

Sub-standard mask donations hamper China virus response: Red Cross

3 February 2020

The Red Cross on Monday stressed the need to ensure that all masks used in Chinese hospitals fighting the novel coronavirus outbreak are high quality, warning that donating sub-standard gear was more problematic than helpful.

China has acknowledged that it "urgently" needs [medical supplies](#), including [surgical masks](#), to battle the outbreak which has killed more than 360 people in the country and infected more than 17,000.

"At the moment, the supply has been heavily stressed," said Jagan Chapagain, the new secretary-general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

He meanwhile rejected harsh criticism lobbed against the local Red Cross chapter in Wuhan—the epicentre of the outbreak—over charges that donations of [masks](#) from across China failed to reach hospitals on the frontlines.

"Clearly the Wuhan Red Cross hasn't dealt with this type of situation recently, (and) they had to massively scale up in a short period of time, so to have some shortcomings is not totally unnatural," he said.

But he said he supported the chapter's "deliberate" decision to withhold a number of the masks donated because they were not safe for use by [health professionals](#) who risked exposure to the [deadly virus](#).

"Having high-quality masks for the caregivers is extremely important," the 52-year-old Nepali humanitarian told AFP in an interview Monday, two days after taking the helm of the IFRC.

He said frontline medical workers required masks of the so-called N-95 standard, but warned that many of the masks being donated from within China as well as from abroad did not measure up.

"They are not good enough for the caregivers," he said.

'Really problematic'

Chapagain urged donors to ensure that any medical gear they send is of the required quality, and to "not send stuff that does not meet the standards, (which) creates more problems than help."

He noted that people using the poorer-quality masks could have "a false sense of protection", while large quantities of such masks cause the "logistics pipeline (to get) congested, the warehouse gets congested".

Already overstretched Red Cross volunteers are left "to sort it out", Chapagain said.

"It is really, really problematic, so everybody who wants to generously donate stuff, please look into the quality that is being asked by the health officials and really stick to that."

Another drag on resources is widespread misinformation about the virus that is creating "unnecessary panic", he said.

"Agencies actually working to address the needs, their resources get diverted to try to address the misinformation," he said.

"To me that is one of the biggest disservices that can happen."

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