

Hong Kong to close borders with mainland China as global alarm spreads over coronavirus

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Hong Kong said on Tuesday it would “temporarily” close some of its borders with mainland China and stop issuing travel permits to Chinese tourists as the death toll from the Wuhan coronavirus surpassed 130.

In a drastic move the city’s [embattled chief executive](#), Carrie Lam, said that high speed rail links would be halted from Thursday, cross-border ferry services suspended and the number of flights to the mainland halved.

The move comes amid growing alarm at the rapid spread of the new virus - which has now reached at least 15 countries outside China, including the US, Germany and France - and infections soared overnight by nearly 60 per cent to more than 4,500.

In Hong Kong, where eight cases have been identified, the fast-moving outbreak has stirred raw memories of the [severe acute respiratory syndrome \(Sars\) coronavirus](#) - which killed roughly 800 people worldwide in 2002-2003. The densely populated city saw 1,750 infections and over 280 deaths during the epidemic.

Speaking at a press conference wearing a face mask Carrie Lam - whose popularity is already at an all-time low from eight months of pro-democracy protests - buckled to widespread political pressure and public demands to limit transit from the mainland.

Health workers had threatened to strike over the city’s response to the outbreak, with a union of hospital workers calling for the border to be closed for days.

The new coronavirus, which is believed to have begun in a seafood market in Wuhan, a city of 11 million in the central Hubei province, has now spread to all provinces bar Tibet, prompting unprecedented lockdowns of multiple major cities, and severe curbs on transport systems and public gatherings.

Over the weekend, China has urged its citizens to postpone trips abroad but millions had already embarked on trips for the Lunar New Year or on business in the weeks and days before Wuhan was completely sealed off.

Germany confirms first coronavirus cases

So far Thailand has reported 14 cases of infection, Hong Kong eight, Taiwan, seven and the US, Australia and Macau five each. Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Malaysia have reported four, France, three and Canada, Germany and Vietnam two. Over the past day, Cambodia has announced one.

Germany's two cases - the first evidence of human to human transmission in Europe - were identified as employees of [Munich car parts supplier Webasto](#).

Neither had travel links to China but they had picked up the virus from a meeting with a Chinese colleague who had visited from Shanghai and had no symptoms at the time.

Dr Emmanuel Andre, a practising doctor and professor of medical microbiology at KU Leuven University in Belgium, told *The Telegraph* this case would have "a lot of consequences" on approaches to contain the coronavirus.

"The important element here is that the disease can be transmitted through asymptomatic people. This means many of the measures we are taking, which are based on screening of symptoms and of people coming from China, are not sufficient," he warned.

"Just as China is having difficulties controlling the disease, we may well have more problems in Europe," he added.

The Ivory Coast is also investigating Africa's first potential case of the coronavirus. Dr Andre said he was surprised the new disease had not yet reached the continent.

"Many countries in Africa are super-connected with China. Over the last 20 years we have seen a huge increase in communication and China has invested millions in the continent.

"But I think lots of nations [in Africa] have a very low capacity to deal with the virus - so it's important that we communicate and coordinate at an international level to prepare and respond to the outbreak."

Singapore, Germany and the US Centre for Disease Control are advising all-but-essential travel to China should be avoided.

Human to human spread found in Japan

In a similar case to Germany, Japan said on Tuesday that a man with no recent travel to China had contracted the virus after driving tourists visiting from Wuhan.

The man in his sixties from Nara in western Japan drove two groups of Wuhan tourists earlier in January and was hospitalised on Saturday with flu-like symptoms, the health ministry said.

Japan has imposed new checks on travellers arriving from China, and is planning to dispatch a plane to Wuhan on Tuesday night to evacuate around 200 Japanese nationals from the city.

Taiwan has also confirmed its first case of domestic transmission - it's eighth case, but the first in a patient without travel history to China.

Until this point only Vietnam had confirmed domestic transmission.

The rapid infection rate has increased pressure on the World Health Organisation to

declare a global health emergency rather than just an emergency for China.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO director-general, who is currently in China for crisis talks with officials and health experts, said on Tuesday that he is confident in China's ability to control and contain the virus, adding that he did not support the evacuation of foreign nationals.

"We appreciate the seriousness with which China is taking this outbreak, especially the commitment from top leadership, and the transparency they have demonstrated," said Dr Tedros. He added that the WHO believes roughly 20 per cent of people with the coronavirus experience "severe" illness.

But the WHO position has left some experts flummoxed. Dr Mark Eccleston-Turner, a lecturer in Global Health Law at Keele University, said the declaration of a public health emergency of international concern would be a "crucial step" in assisting China.

"The legal criteria for a PHEIC have been met. The reasons for this not being declared a PHEIC are unclear, and do not align with the international legal obligations found in the International Health Regulations," he said.

Meanwhile, national capitals have been rolling out their own escalating precautions to protect their citizens.

The Philippines stopped issuing visas on arrival to Chinese nationals on Tuesday, while officials in Russia's Far East closed border crossings with China and travel agencies said they have stopped accepting package holiday makers from China.

Taiwan, which announced its seventh case on Tuesday, has prohibited Hubei residents from visiting the island and will impose a two-week ban on Chinese students planning to go to Taiwanese universities.

Scramble to evacuate foreign nationals from Wuhan

After it emerged at the [weekend that the ability of the deadly coronavirus](#) to spread is becoming stronger and it can infect people even if its carrier shows little or no symptoms, the [UK has joined other countries](#), including the US and Japan, in a desperate scramble to evacuate their nationals.

Nick, a dual US and UK citizen who is teaching English at an international school in Wuhan, told *The Telegraph* that the streets are eerily empty as most people are staying inside to try and avoid catching the coronavirus. "We're all washing our hands every five minutes," he said.

But he said that he and his Indonesian wife and two children, 12 and nine, who have British and Indonesian citizenship, had barely heard from the UK government, despite contacting them several times.

By contrast, the Indonesian government had been "amazing" at keeping in touch with his wife with developments and advice.

"But the first time we had any kind of concrete idea that the government are [working towards getting us](#) out was when [transport minister] Grant Shapps spoke on the news this morning," he said.

"It really is frustrating, we just don't understand - England is supposed to be a powerhouse of world diplomacy," he added.