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Coronavirus outbreak: 'Dread is spreading throughout Hong Kong'

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The largest quarantine in human history is ongoing: a total lockdown of maybe 60 million people in Hubei province and its capital, Wuhan, the epicentre of the epidemic. One thousand kilometres south, Asia's World City, as Hong Kong likes to call itself, is in chaos.



People queuing for masks in Causeway Bay

Viewed from the shore at Lau Fau Shan village fish market in Hong Kong's New Territories, Shenzhen is an imposing behemoth of high rises and skyscrapers. Guangdong's second largest metropolis was China's first global city, designated a special economic zone and opened to foreign capital in 1980. From semi-rural county, it grew to be the Silicon Valley of the People's Republic in just a few decades. More than 8 million of its estimated 13 million population are migrant labourers. This week, they are returning to work after the extended lunar new year holiday, but the city remains in a partial lockdown due to the coronavirus outbreak, after Guangdong became the second most infected province in China.

One thousand kilometres north, the largest quarantine in human history is ongoing: a total lockdown of maybe 60 million people in Hubei province and its capital, Wuhan, the epicentre of the epidemic. Partial lockdowns continue in Guangzhou and China's key industrial zone, the Pearl River Delta (which includes Shenzhen), and the four big coastal cities of Zhejiang province in the Yangtze River Delta, another important industrial zone exploiting millions of migrant workers. So too Beijing and Shanghai. At least two cities, Tianjin and Xian have imposed entry restrictions for people from affected areas. In all, more than 80 cities in 20 provinces reportedly are affected.

"It's every province. Every province has shutdowns", Lu (not his real name) says over the phone from Handan, a city of about 10 million in Hubei province. "Here all buses have been stopped. The schools are shut until March. All businesses are shut except supermarkets and the vegetable markets - although I haven't been outside for five days so maybe it is changing with people going back to work. Everyone is upset about the cover-up. Even pro-government people. But mainly the anger is with the local government [in Wuhan], not Beijing."

More than 1,000 people are dead in Hubei. The ruling Communist Party initially failed to respond to warnings from medics in Wuhan. City officials are accused of orchestrating a cover-up, ignoring or suppressing information about the outbreak and harassing and detaining doctors who sounded the

alarm. Before the shutdown in late January, several million people potentially exposed to the coronavirus had already left (lunar new year celebrations are a time of great human movement in China). The pathogen hitched a ride with some of them. When authorities flipped from censors to crowd controllers, the quarantine declaration came eight hours before its enforcement, prompting an estimated 1 million people to flee to other parts of China. Again, the virus travelled with some of them. The lockdowns soon proliferated.

“The situation is very tense. There have been no notifications when it is going to reopen again”, says a resident via email from a quarantined Hubei city. “The closures came very suddenly and there are no exceptions at all. But the problem is that the logistics support to go hand in hand with this closure has not been ready at all. There are now lots of SOS requests in Wuhan city coming from individual citizens. Here, all necessities are in short supply. Masks and hygienic wipes cannot be bought. People feel that the lockdown is necessary ... But we are all very angry at the government for lying about the virus ... They shouldn’t just do propaganda in this type of situation. We want open information; transparency ... And we need professionals, mutual aid groups within the community so that individual citizens can have their needs met.”

The lockdown of Wuhan, Hubei and then other areas may have been a panic or a belated display of “decisive action” from the Communist Party. Putting aside that it was botched from the start, and that greater death and suffering in Wuhan may well have been the result, it is not clear whether it has been effective in slowing the spread of the virus. But it unquestionably contributed to broader anxieties as the focus shifted to a perceived collective carrier: people from within the quarantine zones as agents of or proxies for the plague. As the death toll and the number of infections rose, the fear arrived. Washington Post China correspondent Gerry Shih noted:

“As the epidemic radiated out from Hubei’s capital, Wuhan, in recent weeks, Chinese have turned against those who hail from the province ... Those from Hubei found in other parts of China are tracked down, accosted and locked at home by neighbors ... On social media, Chinese have condemned the 5 million so-called ‘public enemies’ — Wuhan residents who fled the city in the days before and immediately after the government’s lockdown order ... In the northern city of Shijiazhuang, neighborhood committees offered bounties of \$280 to anyone who reported someone who had visited Wuhan ... In Jiangxi’s provincial capital, Nanchang, hotels asked guests to answer surveys asking if they had travelled to Hubei. A receptionist at a major international chain assured a visitor that there were no guests from Hubei in the building. ‘We’ve rejected them all’, he said.”

Panic is contagious. Travel bans and restrictions, and partial suspensions or full closures of borders were implemented by almost all of China’s neighbouring states as it became clear that Beijing had lost control and that official information was unreliable: Afghanistan, Bhutan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Taiwan and Vietnam. Significantly, North Korea closed its borders the day Wuhan was locked down; Pyongyang shutting the gates on the country that guarantees its survival was an early indication of the potential seriousness of the outbreak. So too with Macau. The semi-autonomous territory shut its casinos for two weeks, a de facto border closure, while panicked authorities deported people from Hubei back to the mainland.

Dread is spreading throughout Hong Kong. The virus is here. Public congregations and family gatherings are discouraged. The libraries are closed. The schools are closed. The museums are closed. The universities are closed. Water is not flowing from public drinking fountains. Even the morning bird watching in Hong Kong Park has been cancelled. Loudspeakers at metro stations implore people to wear a mask, to wash their hands, to not touch their mouth or nose, nor rub their eyes. Don’t spit. Sneeze only into a tissue. Carry and use sanitiser regularly. The territory’s chief

executive, Carrie Lam, has told everyone to stay home if possible.

On the second floor of the Tang Lung Chau wet market in Causeway Bay, cleaners are nervous. Doctors without Borders is briefing about basic hygiene and how to stay safe. "There's no-one here to help us - we have to help ourselves", an elderly cleaner says once the presentation is done. "Be careful when working. Stay hygienic. We must stay optimistic." When the NGO leaves, a volunteer with the cleaners' union makes a speech about government inaction. Another worker agrees. "The government has not provided enough equipment", he says through a translator. "There may not be enough [masks and gloves] to get through next month." When I pull out a stash of masks, hand sanitiser and alcohol wipes picked up in Australia, there are audible gasps. "This is like gold here!", says the union volunteer.

Asia's World City, as Hong Kong likes to call itself, is in chaos. On Nathan Road in Tsim Sha Tsui, a queue outside a cosmetics shop stretches 30 metres. The woman at the front says she's been here for three hours, waiting to get medical masks. Two weeks ago, when a trading company announced it had 11,000 boxes of them, more than 10,000 people queued overnight. On Sunday morning in Causeway Bay, hundreds are waiting in line. Is this for masks? "Only for Indonesians", a woman says. They are domestic workers. Presumably their employers want them fit for duties. A young woman walks by with two bags full of boxes of tissues - panic buying. Many supermarkets have been cleared of rice and toilet paper after rumours spread, much faster than the virus has thus far in Hong Kong, of impending shortages.

The government has fucked up big time. There's no other way of putting it. Almost two decades after severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS, another coronavirus) killed 299 people in the territory amid claims of coverups and inaction, Hong Kong appears thoroughly unprepared. The city's vaunted free market capitalism has failed. There aren't enough masks. There's no sanitiser. Four quarantine zones have hastily been declared, but they are either in or are close to residential areas and some of the locals are apoplectic. Why hadn't proper sites on government land been prepared earlier?

Last week, 7,000 medical workers from the newly formed Hospital Authority Employees Alliance went on strike to protest the government's response. They raised five demands: forbid all travellers from entering Hong Kong via China, ensure a sufficient supply of masks, provide isolation wards and stop all non-emergency services, provide support and facilitation for healthcare staff caring for patients under isolation, and publicly commit to not take disciplinary action against striking workers.

Much has been made about the so-called xenophobia at the heart of the demand to close the border. But that is a misreading of the situation. Anti-mainlander sentiment certainly exists here - how could it not when the Communist Party is infiltrating every political and civil society institution in Hong Kong and the territory is being forcibly integrated into China? Yet while some groups are trying to use the panic to push an anti-mainlander agenda, the border demand is animated by panic - and a recognition that the already strained and under-funded health system will collapse under the weight of a pandemic.

"The Border closure has to be looked at in the context of SARS. 2003 is very close in people's memories", a local activist says. "China hid the outbreak until too late, and a lot of Hongkongers died because of it. Closing the border is looked at from almost exclusively a public healthcare perspective." But what about the right wing of the movement for Hong Kong's self-determination, is it gaining support in such a reactive situation? "The 'right wing' of the movement is incredibly small, as most of the 'right wing' in Hong Kong is the pro-government, pro-Beijing parties. That's where you find the anti-LGBT, anti-immigrant anti-refugee candidates", he says.

“That’s not to say we don’t have some nativists on our side, but they are a minority with not that much pull. They only look bigger than they are because both the tankies and US far right media latched onto them as something they could use for their political agendas and spread that imagery around constantly when it is totally non-representative of the movement here. The strike was supported, and unionising has been a huge part of the build towards finding more ways to put pressure on this government.”

A volunteer with the cleaners’ union echoes this. She seems slightly puzzled by my probing. “Macau and Taiwan have done it, why not here? It’s not against Chinese people – it’s the virus”, she says. The issue is also intertwined with the collapse in the government’s authority, which looms large. A Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute poll last month found that just 19 percent of people trust the government. Seventy percent say they have no trust. The territory’s leader by law must be a China loyalist and the current chief executive, Lam, is widely seen as a stooge. So when she labelled as “discriminatory” the calls to shut the border, it riled people – Beijing’s puppet telling everyone that their legitimate fears are just anti-Chinese racism.

Socialists generally, and rightly, are opposed to the national borders which divide workers from one another and create barriers to building a united movement of oppressed against oppressor. But at this point in the struggle, that arbitrary little line that we despise is the only thing standing between Hong Kong and totalitarianism – its disappearance, when it comes, will be the triumph of reaction over the already limited freedoms that exist here. That fact should give people in the West pause for thought before branding all talk about border controls here inherently reactionary. The authorities’ lack of legitimacy, and the paucity of information about the virus itself and about the real situation in China, also means that any story on social media seems more plausible than official statements. One widely heard conspiracy is that Lam’s inaction on the border is a deliberate ploy to make people sick in retaliation for the ongoing pro-democracy movement. It is far-fetched, but that so many people don’t rule it out is indicative of the deep anti-government sentiment.

Lam reluctantly closed all but three of the border crossings. And she announced a quarantine of all travellers arriving from the mainland. I also discover a “frontier closed area” along the border when a cop at a roadblock orders me from the number 55K bus on a trip to Sha Tau Kok, a village in the north-eastern New Territories. Two leading scientists – Leung Chi-chiu, chairman of the Advisory Committee on Communicable Diseases under the Hong Kong Medical Association, and infectious diseases professor Yuen Kwok-yung from the University of Hong Kong – say that these measures were prudent because drastic action is required to stop the transmission chain. “Yuen said every measure should be taken to minimise the spread, including further border closures”, reported Lilian Cheng and Gary Cheung in the South China Morning Post Several days ago. “The priority for the 14 days from Saturday was to stop more people from the mainland with the virus entering Hong Kong, Yuen said.”

Time will tell whether these measures save lives, although there is quiet confidence on the part of Yuen that the situation is now manageable. But while Hong Kong holds its breath, across the border the Chinese economy is stuttering; the Communist Party wants industrial production restarted. The markets demand movement – movement of goods and movement of labour. If the shutdowns were nothing but reactive, useless (or worse) political stunts, then switching to a focus on growing GDP, with all the attendant health risks that come with that enterprise in regular times, will at least be a good thing for lifting the restrictions on people’s civil liberties. Today though, the official figures from the Chinese government suggest that the situation is getting worse. What if cracking the whip on tens of millions of migrant workers in the middle of an epidemic results in a new wave of infections?

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P.S.

- Red Flag. 13 February 2020:
<https://redflag.org.au/node/7018>