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WUHAN VIRUS SIMILAR TO SARS

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The World Health Organization (WHO) reported on January 20, 2020, that it would be holding an expert panel to decide whether the fast-spreading epidemic spawned by a new virus in China should be announced a global health emergency. The statement came as China gave an account of confirmed cases in Guangdong province and Beijing, 14 instances in health care workers and a confirmed occurrence containing human to human outspread of the new virus, conditionally known as 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV).¹ It is a coronavirus, from the same origin as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) identified in 2003 which harmed 26 countries and generated more than 8000 instances killing 800 people in 2003.²

This SARS-like coronavirus has fuelled fears of a major breakout as millions travel for the Lunar New Year. Wuhan, capital of Hubei province in Central China, has 11 million inhabitants and functions as a vital transport hub specifically during the annual Chinese Lunar Year. To date, China has witnessed 830 confirmed instances and the majority have

occurred in Wuhan, the casualties rose to 26 so far. Four cases were reported overseas- one in Japan, two in Thailand and one in South Korea- all of whom have travelled to Wuhan.³ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – a leading public health institute of the U.S. – has been closely monitoring 2019-nCoV. Coronavirus is thought to be an animal virus but rarely can it grow and affect people and then transmit from person to person.⁴ Zhong Nanshan, a notable scientist at China's National Health Commission, who exposed the threat of the SARS virus, emphasized the possibility of contracting the virus even without visiting Wuhan. A seafood market in Wuhan was believed to be the nucleus for the outbreak but reports have stated that the infected patients had no history of exposure to the seafood market.⁵

China's President Xi Jinping has demanded all municipal and provincial officials to proceed with anti-epidemic counters against the Wuhan virus. Furthermore, Premier Li Keqiang insisted that the local government should be transparent about the spread of the disease in order to

prevent it. In response to the instructions, the National Health Commission had set up a group for “*pneumonia response to new coronavirus infections to guide local governments to do a good job in epidemic response.*”⁶ Wuhan imposed an excessive quarantine to control the spread of the coronavirus. “*Residents should not leave Wuhan except for special reasons,*” a government document stated.⁷

In shutting off Wuhan, China is applying a centuries-old public health measure to halt the transmission of the virus. “*It’s an unbelievable undertaking,*” noted Dr. Howard Markel, a professor of the history of medicine at the University of Michigan. By restricting the movements of millions of people in an effort to safeguard public health, China is embarking on balancing an act that has a long and complicated history filled with political, social and ethical scenarios. The method of isolating people and goods to stop the outbreak of disease goes back to the 14th century. Quarantines could be fruitful if the infected patients are selectively isolated or are believed to have an infection. The measure in Wuhan, with the introduction of “cordon sanitaire” – in which a line is drawn around the infected area and there is no movement of people – has been perceived as an excessive measure to control the transmission of the virus.⁸

Epidemics of the novel virus among people are always a public health threat. The risk from these eruptions depends on the attributes of the virus, and includes whether and how well it

expands between people, the extremity of resulting illness, and the medical or other preventions accessible to control the outcome of the virus, i.e., vaccine or treatment medications. Investigations are on-going, but some level of the person-to-person transmission of 2019-nCoV is happening. It is crucial to consider that person-to-person spread can happen in a continuous manner. It is still unclear how easily 2019-nCoV is spreading from person-to-person. WHO has not yet declared 2019-nCoV as a global health emergency. There are on-going investigations by the WHO researchers who are gathering data to learn more.⁹ This health security is a rapidly evolving condition and information will be refreshed as soon as it is available.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Helen Branswell, “WHO calls for emergency meeting on new virus in China, as cases spread to health care workers,” *STAT*, January 20, 2020 Available on <https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/20/who-calls-for-emergency-meeting-on-new-virus-in-china-as-cases-spread-to-health-care-workers/> Accessed on January 21, 2020

² SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), *World Health Organization*, Available on <https://www.who.int/ith/diseases/sars/en/> Accessed on January 21, 2020

³ James Griffiths and Nectar Gan, “Nine dead, 440 infected as China confirms Wuhan virus can be spread by humans,” *CNN*, January 22, 2020 Available on <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/21/asia/china-china-coronavirus-sars-intl-hnk/index.html> Accessed on January 22, 2020

⁴ “2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), Wuhan, China,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, January 21,

2020 Available on 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), Wuhan, China Accessed on January 22, 2020

⁵ Jeff Pao, "WHO could declare global emergency over Wuhan virus," *Asia Times*, January 21, 2020 Available on <https://www.asiatimes.com/2020/01/article/who-could-declare-emergency-over-wuhan-virus/> Accessed on January 22, 2020

⁶ "Xi Jinping makes important instructions on pneumonia epidemic of new coronavirus infection," China State Council Department Website, January 20, 2020 Available on http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-01/20/content_5471057.htm Accessed on January 23, 2020

⁷ "Of new pneumonia epidemic prevention and control headquarters in Shanghai," *Yangtze River Daily*, January 23, 2020 Available on <http://www.cjrbapp.cjn.cn/p/152710.html> Accessed on January 23, 2020

⁸ Michael Levenson, "Scale of China's Wuhan Shutdown Is Believed to Be Without Precedent," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2020 Available on <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/world/asia/coronavirus-quarantines-history.html> Accessed on January 23, 2020

⁹ Matthew Walsh, Flynn Murphy and Han Wei, "Wuhan Virus Latest: Wuhan Imposes Massive Quarantine, Shutting Down Public Transit," *Caixin*, January 23, 2020 Available on <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-01-23/reporters-note-we-stayed-in-wuhan-as-the-last-trains-pulled-out-101507578.html> Accessed on January 23, 2020