Chinese study warns ending zero-COVID policy would be “a great disaster”

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on China would have been “disastrous” if the country had followed the “herd immunity” and “opening up” policies adopted by the United States and European countries, according to a paper published by China’s Centre for Disease Control and Prevention last week.

The group of mathematicians, who produced the report, concluded: “Even in a highly underestimated outbreak scenario under the most optimistic assumptions, once China adopts the control and prevention strategies of some typical western countries, the number of the daily new confirmed cases in China would likely rise up to hundreds of thousands of cases, and among which more than 10,000 cases would present with severe symptoms.”

By contrast, the number of confirmed cases in China on Saturday in the current widespread outbreak was just 23—down from 25 the day before.

The paper warned that “severe cases would exceed the peak number nationwide in early 2020 within 1–2 days, which would have a devastating impact on the medical system of China and cause a great disaster within the nation.”

The vast majority of China’s total of 127,764 confirmed cases and 5,697 deaths occurred when authorities were wrestling with the outbreak of an unknown severe respiratory disease in Wuhan in the early months of 2020, which was finally successfully suppressed. Subsequent outbreaks have all resulted from the entry of infected individuals from outside China.

To make their estimates, the mathematicians used a well-known epidemiological model to calculate case numbers if China had followed the policy of the reference countries. The estimates were based on conservative assumptions—that the population densities, vaccination coverage and vaccine efficacy for China were the same as the other countries.

The calculated figures are thus a “plausible lower bound.” China’s higher population densities, lower vaccination coverage and less effective inactivated vaccines mean that the case numbers would be even higher.

The results are staggering. With the US as the reference country, China would expect the number of daily cases to exceed 637,000. Based on an analysis of the ratio of cases to severe cases in a recent COVID-19 outbreak in Yangzhou, the paper concluded that daily severe case numbers if China followed US policies would be more than 22,000.

The results for the other reference countries—the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Israel—were similar with huge numbers of daily cases and severe cases. The lowest estimate for the UK was still in the hundreds of thousands—275,000 daily cases with nearly 10,000 daily severe cases.

The mathematicians concluded that China should not adopt the “living with the virus” policy that has been implemented by governments around the world with disastrous results. The figures are not only a warning of the dangers of China abandoning its zero-covid strategy, but an indictment of the murderous policies adopted by virtually every other government.

The total number of cases and deaths to date based on the World Health Organisation (WHO) for the other countries considered in the study are as follows:

The United States: 47,837,599 cases and 771,919 deaths

The United Kingdom: 10,146,919 cases and 144,775 deaths

France: 7,388,196 cases and 116,427 deaths

Spain: 5,131,013 cases and 87,955 deaths

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Israel: 1,342,439 cases and 8,189 deaths

If the mathematicians had done their estimates in reverse—that is, had calculated the daily and cumulative cases and serious cases for all of the reference countries if they had adopted China's zero-covid policy—then the vast majority of the more than a million deaths in those five countries would not have taken place.

With a total population less than half that of China, it would certainly be reasonable to expect the cumulative death toll of the five countries to be less than that of China—currently 5,697. That figure is exceeded every week in the United States.

Undoubtedly, the consequences of the criminal "herd immunity" policy were calculated behind closed doors in Washington, London, Paris, Madrid and Tel Aviv but never made public. The priority of the governments was "open up" in line with the demands of the financial and economic elites—in other words, to put profit ahead of the lives and health of working people.

Now the same governments are responding to the emergence of the new Omicron strain that appears to be more transmissible and deadly than the Delta strain with the same criminal indifference for the terrible death toll that it will exact.

Moreover, the Western media is pressing for China to end its zero-covid strategy—firstly, because it is disrupting China's huge manufacturing export industries on which the world economy relies, and secondly, because it too graphically exposes the homicidal policy of "living with the virus."

A growing stream of articles and comments in the US and international media attempts to discredit the zero-covid policy by focussing on the inconveniences posed by mass testing and contact tracing, limitations on travel and public health restrictions. While acknowledging the broad popular support inside China for the government's policy, articles play up limited complaints that mainly come from elements of the upper-middle class. At the same time, other articles hammer away at the economic impact of the restrictions.

In a thinly-veiled criticism of China, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken gushed with praise for South Africa last weekend for its quick identification of the Omicron variant and "its transparency in sharing this information, which should serve as a model for the world." Along with its promotion of the lie that COVID-19 emerged from a Wuhan laboratory, the US has repeatedly blamed China for its supposed "lack of transparency".

In reality, Chinese scientists very rapidly identified the virus that caused the disease and its full genetic sequence. Chinese health authorities quickly provided that information to the WHO which was the basis of its warnings to other countries. The highly transmissible and deadly character of the virus was well known to governments around the world as well as the measures taken in China to suppress it.

The Trump administration deliberately ignored and downplayed the dangers for weeks, resulting in the very fast spread of the virus once it emerged in the US. The limited public health restrictions followed by the lifting of those measures under pressure from big business—a policy continued by the Biden administration—have led to a horrendous death toll, unparalleled except in the time of war.

While Blinken praises South Africa's rapid response and transparency, the Biden administration, along with most governments around the world, has again chosen to downplay the likely consequences of the Omicron variant. Other than a restriction on travellers from southern Africa, none of the necessary public health measures have been implemented—a decision that can only accelerate the current wave of infections and deaths.

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