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Large COVID-19 outbreak in Xinjiang, China

On October 24, Chinese authorities suddenly announced a lockdown of the city of Kashgar in Xinjiang, due to an outbreak of COVID-19, without releasing any details. From 4 p.m. onward, a large number of flights at Kashgar Airport were cancelled and the highways were closed. The lack of information caused a degree of panic among the population.

By early October 25, the official report was of a single coronavirus infection in Shufu County, Kashgar Prefecture. In the afternoon, however, after the disease control department began testing, 137 people were found to be positive.

On October 26, four townships in Kashgar were declared high-risk areas. Two days later, 183 people had tested positive: 45 people were symptomatic, including three severe cases, and another 138 were found to be asymptomatic.



People wearing masks in China [Credit: AP Photo/Kin Cheung]

By November 5, there had been nearly 400 cases of COVID-19 infection in Kashgar, including 78 confirmed cases with symptoms, seven severe cases, and 318 asymptomatic infections.

After the state-owned media downplayed the severity of the outbreak, the Xinjiang government held a video meeting on November 5. Chen Quanguo, Xinjiang secretary for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), admitted that the outbreak in Kashgar and nearby Kizilsu

Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture was still severe, and the task of prevention and control remained difficult.

According to several media reports, the source of the outbreak was a local factory in Kashgar, and most of the infections detected so far were related to the factory. Both the parents of the first infected person worked in the factory—a sweatshop engaged in making garments. Most of the workers come from poor towns and counties in Kashgar. Samples taken from the factory’s workshop, warehouse and toilets have tested positive for COVID-19.

As of November 14, the official data showed 25 confirmed symptomatic cases and 187 asymptomatic infections in Xinjiang. The following day, weeks after the outbreak was first announced, authorities finally rated some areas near the factory as low-risk areas.

The outbreak in Kashgar underscores the fact that, although China officially resumed production and economic activities as early as six months ago, the risk of further flare-ups still exists.

In June, hundreds of infections were discovered at the Xinfadi wholesale market in Beijing. The following month, a third wave of infections broke out in Urumqi in Xinjiang. The entire province was blocked off for two months, and it was not completely opened until September. In early October, 13 cases were discovered in the coastal city of Qingdao, which is one of the most popular tourist destinations in China. The infections were of particular concern as it was a public holiday and there were large numbers of visitors to the city. Some evidence points to the infections being caused by contact with the packaging of imported frozen seafood.

An official report from Shanghai on November 10 also found that the outer packaging of a batch of frozen beef from Argentina tested positive for COVID-19. On November 13, the Zhengzhou Center for Disease Control and Prevention discovered a batch of frozen pork, also from Argentina, that tested positive. China is the main buyer of Argentinian beef and had been seeking to sign an agreement worth \$US3.5 billion that would make Argentina its largest pork supplier.

The ability of COVID-19 to be transmitted via frozen food, if proven, underscores the fact that China’s strict control of international travel and its mass testing are no guarantee against outbreaks. The pandemic is a global issue that cannot be resolved on a parochial national basis by locking down borders. Nowhere is safe in a world of globalised production.

The repeated flare-ups of coronavirus in different regions also point to the fact that working-class communities are the most vulnerable. The factory dormitories and residential areas are overcrowded and there is a lack of sanitation and protective equipment. Compounding the risk is the state-owned media’s continuous downplay of the pandemic to justify the lifting of prevention and control methods in order to ensure a return to work.

Over the past year as COVID-19 emerged, China’s economy has been severely affected, with a huge 2020 first quarter contraction of 6.8 percent. While the official growth figure for the third quarter [July-September] rose to 4.9 percent, this is well short of the 8 percent that the CCP regime previously maintained was necessary to prevent widespread unemployment.

Moreover, any resumption of economic benefits has only exacerbated social inequalities. The country’s billionaires are expanding their wealth during the pandemic, while the working class has been hard hit. Workers have not only suffered from the virus but their economic situation has become more precarious, with mounting unemployment, wage cuts and unpaid wages. Workers have received virtually no support or assistance to alleviate their deteriorating living conditions.

Currently, winter is approaching in China, and in many parts of the country the temperature has dropped sharply. According to medical experts, this heightens the danger of new coronavirus surges.

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