

Virus Outbreak: No new cases for third time in week

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People take pictures of the Grand Hotel in Taipei yesterday, which illuminated some of its rooms to spell out the word “Zero” after Taiwan reported no new COVID-19 cases for the third day this week.

Photo: EPA

Taiwan yesterday again registered no new cases of COVID-19 — the third time this week — as the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) said that travelers arriving from Southeast Asia, where the pandemic appears to be getting worse, would be the focus of stricter screening.

With no additional cases reported on Tuesday, Thursday and yesterday, Taiwan maintained its tally of confirmed infections at 395, including six deaths.

Of the 395 cases, 340 were imported and 55 were local infections, while 166 patients have been discharged from quarantine facilities following treatment, the center’s data showed.

Asked if reporting zero new cases again means that the disease is abating in Taiwan, Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳時中) told a daily news conference at the center in Taipei that.

While this might be the case, based on US standards, an epidemic can only be said to be abating when the number of new cases continues to drop for two consecutive weeks.

In that case, Taiwan’s situation can be described as “stable,” as the number of locally transmitted cases was either zero or one over the past few days, he said, while urging people to continue observing preventive measures.

Over the past week, the number of tests conducted daily for possible infection has dropped

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from nearly 1,300 to 1,100 to 900, CECC advisory specialist panel convener Chang Shan-chwen (張善政) said.

In its investigations of cluster infections, the center did not find people without symptoms, which means asymptomatic people did not cause any community spread, he said.

As the disease seems to be spiraling out of control in Southeast Asia, where some countries are not as transparent about information, the center is mulling stricter quarantine measures for travelers arriving from the region, as it has done with those from Europe and the US, said Chen, who heads the center.

Prior to the news briefing, a Taipei-based food courier union staged a protest outside the center, calling for attention to be paid to the risks couriers face.

Some couriers did not know their customers were in home quarantine or isolation until apartment managers told them, union chairman Chen Hung-jui (陳宏輝) said.

The government and food delivery platform operators have not provided couriers with a quota of masks, making them potential loopholes in disease prevention efforts, lawyer Chen Yu-hsin (陳宇欣) said, urging authorities to improve their working conditions.

Chen Shih-chung said that the center would meet with representatives of food couriers and postal workers, and soon release guidelines for protecting the delivery industry.

To ease the burden on pharmacies selling masks, pharmacists may close their stores on Sundays from this weekend, he said.

Asked about a UK think tank's index that ranked Taiwan as the seventh-safest nation amid the pandemic — behind China in fifth place — Chen Shih-chung said that he was at first surprised to see countries that have reported more deaths rank better.

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However, after studying the evaluation criteria used for the index, he said that he found it placed more emphasis on the procedures than the results of a nation's quarantine policies.

As Taiwan has not conducted large-scale screening like other nations, the statistics cited by the index might not show its strength, he said, adding that the center could discuss the evaluation with the think tank.

Separately, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that another automatic 30-day visa extension has been granted to foreign visitors who entered Taiwan on or before March 21, citing increased travel restrictions worldwide amid the pandemic.

The announcement followed an initial automatic 30-day visa extension the ministry granted on March 21.

"All travelers who entered Taiwan on or before March 21 on a visitor visa, a landing visa or through a visa-waiver program who have not overstayed their legal stay period would be granted a second automatic 30-day extension," with no application required, the Bureau of Consular Affairs said in a news release.

The total period of stay cannot exceed 180 days, it said, adding that the conditions are subject to change or may be adjusted as circumstances require.

Additional reporting by CNA

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