World Health Organization warns of need for urgent response as coronavirus cases surpass 100,000

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The number of cases caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has now surpassed 100,000, while the death toll has increased to nearly 3,500. Covid-19 is now at least 12 times as infectious and has killed more than four times as many people as the 2002-2003 SARS outbreak, and is continuing to spread at an alarming rate.

"This is not a drill," said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organization, in a press conference Thursday. "This is not a time for excuses. This is a time for pulling out all the stops."

Dr. Ghebreyesus's remarks came as new cases in mainland China reached new lows while new cases outside the country continued to spike. There have been fewer than 200 new cases in Wuhan, the origin of the epidemic, for the past five days, while there have been more than 2,000 new cases each day since March 2. If the current trends continue, the total number of cases outside China will surge past the number of cases within China by the end of the month.

The spread of the virus has now reached 97 countries, prompting the shutdown of many major social and cultural events. Germany's second largest book fair, held in Leipzig, has been canceled because of coronavirus fears. The annual tech, music and film festival SXSW in Austin, Texas will not be held this year, which will cost the city hundreds of millions in tourism, ticket sales and other revenue. The American Physical Society last week canceled its annual meeting with only 34 hours of notice, leaving a large section of its 10,000 members, including many graduate students, saddled with the cost of a wasted plane ticket.

It has also caused several doctors to work themselves to exhaustion and even death. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that, as of Monday, there have been 18 deaths among medical workers caring for Covid-19 patients. This includes some who have died directly from the virus, and others, such as 28-year-old pharmacist Song Yingjie, who worked at a highway stop for 10 consecutive days and then died from cardiac arrest induced by exhaustion. In another incident, Dr. Xu Hui laid down "and never got up" after caring for patients for 18 days straight. Three thousand medical staff in China have been infected so far and dozens more in other countries.

The increase in new coronavirus cases internationally, particularly in South Korea, Iran, Italy and the United States, is especially concerning. When the WHO issued the final report on its Joint Mission to China last week, it noted that while the mortality rate outside of Hubei province, which includes Wuhan, was at 0.7 percent, the mortality rate at the start of the crisis was more than 17 percent because the local health care systems were totally overwhelmed.

This gives an indication of how many people will die in an area affected by the coronavirus that has adequate hospitals and medical facilities, and how many will die in areas that do not. In Italy and Iran, the mortality rate is currently 4.2 and 2.6 percent, respectively, while the mortality rate in South Korea is 0.65 percent, largely thanks to the aggressive measures taken by the government to test more than 150,000 people to date and quickly quarantine and treat those that are infected.

At the same time, Italy has tested 23,345 individuals, while the United States, which currently has a death ratio of 5.1 percent, has tested only 1,500 individuals. Vice President Mike Pence has stated that "we don't

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have enough tests today to meet what we anticipate will be the demand going forward." Only yesterday did Trump commit $8.3 billion to fight the spread of the disease, no doubt lamenting that the money could otherwise have bought eight new nuclear-capable B-2 stealth bombers.

Officially confirmed cases in crowded areas such as Los Angeles and New York City have been increasing, indicating that the virus has been spreading virtually undetected in these areas for weeks, especially given the infection's two-week incubation period.

If, for example, the virus takes off in New York City and infects 1 million people, the results will be catastrophic. An estimated 200,000 of those patients would require an intensive care unit and another 64,000 would require respirators and oxygen. The amount of extra medical infrastructure required to handle such a crisis does not exist in the entire country, much less in a single city. The number of resultant deaths would be in the tens of thousands.

Another indication of the disastrous lack of preparation for the virus in the US was released Thursday by the professional nursing organization National Nurses United. NNU surveyed 6,500 of its members, investigating the ability of the US health care system to handle and contain cases of the novel coronavirus.

It found, in short, that the majority of hospitals and clinics are totally unprepared for an outbreak. Fewer than two-thirds have a policy to ask about travel or exposure history if a patient is exhibiting symptoms of the coronavirus. Only 29 percent have a plan to isolate and treat a patient with Covid-19. A mere 14 percent have an overflow plan to get additional personnel to provide the necessary care to fight the disease. And just under one in five hospitals has a policy in place to inform its employees about known or suspected cases of exposure to the virus.

The survey also asked nurses if they have adequate equipment. Only 63 percent reported having access to high-end N95 masks, and only 27 percent of hospitals have powered air purifying respirators, a lesser form of a hazmat suit. Less than a third of nurses reported that they have enough masks, coveralls, gloves, gowns and goggles to safely treat their patients.

American universities are also largely unequipped to handle the coronavirus. The University of Washington, with 50,000 students across the Seattle metropolitan area, has shifted solely to online classes amid concerns of the infection spreading across its campuses. These measures will remain in place for the rest of the winter quarter, and it is unclear whether or not classes will resume normally in the spring.

At Montana State University, the administration formally canceled all travel to Italy on March 6. But it has told its students studying abroad in that country not to leave before March 10 in order to finish classes. The students are also being forced to bear the cost of changing their flight plans and won't be refunded the money they spent to join the study abroad program in the first place. The university reportedly will not be facilitating testing of the returning students and faculty, setting itself up to become ground zero for coronavirus cases in the region.

As the coronavirus continues to spread, it is clear that it is possible to prevent the spread of the disease. Quarantine measures are effective, as has been shown in China, and effective tests to detect Covid-19, even if a person has no symptoms, have been designed in a matter of weeks.

The problem of stopping the disease is not one of science, but of politics. There is a great divide between the vast potential of modern medicine and the irrationality of a society based on the profit motive and the division of the world into nation-states. This chasm can be bridged only as part of the urgent struggle for socialism.

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