

ALARMING SPREAD: ON NOVEL CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

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[India is still novel coronavirus free](#), even as 18 countries/regions have reported 67 cases, as on January 28, according to WHO. As on Monday, all 20 samples sent to the National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune were negative, according to a Health Ministry tweet on Tuesday. Besides the NIV, four other laboratories have been equipped for testing. Thermal screening of passengers from China will now be extended from seven to 20 airports; around 33,000 passengers have been screened so far. With Nepal reporting one case, another Health Ministry tweet says, “adequate preparedness for screening” is in place in five adjoining States. But it must be noted that in 2017, the Ministry kept under wraps the detection of three cases of the Zika virus in Gujarat. These came to light when WHO was informed in May that year, more than five months after the first case was laboratory-confirmed; the excuse was that the government wanted to avoid creating “panic”. Such irresponsible behaviour by China had led to the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus that claimed 774 lives globally in the early 2000s. India should under no circumstances repeat this with the novel coronavirus as much is [not known about the virus](#).

In China, despite nearly 20 million people being locked down across Hubei province, the virus appears to be spreading with renewed vigour. Cases reported from mainland China have risen sharply — from 1,975 on January 25 to 2,744 on January 26 and 4,515 on January 27. Fatalities too have reflected a similar trend, touching 106 on January 27. The number of exported cases and countries that have such cases have also been increasing. The first case of [human-to-human transmission](#) was reported in Vietnam, and now Germany. The virus has long acquired the ability to spread among humans; WHO’s emergency committee meeting statement said China had reported fourth-generation cases within, and second-generation cases, outside Wuhan. Alarmingly, unlike SARS, more asymptomatic novel coronavirus cases are being reported. Besides a reported case in China, WHO has reported three other such instances outside that country. But China’s recent warning that the novel virus might be spreading even before there are symptoms has the potential to change the infection landscape if true. It is not clear if these were the reasons why, on Monday, WHO silently updated the global risk assessment from “moderate” to “high retroactively” from January 23. If the virus had exhibited all the attributes necessary to be declared as a “public health emergency of international concern” even during the first emergency committee meeting, the situation has become grim since then. WHO cannot dither any more.

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