeting with the African Union and the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The European Union has pledged a paltry \$124 million to fight the COVID-19

outbreak, with half to go to the WHO's call for global preparedness. Some funding will go directly to health authorities in Africa.

The WHO has identified thirteen "priority countries" because of their direct economic links and high-volume travel with China. All have substandard public health systems and are particularly vulnerable if a major outbreak takes place. WHO has initiated a preparedness plan to provide \$675 million in support, as well as shipped 30,000 sets of protective equipment.

Hospitals across the United States have been warned to begin preparing for a surge of COVID-19 patients. CNBC reported that an outbreak "could overwhelm emergency rooms and quickly cause supply shortages of some crucial medical supplies, according to half a dozen interviews with doctors, US hospitals and health systems."

The epidemic has exposed again how woefully unprepared capitalist governments are around the world to combat the outbreak of infectious diseases. From one nation to the next, the response of authorities to the epidemic has been to try to seal the borders and impose authoritarian restrictions on people's movements. While various research facilities and medical companies are claiming to have made progress toward developing a vaccine for COVID-19, the large-scale delivery of any vaccine is unlikely for at least 18 months.



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