WHO says coronavirus danger is “very high”

By Benjamin Mateus
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The World Health Organization (WHO) has upgraded its assessment of the danger posed by the coronavirus to “very high,” stopping short of calling the outbreak a pandemic. Director-General Tedros said at a recent press conference, “For the moment, we are not witnessing the uncontained global spread of this virus, and we are not witnessing large-scale severe death or disease.” The coronavirus has now been documented in at least 56 countries.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the 2019-nCoV virus has caused death resulting from the illness as well as sustained person-to-person spread criteria. The worldwide spread is the third criterion in determining a contagion as a pandemic. According to Dr. Mike Ryan, executive director of the World Health Organization, “If we say there’s a pandemic of coronavirus, we’re essentially accepting that every human on the planet will be exposed to that virus.”

These statements reflect the WHO’s belief that containment measures can still bring the “epidemic” under effective control. However, as the number of cases outside of mainland China continues to outpace China with new countries being added to the growing list of countries that have confirmed new cases of Covid-19, it seems that time is of the essence. Still, some countries like Vietnam, Nepal, and Singapore, as well as more recently China, have shown early indications that the infection has slowed or stopped in these countries.

A declaration of a pandemic would employ emergency-grade response plans at local and state levels. These measures would include school closures, the use of essential personnel only, use of telecommunication for the conduct of business, closure of public events – sporting events, conferences, political rallies and conventions – and the possible use of massive quarantine measures to include the deployment of military or police forces to enforce regulations. These measures have been employed by many nations who are essentially preparing for massive outbreaks in their communities.

The last time the WHO declared a pandemic was in 2009 when the H1N1 flu, better known as the swine flu, infected over 1 billion people on the globe and killed over half a million people. The WHO was severely criticized for its declaration of a pandemic and handling of the crisis. They were cited for the needlessly complex definition of a pandemic, potential conflict of interest with the vaccine industries, and responding with lack of resolve after declaring the pandemic. According to the New York Times, “Countries that needed technical help could not obtain it in enough languages, and the WHO bureaucracy created an unmanageable number of documents.”

During a 2011 review of the pandemic, they noted in their draft that the “core national and local capacities called for in the International Health regulation (IHR) are not yet fully operational and are not now on a path to timely implementation worldwide.” Essentially, the WHO lacks enforceable sanctions. In other words, it cannot make countries ascribe to their recommendations.

In their Summary conclusion 3: The world is ill-prepared to respond to a severe influenza pandemic or any similarly global, sustained, and threatening public health emergency. Beyond the implementation of core public health capacities called for in the IHR, global preparedness can be advanced through research, strengthened health-care delivery systems, economic development in low and middle-income countries ad improved health status.

There are presently 84,175 cases of Covid-19, with 2,876 deaths so far. Thirty-six thousand eight hundred eighty-four people have recovered. The three countries posing serious acceleration in cases – Iran, Italy, and
South Korea – have reported more than 3,500 infections on Friday, doubling in two days. On Friday, Iran had 388 cases (+143 from the day before) with 34 deaths (+8); Italy 889 (+234) with 21 deaths (+4); South Korea 2,337 (+571) with 16 deaths (+3). The high number of deaths in Iran is worrisome as it suggests the epidemic is much more expansive than reported. Additionally, a case confirmed in Nigeria has the WHO worried that the outbreak could take a foothold in Africa, which could have devastating consequences. China has only had eight new cases and no new deaths.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average has lost over 3,200 points in one week, suffering its worst week since the financial crisis in 2008. Goldman Sachs has told its investors that they do not expect US companies to generate earnings growth in 2020. With the warning by the CDC that it is only a matter of time that the coronavirus will find impact, the US has sent the markets into an epileptic fit. Supply chains are almost non-existent, and production and shipping have come to a grinding halt.

A high-ranking whistleblower informed the Washington Post that federal health employees sent to Travis Airforce Base to assist with quarantined evacuees from Japan openly interacted with them without proper medical training or protective gear.

This followed news that a California woman, currently in critical condition at UC Davis Medical Center, had been infected with no direct link to anyone traveling from the affected countries raising the suspicion that the source of her infection may have come from someone at Travis Air Force Base. It is unclear if any of the HHS personnel were contaminated or are the source of the infection in California. A second person in Santa Clara County has now been identified without any links heightening the suspicion that the infection is taking hold there.

The US Navy also confirmed on Friday that they had ordered ships in the Pacific Fleet that have traveled to affected countries, approximately 30 to 40 vessels, to remain at sea for fourteen days while they monitor the several thousands of sailors for possible signs of infection. One American military soldier based in Daegu, South Korea, has tested positive for Covid-19.

Meanwhile, new infections are erupting in Europe with its porous borders as France and Germany are reporting new cases without travel links suggesting the infection, given its two-week incubation period, has become well established in these regions. Mexico has also confirmed its first case. It is not a matter of if but a matter of when the WHO will declare a pandemic.

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