

41 MN PEOPLE IN 13 CITIES LOCKED DOWN AS VIRUS SPREADS IN CHINA

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

Dealing with the outbreak: Staff transporting medical supplies at the Wuhan Red Cross Hospital on Friday. AFP/HECTOR RETAMAL

Chinese authorities rapidly expanded a mammoth quarantine effort aimed at containing a deadly contagion on Friday to 13 cities and a staggering 41 million people, as nervous residents were checked for fevers and the death toll climbed to 26.

While the World Health Organization (WHO) held off on declaring a global emergency despite confirmed cases in half a dozen other countries, China expanded its lockdown to cover an area with a total population greater than Canada's.

A range of Lunar New Year festivities have been cancelled, while temporary closures of Beijing's Forbidden City, Shanghai's Disneyland and a section of the Great Wall were announced to prevent the disease from spreading further.

The previously unknown virus has caused alarm because of its similarity to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed hundreds across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-03.

The WHO said China faced a national emergency but stopped short of making a declaration that would have prompted greater global cooperation.

The outbreak emerged in late December in Wuhan, an industrial and transport hub of 11 million people in China's centre, spreading to several other countries, including the U.S.

China is in the midst of its Lunar New Year holiday, a typically joyous time of family gatherings and public festivities.

But on Friday, Wuhan was a ghost town, its streets deserted and stores shuttered.

Worried patients

Hospitals visited by AFP journalists bustled with worried patients being screened by staff wearing full-body protective suits.

At a temperature-check station, a medical staffer in bodysuit, face mask and goggles took a thermometer from a middle-aged woman, pausing to examine the reading before quickly turning back to the patient.

One 35-year-old man surnamed Li voiced the fears of many. "I have a fever and cough, so I'm worried that I'm infected," he said. "I don't know the results yet."

With hundreds of millions of people on the move across China for the holiday, the government has halted all travel out of Wuhan, shut down its public transport and told residents to stay home. Deepening the isolation, there were few flights available to the city.

Besides Wuhan, 12 other smaller cities nearby have battened down the hatches, with most of them going public on Friday with various measures ranging from closing public venues and restricting large gatherings to halting public transportation and asking citizens not to leave their cities.

Several of the cities have populations numbering several million, led by Huanggang, which has 7.5 million.

The pathogen — 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) — has caused many outlets in Shanghai, Beijing and other cities to sell out their stocks of face masks.

State broadcaster CCTV reported that 40 medical doctors from the military were being brought in to help with intensive care.

In addition, 405 medical workers were being sent to Wuhan from Shanghai, said state news agency Xinhua, with the first set of 135 flying in Friday night.

On Friday, staff in full body protective suits were seen checking the temperatures of people entering a subway station in Beijing.

Thermal cameras scanned passengers arriving at Beijing's West Railway Station.

'Work as one'

Chinese authorities said the number of cases leapt overnight to more than 800, with 177 in serious condition. There were another 1,072 suspected cases.

Officials also said that a virus patient died in Heilongjiang province in China's far northeast, the second death outside the Wuhan epicentre.

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