

Omicron wave overwhelms health system in Hong Kong

Our reporter
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Despite formally adhering to mainland China's zero-COVID policy, weaknesses in the Hong Kong government's pandemic policies have permitted the highly-transmissible Omicron variant to sweep through the territory's 7.4 million residents. On Friday, daily reported cases exceeded 10,000 for the first time and on Saturday they reached 17,000, with 66 deaths, including a teenager.

Ho Pak-leung, an infectious diseases expert from the University of Hong Kong, told the media that he estimated that about 200,000 Hong Kong residents probably had been infected in the past four weeks. The cases that had been reported only accounted for a third of that figure.

When the upsurge began in mid-January, the Hong Kong administration, which is sensitive to the demand of sections of the territory's business and financial elite, failed to implement the proactive mass testing and partial lockdowns that have succeeded in suppressing outbreaks in numbers of Chinese cities.

Reflecting the criminal "let it rip" policies of governments around the world, the European Chamber of Commerce issued an unprecedented letter to Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam last year stating that the strict quarantine measures then in place would "lead many in the international community to question if they want to remain indefinitely trapped in Hong Kong when the rest of the world is moving on."

In mid-February, however, as case numbers were spiralling out of control, Chinese President Xi Jinping issued a "directive" to the Hong Kong government to suppress the spread of the virus in line with Beijing's highly effective "zero-Covid" policy. Xi's message, published in two of the city's newspapers, was that controlling the pandemic was "the overriding task at present". He offered assistance to ease storages of food

and other items as well as help in building treatment and isolation centres.

While the Hong Kong administration has implemented some measures to suppress the virus, it is clearly concerned about big business profits. When asked last week if a full city lockdown would occur, Lam was cautious in her response, saying it "depends on the city's particularities."

One of the rationales given for the lack of shutdown measures was that the densely-populated territory lacked the mainland's community networks and social workers to ensure supplies of life necessities to households.

As a result, Hong Kong's cumulative total of infections has surged from just under 13,000 at the beginning of the year to over 100,000.

The territory's fifth wave began when two flight crew members reportedly flouted quarantine rules. However, local infections started getting out of control after a returning traveller returned a positive test during hotel quarantine. The spread occurred so fast that Hong Kong's contingency plans proved completely inadequate.

The large numbers of patients have stretched hospital admissions beyond breaking point. Last week, hospital staff at the Caritas Medical Center in Sham Shui Po faced overwhelming conditions. They were left feeling helpless as the flood of patients broke capacity, limiting their ability to take care of each patient properly.

Distressing scenes were captured by local media. Often elderly patients were lying on gurneys or beds in car parks and overcrowded tents outside hospitals. Medical staff across all other hospitals faced exhausting conditions due to understaffing and a lack of planning. Nurses said they are concerned about their own risk of infection. About 1,200 healthcare workers had been

infected as of Wednesday, according to the Hospital Authority.

Ambulance services are being overwhelmed as well. Emergency call times being met (responding within 12 minutes) have dropped from 92.5 percent last year to 23.3 percent. Only 185 out of 260 ambulances were operating at 5pm on Friday.

Last week, the government belatedly ordered all residents to go through three rounds of mandatory coronavirus testing next month. Mainland medical workers and advisers began arriving last week, including critical care workers, as did 25 million KN95 masks and 10 million testing kits. The Beijing government is also building temporary hospital wards and isolation units, but these measures may be too late. Modelling predicts 180,000 infections and 100 deaths daily by mid-March.

Long waits for COVID screening across many of Hong Kong's testing stations have also brought about concerns of increased infection. Many people waited for hours. In some cases, residents ended up catching public transport to other parts of Hong Kong to get tested, further increasing the risk of spreading the virus.

Residents have complained about the poor communication and confusing testing arrangements, expressing a lack of confidence in the government's ability to stave off the spread.

Vaccination rates remain below those of the mainland. About 77 percent of residents are double-vaccinated compared to near 90 percent on the mainland, and only about 25 percent are triple-vaccinated.

School and university students have been learning from home since January. Last week, the government decided to shift the summer holidays forward several months to start in March and repurpose schools as testing, vaccination and isolation centres.

Limited social distancing measures, including the closure of gyms, bars, and swimming pools, and no dine-in services at eateries after 6 pm, have been extended until April 20. A ban on flights from nine countries—including Australia, Canada, India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, the UK, and the US—will be extended until April 21.

The fifth wave is hitting vulnerable people hard, including migrant domestic workers. Philippines and Indonesian domestic workers who live with families as

cleaners, cooks and childminders face homelessness if tested positive with COVID, because their employers refuse to allow them to stay in the house. So far, 70 domestic helpers have been forced to seek help with emergency housing and some have ended up sleeping on the street.

Tiny subdivided flats are making it difficult for poor families to isolate from each other if testing positive. The Society for Community Organisation has received more than 500 calls from families living in tiny flats who were infected but had nowhere to quarantine.

Hong Kong is a highly unequal society. Recent figures have shown 1 in 5 (1.65 million) people living in poverty, a 12-year high. Another recent study concluded that two-thirds of underprivileged families have at least one family member out of work due to the pandemic.

Significantly, residents have willingly fought the battle against COVID-19. When the pandemic first emerged, working-class people implemented their own anti-COVID measures, long before the government's official response. Residents were already wearing masks and taking social distancing measures. Families and friends communicated with each other, reporting COVID cases through social media and Whatsapp groups.

The people of Hong Kong are no strangers to epidemics, with the tragedy of the 2003 SARS outbreak still in the collective consciousness. People have supported government restrictions despite deep-seated distrust from two years of unrest and violent repression.

The current crisis in Hong Kong is a reminder that the pandemic can end only through coordinated efforts on an international scale. The deadly "live with the virus" drive in other countries demonstrates the human cost when capitalist interests dominate over lives.



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