

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]

Diptel BEIJING (Sensitive)
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

6. On 23 January, routes out of Wuhan (11.4 million people) were closed (rail, road and air). This was followed by a ban on private transport and instructions residents should remain at home, measures now covering the entire province of Hubei of approximately 60 million people. The army will take over the newly-built Huoshenshan hospital on 3 February (1000 beds); a second 1300-bed hospital is due to open 5 February. The pressure on local authorities is intense: a disastrous press conference on Sunday from the Mayor of Wuhan prompted public anger as he suggested up to five million people may have left the city since the outbreak; he has offered to resign. Party paper People's Daily has criticised the local government response.

Society

7. The coronavirus is dominating discussion in state and social media. Memories of the SARS outbreak in 2003 (and accompanying cover up) are adding to concern, and (anecdotally) suspicion over the veracity of official communications. Rumours abound, streets in major cities are almost empty; Wuhan is a ghost town. We have seen long queues at supermarkets and for certain medical supplies (e.g. masks).

Post response

8. BE Beijing, CG Wuhan and London FCO have moved into crisis mode (Diptel 2000315). Our priority is supporting departure of British Nationals from Wuhan and provide clear guidance to BNs across China. We are in close contact with the Chinese government (who, contrary to media reporting, have been responsive and broadly helpful) and international partners. BCG Wuhan is operating a skeleton staff; the remainder of the China Network is operating strict self-quarantine procedures.

Comment

9. The coronavirus crisis is an inauspicious start to the Year of the Rat. The Party leadership will be acutely aware that crisis management is a core part of the social contract with the people. Any perception of mishandling will increase political risk at a time of mounting challenges on multiple fronts (economy, Hong Kong, US). Crisis handling has made and destroyed official careers throughout Chinese history; Xi himself earned plaudits for his work on the 2008 Olympics as challenges emerged in the lead-up. The decision to deploy the big guns over Chinese New Year (including Xi directly taking charge at the head of the Politburo), and to employ measures that will shave billions (USD) off growth, show the extent of the Party's concern. They will do everything they can to quickly control this outbreak. But the challenge of doing so is substantial.

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