

Message

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Sent: 28/01/2020 6:13:54 AM
To: Diptel FCO (Sensitive) [FCO.diptelrestricted@fco.gov.uk]
Subject: OFFICIAL_SENSITIVE CHINA RAMPS UP RESPONSE TO NOVEL CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK [DIPTTEL 2000318]

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Foreign & Commonwealth Office Diplomatic Telegram

Summary

Chinese Government ramps up efforts to control the spread of Novel Coronavirus amidst world's largest human migration. 4515 cases reported (and counting), with 106 fatalities. Hubei province on lockdown; multiple cities have transport restrictions. Memory of SARS cover-up ensures residual distrust of government response; it is better than 17 years ago, but serious challenges remain. We are in close contact with Chinese Government and international partners on evacuating UK nationals from Hubei. BE Beijing have joined BCG Wuhan in crisis mode.

1. DIPTTEL 2000217 of 20 January reported on the outbreak of Novel Coronavirus in the city of Wuhan. This is what we know eight days on.

Health

2. The number of declared cases have increased from 204 cases and 3 fatalities (20 January) to 4515 and 106 fatalities earlier today (including a first Beijing fatality). On 26 January, Ma Xiaowei, Director of the National Health Commission, confirmed cases of asymptomatic human-to-human transmission, making control of the outbreak more challenging (though far from unique to this virus). The World Health Organisation suggest an incubation period of 2-10 days, during which symptoms may not appear but an individual may still be infectious. The exact source of the outbreak has yet to be confirmed (though wild animal trading has been banned). WHO has not yet declared an international emergency but are expected to do so shortly.

Government Response

3. The Chinese Government response ramped up substantially on 25 January, with General Secretary Xi Jinping convening an exceptional Politburo meeting (comment: comparable to a COBR meeting on Christmas Day). Chinese state media quoted Xi describing the outbreak as "grave", with the virus "accelerating". The following day, China announced a new Leading Small Group to coordinate the government response, chaired by Premier Li Keqiang and including five other Politburo members (including head of Xi's personal office Ding Xuexiang) and three State Councillors (including Foreign Minister Wang Yi). The State Council has announced an extension of the Chinese New Year holiday to 2 February. Yesterday Premier Li conducted an inspection of Wuhan on Xi's behalf.

4. There have been a raft of measures aimed at slowing the virus (and demonstrating grip). Public communication has increased exponentially. Cities across China have closed bus services between provinces and some rail services. Schools have postponed the start of term. People returning to Beijing and other major cities from outside their home cities have been instructed to self-quarantine at least seven days. The challenge of controlling the outbreak has been exacerbated by the Chinese New Year migration, expected to see approximately 3 billion trips. All tour groups journeys have been cancelled.

5. The centre is also preparing to wield a big stick; stories are emerging of officials under investigation for late reporting of cases, and omnipresent social media app Wechat has introduced a feature for people to report poor performance by officials.

Wuhan Response