

Experts warn over scale of Wuhan outbreak

Written by Taipei Times

Sunday, 19 January 2020 05:43 - Last Updated Wednesday, 29 January 2020 06:33



Medical personnel carry a patient into Jinyintan hospital, where people infected with the novel coronavirus 2019 are being treated, in Wuhan, China, yesterday.

Photo: AFP

The true scale of a viral pneumonia outbreak in China is likely far bigger than officially reported, scientists have said, as countries ramp up measures to prevent the disease from spreading.

Fears that the virus will spread are growing ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday, when hundreds of millions of Chinese move around the country and many others host or visit extended family members living overseas.

Authorities in China have said two people have died and at least 45 have been infected, with the outbreak centered around a seafood market in Wuhan, a central city of 11 million inhabitants that serves as a major transport hub.

However, a paper published Friday by scientists with the MRC Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis at Imperial College in London said that the number of cases in the city was likely about 1,700.

The researchers said that their estimate was largely based on the fact that cases had been reported overseas — two in Thailand and one in Japan.

The virus — a new strain of coronavirus that humans can contract — has caused alarm because of its connection to SARS, which killed nearly 650 people across China and Hong

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Kong in 2002-2003.

China has not announced any travel restrictions, but authorities in Hong Kong have stepped up detection measures, including rigorous temperature checkpoints for inbound travelers from China.

The US has said that from Friday it would begin screening flights arriving from Wuhan at San Francisco International Airport and New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport — which both receive direct flights — as well as Los Angeles International Airport, where many flights connect.

Thailand said it was already screening passengers arriving in Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Phuket, and would soon introduce similar controls in Krabi.

No human-to-human transmission has been confirmed so far, but the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission has said that the possibility “cannot be excluded.”

A WHO doctor said it would not be surprising if there was “some limited human-to-human transmission, especially among families who have close contact with one another.”

Scientists with the MRC Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis — which advises bodies including the WHO — said they estimated a “total of 1,723” people in Wuhan would have been infected as of Sunday last week.

“For Wuhan to have exported three cases to other countries would imply there would have to be many more cases than have been reported,” Neil Ferguson, one of the authors of the report, told the BBC.

“I am substantially more concerned than I was a week ago,” he said, while adding that it was “too early to be alarmist.”

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“People should be considering the possibility of substantial human-to-human transmission more seriously than they have so far,” he said, adding that it was “unlikely” that animal exposure was the sole source of infection.

Local authorities in Wuhan said a 69-year-old man died on Wednesday, becoming the second fatality, with the disease causing pulmonary tuberculosis and damage to multiple organ functions.

After the death was reported, online discussion spread in China over the severity of the coronavirus — and how much information the government might be hiding from the public.

Several complained about censorship of online posts, while others made comparisons to 2003, when Beijing drew criticism from the WHO for underreporting the number of SARS cases.

“It’s so strange,” wrote a Web user on Sina Weibo, citing the overseas cases in Japan and Thailand. “They all have Wuhan pneumonia cases but [in China] we don’t have any infections outside of Wuhan — is that scientific?”

Source: [Taipei Times - 2020/01/19](#)