

WORLD

China locks down two cities to curb outbreak

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● Trains and planes out of Wuhan were indefinitely suspended

Wuhan | China

China locked down nearly 20 million in two cities at the centre of a deadly virus outbreak yesterday, banning planes and trains from leaving in an unprecedented move aimed at containing the disease which has already spread to other countries.

The respiratory virus has claimed 17 lives since emerging from a seafood and animal market in Wuhan, infected hundreds of other people nationwide and been detected as far away as the United States.

Streets and shopping centres in Wuhan, a major port city in central Hubei province with a population of 11 million people, were eerily quiet after authorities told residents not to leave town "without a special reason".

Trains and planes out of Wuhan were indefinitely suspended, tollways on roads out the city were closed, leading to fear and panic for those who were trapped.

Hours later, authorities in neighbouring Huanggang announced that public transport and train services would be suspended at midnight, while people were told to not leave the city of 7.5 million.

All of Huanggang's cinemas, internet cafes, and the central market will close.

A third city, 1.1 million-population Ezhou, announced the train station had been temporarily closed earlier in the day.

"We are feeling as though it is the end of the world," said one Wuhan resident on China's Twitter-like Weibo platform, voicing concerns about shortag-



Children wear masks to prevent an outbreak at the Hong Kong West Kowloon High speed train station in Hong Kong



Chinese paramilitary police wearing masks stand guard at a Shanghai train station as the country faces a virus crisis at the start of the Lunar New Year holiday



Staff members wearing masks monitor thermal scanners that detect temperatures of passengers at the security check inside the Hankou Railway station in Wuhan

es of food and disinfectant. Another described being on the "verge of tears" when the de facto quarantine was an-

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A WUHAN RESIDENT SAID ON CHINA'S TWITTER-LIKE WEIBO PLATFORM

nounced, with the misery compounded by it coming on the eve of the Lunar New Year holiday.

In Beijing, the government cancelled massive gatherings that usually attract throngs at temples during the New Year holiday.

Empty streets

Wuhan's train station and airport, which should have been packed with people coming travelling for holiday family reunions, were almost empty except for workers on Thursday afternoon.

The few people wandering in the streets of the city were wearing masks as mandated by police.

At a shopping centre that would have been packed in normal times, a man who works there said he understood the government's measures.

"Even if we can't celebrate the New Year this year, there's always next year," said the man surnamed Sun.

Taxis in Wuhan tripled their fares, a driver admitted.

"It's very dangerous to be outside at this moment but we need to earn money," the driver told AFP.

Confusion, alarm

More than 570 people have been infected with the virus across China -- with most cases found in Wuhan, where a seafood market that illegally sold wild animals has been identified as the epicentre of the outbreak.

The coronavirus has caused alarm because of its similarity to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed nearly 650 people across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-2003.

Like SARS, it can be passed among people through the respiratory tract.

The first case of the new virus

was confirmed on December 31, and it has since been detected in Japan, Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States.

The 17 people who died in China were aged from 48 to 89, and had pre-existing health conditions, Chinese health authorities said Thursday.

The World Health Organization on Wednesday delayed a decision on whether to declare a global health emergency -- a rare instrument used only for the worst outbreaks.

The emergency committee will meet again on Thursday, after experts were split over declaring a public health emergency.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said "more information" was needed but he also praised China's "very, very strong measures" that will help control the epidemic and "minimise the chances of this outbreak spreading internationally".

Unknowns

Animals are suspected to be the primary source of the outbreak, with Chinese health officials saying the virus originated from the market where wild animals were illegally sold.

Studies published this week suggest that the virus may have originated in bats or snakes.

The WHO has confirmed that the virus can be passed between people, at least those in close contact. Chinese health officials warned it could mutate and spread further.

"There are many unknowns to address in this event including clinical severity and the true extent and nature of disease transmission," said Michael Ryan, head of the WHO's health emergencies programme.

Chinese authorities on Thursday reported dozens of new infections, bringing the confirmed total to 571. About 5,000 people remain under medical observation.

But scientists at the Imperial College in London estimate that 4,000 people have been infected in Wuhan.

Hong Kong turns holiday camps into quarantine zones

Hong Kong

Hong Kong will turn two holiday camps, including a former military barracks, into quarantine zones for people who may have come into contact with carriers of the Wuhan virus, officials announced Thursday.

The international financial hub has been on high alert for the virus, which has killed 17 people since the outbreak started in central China.

The same sites were used as quarantine facilities during the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak 17 years ago.

Nearly 300 people in Hong Kong were killed by SARS, a tragedy that left a profound psychological impact on one of the most densely populated places on earth.

So far two people in the city have tested positive for the new coronavirus -- which is similar to the SARS pathogen. Both had visited Wuhan in recent days. They are being treated on isolation wards in hospital.

The gambling hub of Macau, which is hugely popular with mainland tourists, also confirmed two cases this week.

China 'commendable'

Tedros, the WHO chief, on Wednesday indicated the situation was not escalating out of control, saying there was "stability" for the moment.

He also praised China's openness about the outbreak as "commendable".

But a senior US State Department official said Washington was "still concerned" about transparency in the Chinese government.

During the SARS epidemic, the Chinese government took months to report the disease and initially denied WHO experts access to southern Guangdong province, where it originated.

Three American crew killed as firefighting plane crashes in Australia

Sydney

Three American crew helping to battle Australia's devastating bushfires were killed yesterday when their water-bombing plane crashed in mountainous terrain during a sortie to tackle another outbreak of the deadly blazes.

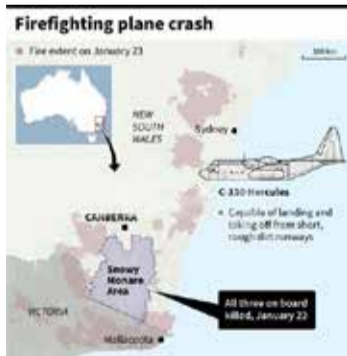
Officials said the Hercules C-130 plane erupted in a large fireball on impact in a national park the Snowy Mountains shortly before 1:30 pm (0230 GMT).

The cause of the crash was not immediately known, but New South Wales Rural Fire Service commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons had said earlier in the day that high winds were making flying the water tankers "very difficult".



A Coulson Aviation C-130 Hercules dropping fire retardant during a sortie in early January

"We've got a number of firefighters and a number of crew that are in the area and working to contain and work around the fire," Fitzsimmons said. The incident brought the death toll in Australia's bushfires to at least 32 since the crisis



began in September.

The highly experienced US firefighting trio was working for Canadian firm Coulson Aviation, which had been contracted to help fight the fires.

State Premier Gladys Berejiklian said the crash highlighted the danger faced by firefighters as they attempted to extinguish massive blazes across Australia's

southeast.

"There are in excess of 70 aircraft that have been used today alone and today is a stark and horrible reminder of the dangerous conditions that our volunteers, (and) our emergency services personnel... (face) on a daily basis," she said.

The crash happened as at least seven fires, whipped up by scorching temperatures and strong winds, flared to emergency status following a brief lull brought by rain and cooler temperatures.

Temperatures soar

Bushfires also forced the closure of Canberra Airport yesterday, with all flights in and out of the country's capital suspended to allow the deployment of aerial firefighting

crews to battle the approaching flames.

Temperatures soared to 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) in Sydney, where a bushfire also broke out in a northwestern suburb of Australia's biggest city.

Wind gusts had been forecast to reach 90 kilometres per hour (55 miles per hour) in some areas, but Fitzsimmons said the winds were stronger than expected, especially in the fire-ravaged southeast.

Unprecedented bushfires fuelled by climate change have devastated vast swathes of the country since September, destroying more than 2,000 homes and burning 10 million hectares (100,000 square kilometres) of land -- an area larger than South Korea or Portugal.