

Virus Outbreak: Chen reveals Taiwan's e-mail to WHO

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Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung at the Central Epidemic Command Center in Taipei yesterday shows a copy of an e-mail that Taiwanese authorities sent to the WHO on Dec. 31 last year regarding the novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China.

Photo: CNA

Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳時中) yesterday urged the WHO to be honest as the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) published the e-mail it had sent to the world body in December last year alerting it about the risk of an outbreak in China.

The WHO on Friday said it received an e-mail from the Ministry of Health and Welfare on Dec. 31 last year, but added that "there was no mention in the message of human-to-human transmission."

During a news conference at the CECC in Taipei yesterday, Chen read out the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) e-mail to the WHO International Health Regulations (IHR) Focal Point on Dec. 31 last year.

"News resources today indicate that at least seven atypical pneumonia cases were reported in Wuhan, China," the e-mail read. "Their health authorities replied to the media that the cases were believed not SARS; however, the samples are still under examination, and cases have been isolated for treatment."

"I would greatly appreciate it if you have relevant information to share with us. Thank you very much in advance for your attention to this matter," it added.

China commonly uses the term "atypical pneumonia" to refer to SARS, but Chinese authorities had been ambiguous in describing the novel coronavirus as "an atypical pneumonia, but not SARS."

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"The e-mail specifically noted that patients had been isolated for treatment," Chen said. "Any public health expert or medical professional would know what circumstances would require patients to be isolated for treatment."

As there were no confirmed cases in Taiwan at the time, the CDC could not definitively state that there had been human-to-human transmission of the disease, he added.

"We would really be giving a misleading message if we firmly stated that there was human-to-human transmission, so we clearly alerted the IHR about the information we received," he said.

"If our warning to the WHO that the patients were 'isolated for treatment' does not count as a warning, then what does?" Chen said.

"While Taiwan, a non-member state, has informed the WHO, I would like to ask whether China, a WHO member, had informed the WHO about the situation?" Chen said, adding that if China did not alert the WHO at the time, then it had been concealing the truth about COVID-19, and if China did alert the WHO, then the WHO has neglected its duty in warning the world.

Chen urged the WHO to be honest in dealing with the issue and stop trying to shift the focus.

The CECC in a news release said that the IHR Focal Point only responded with a short message stating that Taiwan's information had been forwarded to experts.

Taiwan strongly suspected that human-to-human transmission was already occurring at the time, but could not confirm it, so enhanced border control and quarantine measures were implemented based on the assumption, including screening passengers on flights from Wuhan prior to disembarkation starting on Dec. 31 last year, the release said.

The CDC also sent experts to Wuhan in January to gain a better understanding of the

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outbreak, patients' exposure history and the control measures taken there, it added.

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