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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Benjamin Mateus
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Rising concerns over spread of the Wuhan coronavirus

There are now 2,744 confirmed cases and at least 80 reported deaths from the Wuhan coronavirus, including one physician treating patients—61-year-old Dr. Lian Wudong. To date, all but some 44 of the confirmed cases and all the deaths have occurred in mainland China, predominately at the center of the epidemic, Wuhan. Other cases of the infection, formally known as 2019-nCoV, or novel coronavirus, have been found in Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Australia, Thailand, Nepal, France and the United States.



Residents in Fanling district of Hong Kong took the streets on Sunday night to oppose the plan to house quarantined patients or medical workers in their neighborhood, that is far from Hong Kong's business center. (Photo Credit: Vincent Yu/AP)

The virus so far remains uncontained, fueling confusion, panic and rising social tensions across China, where the government has partially or fully locked down 13 major population centers, encompassing nearly 60 million people. In Wuhan, citizens are calling for their local leaders to be held accountable. Doctors on the front line of treating victims of the coronavirus infection are leading this call by bluntly declaring, “The city’s leaders should be removed immediately.”

These tensions have begun to spread to Shanghai, one of China’s major commercial centers and one of its most populous cities, where an 88-year-old man died as a result of the virus, sparking concerns about the complex spread of the disease and its ramifications on an international scale. In response, Chinese President Xi Jinping was forced to state, “Confronted with the grave situation of this accelerating spread of pneumonia from infections with the novel coronavirus, we must step up the centralized and united leadership under the party central.”

Initial efforts to combat the epidemic include a promised 1,230 medical experts from China’s National Health Commission to assist with efforts on the ground in Wuhan. The military is also sending additional medical personnel, while the city has promised to build two new hospitals in 15 days to treat patients with coronavirus infections.

The United States, French, Japanese and Russian consulates have ordered the removal of their people and are coordinating with Chinese authorities for their safe and efficient transfer out of the city. US private citizens are being offered seats on planes departing Wuhan.

There are also six confirmed and 100 suspected cases in Hong Kong. The city has taken emergency measures by restricting celebration of the Lunar New Year, limiting the gathering of groups, requiring the use of face masks and shutting schools until at least mid-February. These measures have been met with resistance by demonstrators, who set fire in the lobbies of two buildings designated as quarantine sites for the developing epidemic.

The head of China’s National Health Commission, Ma Xiaowei, told the media, “The epidemic has entered a more serious and complex period.” The local Chinese medical authorities stated that there are at least an additional 3,000 suspected coronavirus cases, of which at least half are expected to be confirmed. Because the incubation period can last up to two weeks, those without symptoms can be contagious without knowing it, suggesting that the infection will become far more widespread than anticipated earlier.

This is highlighted by the international nature of the crisis: there are three confirmed cases in France, five in the United States, four in Australia and 32 in the rest of Asia. Canadian health officials are observing a man who returned from Wuhan to Toronto on January 22 and is now admitted with a respiratory illness.

In China itself, the emergency is being exacerbated by the lack of supplies. According to local medical personnel and staff, masks are running short and sanitary equipment is being quickly exhausted. Physicians, nurses and aides are on 24-hour standby, even as the travel ban within the affected cities makes commuting to hospitals difficult. This has created the added problem of making routine tasks, such as other forms of medical care and even getting groceries, much more difficult in population centers as large or larger than New York City and Los Angeles. Local hospitals have been forced to appeal on social media for donations of supplies and funds to stock and run their services.

Dr. Xu Wenbo, the director of the Chinese National Institute for Viral Disease Control and Prevention under the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Beijing, announced to reporters on Sunday that researchers had isolated viruses and were selecting strains to use in developing a vaccine against the coronavirus. The US National Institutes of Health has also stated that it can potentially develop a vaccine for human trials in a few months. It remains unclear if these efforts are being jointly coordinated.

Meanwhile, three Beijing hospitals—Beijing Ditan Hospital, Beijing Youan Hospital and No. 5 Medical Center of PLA General Hospital—have turned to administering the anti-HIV retroviral drugs Lopinavir and Ritonavir to treat patients. This ad-hoc treatment is being used with limited data to support or refute its efficacy. The medical journal *Lancet* has announced that it has commenced a clinical trial using these agents to treat new cases of coronavirus.

The *Lancet* also published two small studies on the novel coronavirus last Friday confirming many of the suspicions medical authorities were claiming, including that the virus can transfer from person to person in hospitals, homes and cities, and that people can infect others during the incubation period of the virus—in other words, people can spread the contagion before they become symptomatic themselves. The studies also found symptoms including fever, coughing, shortness of breath, fatigue, pain, headaches, coughing up blood and diarrhea. Of 41 patients reviewed, six died.

The largely scattered efforts to contain and treat 2019-nCoV reflect the scarcity of resources devoted to medicine. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Risks

Report 2020, “Health systems around the world are at risk of becoming unfit for purpose. New vulnerabilities resulting from changing societal, environmental, demographic and technological patterns threaten to undo the dramatic gains in wellness and prosperity that health systems have supported over the last century.”

This state of affairs is not the result of new viruses evolving more quickly or a lack of advances in medical technology, but of the subordination of modern medicine to private profit. In one revealing episode, China’s vice minister of industry and information technology, Wang Jiangping, told news outlets that Hubei Province is going through more than 100,000 protective suits each day, while their manufacture lags by 30,000 per day. The sheer material needs are overwhelming the capacity to address these demands. Yet Chinese companies manufacture more than 50,000 such suits per day for export.

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