
17 Die From China's Coronavirus, Over 470 Affected Amid Global Fears

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BEIJING/SHANGHAI: Deaths from China's new flu-like virus rose to 17 on Wednesday, heightening global fears of contagion from an infection suspected to have come from animals.

The previously unknown and contagious coronavirus strain emerged from the central city of Wuhan, with cases now detected as far away as the United States. Officials believe the origin to be a market where wildlife is traded illegally.

The latest death toll in Hubei province, of which Wuhan is the capital, had risen to 17 by 1200 GMT on Wednesday, state television quoted the provincial government as saying.

Hours earlier, officials had put the toll at nine dead, all in Wuhan, and more than 470 cases confirmed in China.

Contrasting with its secrecy over the 2002-03 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that killed nearly 800 people, China has this time given regular updates to try to head off panic as millions travel at home and abroad for the Lunar New Year.

"The rise in the mobility of the public has objectively increased the risk of the epidemic spreading," National Health Commission vice-minister Li Bin said.

The World Health Organization (WHO) began an emergency meeting to rule if the outbreak was a global health emergency.

After official appeals to stay calm, many Chinese were cancelling trips, buying face masks, avoiding public places such as cinemas and shopping centres, and even turning to an online plague simulation game or watching disaster movie "The Flu" as a way to cope.

"The best way to conquer fear is to confront fear," said one commentator on China's Twitter-like Weibo.

The virus has spread from Wuhan around China to population centres including Beijing, Shanghai, Macau and Hong Kong.

Abroad, Thailand has confirmed four cases, while the United States, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan have each reported one.

President Donald Trump said the United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had a good containment plan. "We think it is going to be handled very well," he said at Davos in Switzerland.

Respiratory Threat

Li said the virus, which can cause pneumonia, was being spread via breathing. Symptoms include fever, coughing and difficulty breathing. About 2,200 people in contact with infected people were in isolation.

There is no vaccine for the virus.

"I believe the government for sure, but I still feel fearful. Because there's no cure for the virus," said Fu Ning, a 36-year-old woman in Beijing. "You have to rely on your immunity if you get an infection. It sounds very scary."

Fears of a pandemic initially spooked markets, with aviation and luxury goods stocks hit and the yuan falling, but they were regaining their footing on Wednesday in approval of China's containment response.

Across China, companies from Foxconn to Huawei Technologies and HSBC Holdings were warning staff to avoid Wuhan and handing out masks. Terry Gou, the billionaire founder of Apple supplier Foxconn, said he was advising employees not to visit China.

With more than 11 million people, Wuhan is central China's main industrial and commercial centre and an important transport hub, home to the country's largest inland port and gateway to its giant Three Gorges hydroelectric dam.

WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic said new cases would appear as China stepped up monitoring. But Li said there was no evidence of "super-spreaders" capable of disseminating the virus more widely, as happened during the SARS outbreak. SARS was thought to have crossed to humans from civet cats sold for food.

Global Precautions

Airports round the world have stepped up screening of people from China.

Russia's consumer safety watchdog said it had strengthened its sanitary and quarantine control, Britain said it would start enhanced monitoring of passengers arriving from Wuhan and

Singapore started screening all passengers arriving from China.

The Chinese-ruled gambling hub of Macau confirmed its first case of pneumonia linked to the coronavirus and tightened body-temperature screening measures.

A first case of the virus emerged in Hong Kong on Wednesday, media reported. The patient arrived via high-speed railway from the mainland and had been quarantined.

"The whole world is watching," the city's commerce secretary, Edward Yau, told Reuters at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Mexico said it was investigating a potential case of the virus.

North Korea banned foreign tourists from Wednesday due to the virus, several foreign tour operators said, losing one of its main sources of foreign currency.

Sport too was affected, with some qualifying boxing matches for the 2020 Olympics set for Wuhan cancelled and women's football qualifiers shifted to Nanjing.

China's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, the top legal authority in the communist-ruled country, posted on Tuesday that anyone failing to report virus cases "will be forever nailed to the pillar of historical shame".

But despite such openness, some experts were sceptical.

"We have reason to doubt whether surv (surveillance) is adequate as cases mount," tweeted Lawrence Gostin, a public health expert at Georgetown University Law School in Washington.
