Virus infections surge outside China
Philippines partially lifts travel ban to South Korea

By AFP and GENALYN D. KABILING

The world has entered uncharted territory in its battle against the deadly coronavirus, the UN health agency warned, as new infections dropped dramatically in China on Tuesday but surged abroad with the US death toll rising to six.

Globally, the virus has killed more than 3,100 people and infected over 90,000 even as a clear shift in the crisis emerges, with nine times as many cases recorded outside China as inside, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

China has imposed draconian quarantines and travel restrictions to keep large swaths of the population indoors for weeks, a strategy that appears to have paid off as new cases have been falling this month.

While Italy has locked down towns, other countries have stopped short of enacting mass quarantines and instead have discouraged large gatherings, delayed sporting events, and banned arrivals from virus-hit nations.

South Korea, Iran, and Italy have emerged as major spawning grounds for the novel coronavirus, which is believed to have...
Virus infections surge...

originated at a market that sold wild animals in the central Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

"We are in uncharted territory," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Monday.

"We have never before seen a respiratory pathogen that is capable of community transmission, but which can also be contained with the right measures."

Community transmission means infections within a population are not imported from another virus-hit area.

The United States is now facing a potential epidemic, with six people dying in the northwestern state of Washington, where officials warned residents the battle against the disease was shifting from containment to mitigation.

"The risk for all of us of becoming infected will be increasing," said Jeff Duchin, a health officer in King County where five of the deaths occurred.

The district is home to Seattle, a city with a population of more than 700,000 people.

US eyes treatment

The White House, which has been accused of downplaying the threat from the virus, continued to strike a bullish tone.

Vice President Mike Pence declared that a treatment "could literally be available by this summer, or early fall."

He was likely referring to remdesivir, an antiviral drug developed by the pharmaceutical firm Gilead that has already been used to treat one US patient and was moving toward two expansive final stage trials in Asia.

Pence also announced American pharmaceuticals were teaming up in a consortium to fight the virus, and said that South Korea and Italy, two of the hardest-hit nations, would screen all their airline passengers bound for the US.

Despite its world-class hospitals and cutting edge research, the US is viewed as vulnerable to an epidemic because of glaring disparities in its health care system, including nearly 28 million people without coverage.

China cases down

China reported 125 new cases on Tuesday, its lowest daily increase in six weeks, with all but 11 infections in Wuhan's central Hubei province.

The nationwide death toll rose to 2,943 with 31 more deaths, all in Hubei.

Chinese officials have touted progress in the battle against the epidemic, which has taken a toll on the world's second largest economy and threatened to cut into global growth.

Global markets tanked last week but rebounded on Monday after governments and central banks said they would step in if needed to soften the blow.

Finance ministers and central bank chiefs from G7 countries will hold talks on the issue on Tuesday.

Although infections in China have dropped, Chinese President Xi Jinping on Monday called for the stepping up of scientific research on vaccines, drugs, and testing that will help fight the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Xi bats for scientific research

More work should go into establishing a stockpile of vaccines and researching possible hosts of the new coronavirus strain, said Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, during his visit to the Academy of Military Medical Sciences and the School of Medicine at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

"Fighting this hard battle, China should seize [control of] more core technology with its own intellectual property, make more core products to better protect people's lives and health, and contribute more to safeguard national and strategic security," he added.

Xi put the focus on containing the coronavirus in the long term, including through vaccine research, as more nations reported their first cases and deaths, while new infections in mainland China fell to their lowest level since it took emergency measures to tackle the crisis.

During his visit, Xi thanked front-line science and technology personnel of the Academy of Military Medical Sciences where he learned about the progress of research and application of the vaccines, anti-bodies, medicines and fast testing kits.

Science as most powerful weapon

"Science and technology are the most powerful weapons in humanity's battle against diseases," Xi said. "Man-kind cannot defeat a major disaster or epidemic without scientific development and technological innovation."

Xi said the COVID-19 research must be taken as a major and pressing task, calling for accelerating its progress and overcoming major difficulties in epidemic prevention and control at an earlier date.

Hotspots elsewhere

UN medical experts arrived in Iran on Monday to help it tackle the world's second deadliest outbreak, with 66 fatalities and more than 1,500 infections.

China sent experts to Iran on Saturday while Germany, France and Britain pledged emergency medical supplies including testing equipment, body suits and gloves.

In Italy, tourist hotspots including the Duomo in Milan reopened to visitors but access was limited to avoid overcrowding in a bid to contain the virus.

Italy, Europe's worst-affected country with around 1,700 infections, said Monday its deaths from the virus
had jumped 18 to 52. South Korea has the most infections outside China, with more than 4,000 cases and 26 deaths.

The WHO says the virus appears to particularly hit people over the age of 60 and those already weakened by other illnesses. Its mortality rate is between two and five percent — higher than the seasonal flu.

**War on coronavirus**

In South Korea, South Korean President Moon Jae-in declared "war" against the coronavirus on Tuesday, placing all government agencies on a 24-hour emergency footing as the country's total cases — the largest in the world outside China — approached 5,000.

South Korea has seen a rapid rise in infections in recent days and scores of events — from K-pop concerts to sports seasons — have been cancelled or postponed over the contagion, with school and kindergarten breaks extended by three weeks nationwide.

The central bank has warned of negative growth in the first quarter for the world's 12th-largest economy, noting the epidemic will hit both consumption and exports.

Moon said the government will inject more than 30 trillion won (US$25 billion) into the economy to address the "grave" situation brought on by the outbreak.

"The entire country has entered a war with the infectious disease," Moon said, ordering all government agencies to operate around the clock.

South Korea confirmed 477 new cases Tuesday, with two more deaths taking the toll to 28, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a statement.

**PH partially lifts ban**

Meanwhile, Filipino tourists will be allowed anew to travel to South Korea, except to areas hit by the new coronavirus with the partial lifting of the travel ban to that country, Malacañang announced Tuesday.

Presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo said Filipinos travelling to South Korea must sign a written declaration about the health risks of their trip.

The decision was reached by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) during a meeting at the Department of Health office on Tuesday.

"The IATF has approved to allow Filipinos to travel to South Korea, except to the whole of North Gyeongsang Province, including Daegu City and Cheongdo County, where the virus outbreak is concentrated," Panelo said. (With a report from Xinhua)