

Coronavirus Epidemic in China: Wuhan eases lockdown then U-turns 3 hours later, while China's daily deaths rise 55 per cent

Monday 24 February 2020, by [HUANG Kristin](#), [LEW Linda](#), [SHI Jiangtao](#), [WANG Orange](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2020).

- **Three most senior Communist Party leaders in southwestern city of Dali sacked for intercepting masks being delivered to Chongqing**
- **Guangdong, the second worst-hit province, downgrades its alert, as data suggests the outbreak is being largely contained outside the Hubei province epicentre**

All but one of the new deaths were in Hubei province, the outbreak's epicentre, which accounted for 398 of the 409 new cases. The other death was in the southern island province of Hainan.

Sunday's figures, released on Monday, showed that 1,846 more people had been discharged from hospital, taking that total to 24,734.

Wuhan U-turn over lockdown

Authorities in Wuhan, Hubei's provincial capital, on Monday revoked their announcement of an easing of the city's lockdown measures – barely three hours after the notice was issued.

The government said the now-retracted notice had been issued by a subordinate working group of the city's disease control command without their superiors' approval, China News Service reported. The disease control command said it would reprimand the officials who issued the order without approval.

Extreme lockdown measures have been in place since January 23, with all residential quarters quarantined and roads and transport links closed.

The retracted order would have allowed non-residents who showed no symptoms and had no contact with infected patients to leave the city. It had also said locals deemed essential for disease control or the city's daily operation – including delivery of utilities and other necessities – along with those who needed specialist medical treatment outside Wuhan, could leave with permission.

It had not been clear whether Hong Kong residents or foreign nationals were allowed to exit under the now-retracted order, which appeared to apply only to Chinese citizens. An estimated 2,000 Hongkongers are stuck in Hubei province, including those in Wuhan.

More than 75 per cent of the deaths in China during the outbreak have occurred in Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, in what President Xi Jinping has described as the country's worst public health crisis since 1949.

Badly hit province lowers alert

Authorities in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong have lowered their alert level for the outbreak, amid indications that the deadly epidemic has been largely contained in most parts of the country.

The province downgraded the outbreak from a Grade I public health emergency – the most severe level of emergency response – to Grade II, beginning on Monday.

Guangdong, which neighbours Hong Kong, has been the second worst-hit province after Hubei, with 1,345 confirmed cases of infection and six deaths. It was China's sixth administrative region to lower the alert level as the country grapples with the outbreak while struggling to get people back to work and limit damage to the economy.

All of the 31 provinces and municipalities had last month declared the epidemic a Grade I emergency, which centralises the command and co-ordination of provincial-level emergency response work under the national government.

Shanxi has also downgraded the outbreak to a Grade II emergency, while Gansu, Liaoning, Guizhou and Yunnan have classed it as a Grade III event.

US travel warning

China has warned its citizens against travelling to the United States, saying it was in response to Washington's "excessive" preventative measures and the unfair treatment of Chinese tourists.

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism also cited recent safety fears, without providing details.

Beijing has repeatedly accused the US of spreading fear by overreacting to the epidemic.

Washington issued its highest level travel warning on February 2, advising its citizens against travelling to China due to the epidemic.

Parliamentary delay confirmed

The standing committee of China's top legislative body, the National People's Congress, has officially confirmed that the annual parliamentary session will be postponed to a later date. It had originally been due to start on March 5.

The committee also decided to widen curbs on the wild animal trade and consumption of game meat in order to curb practices that may have contributed to the virus's transmission to humans.

WHO delegation leaves Wuhan

Public health experts from the World Health Organisation (WHO) have completed their visit to the central Chinese city of Wuhan, ground zero of the outbreak, according to state media.

During the weekend's two-day trip, a joint inspection team of Chinese and foreign experts visited various hospitals where infected patients were being treated, held talks with the local health authority, and met Ma Xiaowei, director of China's National Health Commission.

Deadly coronavirus may not have originated in Wuhan seafood market, Chinese scientists say

Comprising specialists from the United States, Germany, Japan, Nigeria, Russia, Singapore and

South Korea, the WHO delegation arrived in China last Monday, visiting Beijing followed by the provinces of Guangdong and Sichuan.

Wuhan was originally not on their itinerary, but was added on Friday as the WHO team finally made it to Hubei after weeks of delays. China has been criticised for resisting cooperation with international experts, especially those from the US.

The visit came with Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, spreading rapidly in other countries, especially Japan, South Korea, Italy and Iran.

The WHO team will hold a joint press briefing with Chinese experts on Monday evening.

Party officials sacked for stealing masks

The three most senior Communist Party leaders in the city of Dali in southwestern Yunnan province, including committee secretary Gao Zhihong, have been sacked for intercepting masks that were en route to Chongqing, Yunnan's party disciplinary watchdog reported.

Five other senior officials were removed from their posts or given warnings for disrupting outbreak prevention work and damaging the reputation of Yunnan, according to the watchdog.

In early February, nine shipments of masks, bought overseas on behalf of the municipal government of Chongqing, passed through Dali, about 700km (435 miles) to the southwest. A document issued by the Dali government on February 2, which was leaked online, said it was commandeering the masks.

Facing public scrutiny and a request from Chongqing to return the masks, the Dali government apologised but said it could not return the masks because they had been distributed.

Fast testing at lab built in days

Wuhan's new Huoyan laboratory, which was built in five days, tested almost 20,000 Covid-19 samples between February 5, when it opened, and February 15, state news agency Xinhua reported.

Huoyan, or fire eyes, means the ability to see through deceptions, derived from the Monkey King in Chinese folklore, who could see through the deceptions of monsters.

Measuring 2,000 square metres (21,500 sq ft), the lab is designed to test up to 10,000 samples a day, taking six to seven hours on average for results to be delivered, according to the report.

Rapid screening of nuclei acid samples can win precious time in treating patients and quarantining close contacts, as well as protecting medical workers, lab director Tian Zhijian was quoted as saying.

Online sectors 'profit from outbreak'

Many online sectors of China's economy have grown despite the outbreak, according to the head of the economic management agency that reports to China's cabinet, the State Council.

Cong Liang, general secretary of the National Development and Reform Commission, told a press conference in Beijing on Monday that online shopping, education, remote office services and entertainment, as well as intelligent manufacturing, had shown growth, and predicted some other sectors would rebound after the epidemic was over.

EU borders to stay open despite Italy deaths

The European Commission said the EU was not yet considering suspending travel within the border-free Schengen area, but it was preparing contingency plans.

Four people have died in northern Italy from Covid-19 and around 150 cases have been reported since Friday, making Italy the most affected country outside Asia.

"On various scenarios, like a coordinated suspension of Schengen, we are not going to that at the moment, but we are working on various contingency plans," the EU crisis management commissioner, Janez Lenarcic, told a news conference in Brussels.

The EU also announced a €232 million (US\$251 million) aid package to fund global efforts to fight Covid-19.

'No impact' on US trade deal

US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told Reuters he does not expect the epidemic to have a material impact on the Phase 1 trade deal with China.

"Based on everything that we know, and where the virus is now, I don't expect that it's going to be material," he said late on Sunday.

"Obviously that could change as the situation develops. Within the next few more weeks, we'll all have a better assessment as there's more data."

Mnuchin acknowledged the outbreak could also delay the start of negotiations on deepening the trade deal with Beijing and reaching a Phase 2 agreement, but said he was not worried about that at this point.

G20 hears predicted blow to global growth

Finance chiefs of the world's top 20 economies vowed to monitor the outbreak's impact on global growth and act if needed, and predicted growth would pick up in 2020 and 2021.

The Group of 20 (G20) finance ministers and central bank chiefs were given a sobering presentation by the International Monetary Fund, which predicted the epidemic would shave 0.1 percentage points off global growth.

"We will enhance global risk monitoring, including of the recent outbreak of Covid-19," the statement from the financial leaders said. "We stand ready to take further action to address these risks."

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Additional reporting by Reuters

P.S.

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3052019/coronavirus-chinas-second-worst-hit-province-guangdong-lowers>

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