

China virus cases drop as foreign fears rise

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Fears mounted Saturday as cases of the new coronavirus multiplied outside China in places such as Europe, the Middle East and Asia, with pockets of outbreak sparking lockdowns and school closures.

Europe saw its first deaths from the COVID-19 strain, whose

transmission authorities say has been untraceable in some instances. Infection has now reached more than 25 countries worldwide and caused more than a dozen fatalities outside China.

In northern Italy, a 77-year-old woman died Saturday near the small town of Codogno in Lombardy, one day after a 78-year-old retired bricklayer succumbed to the virus in the neighbouring region of Veneto.

"The contagiousness of this virus is very strong and pretty virulent," Lombardy's health chief Giulio Gallera told reporters.

But he cautioned: "Today it's not a pandemic."

The cases triggered a lockdown in approximately a dozen Italian towns—a move reminiscent of China's sealing off of entire cities in central Hubei province, the epicentre of the virus where millions remain under quarantine.

A second person also died in South Korea, where the number of cases spiked, authorities said, while the death toll in Iran reached five and a number of new cases were reported across the Middle East.

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has cautioned that if countries do not quickly mobilise to fight the reach of the virus, "this outbreak could go in any direction. It could even be messy."

A study from the Imperial College London meanwhile estimated that "about two thirds of COVID-19 cases exported from mainland China have remained undetected worldwide, potentially leaving sources of human-to-human transmission unchecked."

The outbreak has now claimed 2,345 lives in China and infected more

than 76,000 people.

The number of new cases in China outside Hubei has been generally declining, although new outbreaks have emerged in several prisons and hospitals.

On Saturday Chinese authorities reported nearly 400 fresh cases nationwide, less than half the previous day and just 31 outside Hubei.

International spread

Cases of the deadly virus were reported in a range of countries in the Middle East, including the first cases in Israel and Lebanon.

Iraq and Kuwait, which share borders with Iran, were on high alert for a potential outbreak after banning travel to and from the Islamic Republic, although they have not confirmed any cases domestically.

Iran's latest cases take to 28 its total number of confirmed infections.

Based on official figures, nearly 18 percent of those infected with the new coronavirus in the country have died, compared with little more than three percent in China.

More than 400 people have been infected in South Korea, many linked to a hospital and a religious sect, and two people have died.

Many of the hospital-linked cases involved patients being treated for mental health issues.

Officials said some of the cases show no confirmed epidemiological connections, meaning they are not sure where or how they contracted the virus.

The latest group of passengers disembarked from the coronavirus-stricken Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan on Saturday.

Several Australians, 18 Americans and an Israeli evacuated earlier this week tested positive for coronavirus back in their home countries—fuelling questions about Tokyo's policy of allowing former passengers to return home.

Two former Japanese passengers in their 80s have died. Meanwhile, a Japanese woman who was part of the latest group of passengers to disembark has tested positive in Tochigi Prefecture, local media reported.

The British government said an evacuation flight left Japan Saturday, with 32 British and European passengers on board.

As fears spread of the virus in Japan, Tokyo 2020 Olympic organisers postponed training for their army of volunteers—but said that there was "no consideration" of cancelling the Games.

'Tough' economy

Beijing has so far downplayed any possible long-term impact on the Chinese economy from the outbreak, which has paralysed much of the country.

Chen Yulu, China's deputy central bank governor, told state broadcaster CCTV on Saturday that economic growth would "quickly rebound".

China's financial system has "extremely strong toughness" to respond to risk, he said.

Chinese officials are also keen to show the country is returning to work.

Almost all the country's chain supermarkets have now reopened, commerce official Wang Bin said Saturday, as well as half the country's department stores and shopping malls.

But only a third of rail construction and 15 percent of civil aviation projects have re-started work.

Beijing was already tackling a slowing economy before the virus struck and has closed many businesses, factories, tourist sites and travel routes in a bid to contain the epidemic.

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