

Beijing reports three COVID-19 deaths as cases continue to surge across China

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The latest surge of COVID-19 infections in China continues to deepen in major cities throughout the country, with the National Health Commission (NHC) reporting a near-record 27,095 total new cases on Sunday, bringing the seven-day average of daily new cases to 23,056. Also over the weekend, health authorities in Beijing reported three official deaths from COVID-19, including a 91-year-old woman and an 88-year-old man, the first deaths in China since May 26.

So far, the deepening surge has been met with a limited response from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government, affirming the assessment of the *World Socialist Web Site* that the CCP has begun a shift away from the Zero-COVID elimination strategy, which had been in place since the start of the pandemic. It is entirely possible that the CCP will reinstate Zero-COVID as the crisis deepens, but at this point there has been no sign of reversal as infections are mounting.

On November 11, the NHC released 20 changes to the “dynamic zero” policy, all of which curtail the measures needed to stop viral transmission of COVID-19. These include reductions in mass testing, contact tracing, quarantine and isolation protocols, and above all the limitation of citywide lockdowns which have proven to be the most effective measure at quickly suppressing transmission.

The NHC is framing the 20 changes as intended to resolve “problems of excessive and one-size-fits-all approaches,” but it is now clear that they represent the beginning of a shift away from the Zero-COVID policy. The implications of this shift are increasingly coming into focus as the current surge progresses.

China’s capital Beijing, home to 21.5 million people, is now experiencing its worst COVID-19 outbreak since the start of the pandemic, with a record 962 cases

detected on Sunday. Instead of implementing a mandatory citywide lockdown, local authorities have responded by requesting that residents voluntarily stay at home, without providing any financial assistance to workers that cannot afford to do so. While many residents are following this recommendation and some schools have voluntarily switched to remote learning, businesses throughout the city remain open.

In nearby Shijiazhuang, a city of 11 million people, cases have steadily risen, with 641 reported on Sunday. In response, local authorities have refrained from issuing a lockdown and instead announced Sunday that mass testing will take place in six of the city’s eight districts over the next five days. They also encouraged residents to shop online and ordered some schools to switch to remote learning.

Roughly one-third of all new infections in China are taking place in Guangdong province, which now has a seven-day average of 8,706 daily new cases, with most taking place in the provincial capital Guangzhou, home to nearly 19 million people. Instead of implementing a robust citywide lockdown, since November 5 local authorities have implemented partial lockdowns of different districts in the city. On Monday, a five-day lockdown began in Baiyun, the most populous district in Guangzhou, while dine-in services, night clubs and movie theaters in the city’s main business district were ordered to temporarily close.

It bears reviewing the experience of last spring’s surge in Shanghai to recognize the shifts taking place across China at present.

On March 28, 2022, the seven-day average of daily new cases in Shanghai stood at 3,662. After officials in Shanghai had stated repeatedly that they would not implement a citywide lockdown, national authorities finally intervened and demanded that they do so.

Almost exactly two months later, the city finally emerged from the lockdown, with over 380,000 total infections and 337 deaths.

The experience in Shanghai underscored the need to expand the Zero-COVID strategy in response to the highly infectious Omicron variant. Throughout the country, authorities should have been advised to implement citywide lockdowns more promptly, as soon as cases begin to surge, in order to quickly contain serious outbreaks. They should have ensured that every resident is provided with N95 or better masks, renovated infrastructure in all public spaces to limit airborne transmission, provided full funding to every city to maintain mass testing and other necessary public health measures.

Instead, five months later, the opposite path is being taken. The refusal to implement a citywide lockdown in Guangzhou is particularly revealing. At present, the seven-day average of daily new cases in Guangzhou is 138 percent higher than this figure was in Shanghai on March 28, when a lockdown was finally implemented.

Undoubtedly, the CCP faces immense economic pressures from global finance capital, which for over two years has demanded the lifting of Zero-COVID in order to maximize production and the exploitation of the Chinese working class. The belated lockdown in Shanghai was very costly, and in recent months many cities have accumulated substantial bills for mass testing which must be paid to testing companies.

Furthermore, many companies have signaled that they intend to shift production away from China as long as Zero-COVID remains in place, most notably Apple. Following the announcement of the 20 measures, stocks surged and foreign investors celebrated. On Monday, however, the Shanghai Composite Index was down 0.8 percent as multiple Chinese consumer stocks fell amid the growing spread of COVID-19 and fears that the remaining mitigation measures would continue to be too disruptive to production.

Speaking on the 20 measures, PineBridge Investments portfolio manager Hani Redha told the *Wall Street Journal*, “All eyes are on China. Any attempt to reopen is going to be tricky because we know the pattern with these things: you get a spike in cases. We haven’t even really got going and there are already a lot of cases.”

The Chinese ruling class is clearly stuck in a

quandary, in which they are being compelled to fully reopen their economy while knowing full well that the ensuing public health crisis could itself cause disastrous economic ramifications.

While at this point the CCP is maintaining the most robust mitigationist program in the world, they will continue to face unrelenting pressure to lift all mitigations and embrace the mass infection “herd immunity” strategy now dominant globally.

If China ultimately abandons all measures against COVID-19, the results would be catastrophic. Current vaccination rates in China are not publicly available, but a recent article from the *South China Morning Post* noted, “as of mid-August, the booster shot rate among China’s elderly was just around 68 per cent” without specifying the precise age range for “elderly.”

According to the latest data available from Statista, as of March 17 only 51 percent of Chinese people 80 years or older had two doses of the vaccine, and only 20 percent had been boosted. Rates have surely increased since then, but it is widely acknowledged that this eldest section of the population remains the least vaccinated, due to more widely held beliefs in traditional Chinese medicine. Significantly, there are 36 million people in this age group living in the country who now face tremendous risks due to the lifting of Zero-COVID.



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