Virus death toll hits 81; draconian measures eyed

The death toll due to the new coronavirus strain has spiked to 81 in China despite unprecedented quarantine measures and travel lockdowns.

A team of experts, mapping the outbreak said Monday governments need to impose "draconian" travel restrictions to stop the coronavirus in China from becoming a global epidemic.

Scientists at the University of Hong Kong presented a briefing warning that the spread of the deadly SARS-like virus that first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan was accelerating.

"We have to be prepared that this particular epidemic may be about to become a global epidemic," said Gabriel Leung, head of the team.

"Substantial, draconian measures limiting population mobility should be taken sooner, rather than later," Leung said.

Leung leads a group of researchers who are mapping the virus, which has so far infected more than 2,700 people in China and killed 81 people.

In a sign of the mounting official concern, Premier Li Keqiang visited the ground-zero province of Hubei to oversee containment efforts in Wuhan, a city of 11 million people where the coronavirus emerged late last year.

The government has sealed off Wuhan and neighboring cities, effectively trapping tens of millions of people, in a bid to contain the spread of the virus.

Thousands of foreigners have also been ensnared in the lockdowns, triggering a scramble from some countries to orchestrate evacuation flights from Wuhan for their citizens.

Twenty-four new deaths were confirmed in Hubei on Monday, and another in the southern island province of Hainan, bringing the overall death toll to 81, while confirmed infections swelled to more than 2,700 nationwide.

A nine-month-old baby in Beijing was among those infected, authorities said, making her the youngest person to have been confirmed to have contracted the virus.

And thousands more patients with flu-like symptoms were suspected to have the virus.

Authorities around the country have also imposed aggressive curbs on transport during the usually high-traffic Lunar New Year holiday season now underway, in a race to cut off transmission routes.

Typically hundreds of millions of people cross China in jam-packed buses and trains during the Lunar New Year holiday, a time for family reunions.

The government said Monday it would extend the national holiday initially due to end on Jan. 30, for three days to limit population flows.

While the epicenter remains in Wuhan and the central Chinese province of Hubei, it has since spread to some of the country's biggest cities, including Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing, and the southern cities of Shenzhen and Guangzhou.

"We are expecting to see epicenters of self-sustaining epidemics in these other major city clusters on the mainland," Leung predicted.

Given those cities have major regional and international transport links it was "highly likely they would spread the virus further" and once those cities have self-sustaining outbreaks, he added.

The Wuhan virus has been detected in a dozen other countries — as far afield as North America and Europe — but only via a handful of people who traveled primarily from the epicenter in Wuhan.

With the virus having spread to around a dozen countries, World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus heard the Beijing to meet government officials to discuss "providing further protection against the outbreak," he said on Twitter.

The WHO last week stopped short of declaring the outbreak an international public health emergency, which would have prompted more concerted international action, including possible trade or travel restrictions.

The United States, France and Japan were among the countries looking to evacuate their citizens from Wuhan on Monday.