

# UNPRECEDENTED STEP: ON WUHAN LOCKDOWN

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

In a bid to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus that emerged in the city of Wuhan in Hubei Province in early December last year, China took a drastic and unprecedented step this week [to shut down the city](#), thus preventing its 11 million inhabitants from leaving. All modes of transport have been suspended to prevent residents from exiting the city. Authorities also planned to suspend public transport services in Huanggang, a city of seven million; shut rail stations in Ezhou; and impose travel restrictions in Chibi. These moves come in the wake of an increasing number of people getting infected and even dying. As on January 23, the number of infected people in China stood at 571 and deaths at 17. Wuhan, the hotspot of the disease outbreak, has reported nearly 80% of all cases and all the 17 deaths. Further, the virus has spread to 24 provinces within the country and outside as well — cases have been reported in Thailand and Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, U.S., Hong Kong, Macau, Vietnam, and Singapore. That the virus has already acquired the ability to spread from one person to another has been confirmed by the World Health Organization. Apart from people in close contact with affected individuals, 16 health-care workers have been infected. The WHO now sees possible evidence of sustained transmission — the ability of the virus to spread beyond just clusters of patients.

Residents of China's virus-hit Wuhan call for support

The decision to enforce shutdowns came on a day when WHO's Emergency Committee was deliberating on whether the coronavirus outbreak should be declared a "public health emergency of international concern". With a split verdict and not enough information available to make a decision on Wednesday, the emergency committee reconvened on Thursday. The WHO Director-General took note of China's decision and said that the travel ban is a reflection of the significant measures taken by China to minimise the spread of the virus. Even the chair of the committee said the travel ban is an "important information and will certainly be useful for the reflection of the members of the committee". These observations run counter to the stand the WHO has always taken even when it announces public health emergency. While declaring the Ebola virus disease outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a public health emergency last year, the WHO had stated unequivocally that it is "essential to avoid the punitive economic consequences of travel and trade restrictions on affected communities". That said, even if it limits the spread outside these cities, shutdowns cannot prevent human-to-human transmission within the cities. Shutting down entire cities go beyond the normal practice of quarantining infected people and might backfire.

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