

Outbreak to last months at least: experts

AFP, Washington

The deadly new coronavirus that has broken out in China, 2019-nCoV, will afflict a minimum of tens of thousands of people and will last at least several months, researchers estimate based on the first available data.

"The best case scenario, you would have something... where we go through the spring into the summer, and then it dies down," David Fisman, a professor at the University of Toronto who wrote an analysis of the virus for the International Society for Infectious Diseases, told AFP.

"It's not something that's going to end the next week or the next month," said Alessandro Vespignani, a professor at Northeastern University. He is part of a group of researchers that manages an online dashboard about the outbreak.

In recent days, multiple experts have calculated an important parameter for any outbreak: the basic reproduction number, or "R0." It represents the number of people contaminated by an infected person. Estimates range from 1.4 to 3.8, according to Fisman, figures that are considered moderate.

That is only an average: some patients may infect many people, while others infect only a few. "On its own, it isn't a reason to panic," said Maimuna Majumder, a researcher at Harvard University and at Boston Children's Hospital.

She said the rate is 1.3 for seasonal flu (which has millions of cases per year) and between two and five for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which resulted in 8,000 cases and 774 deaths, the majority in mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-2003. In comparison, the rate for measles ranges from 12 to 18.

Quarantines and isolation measures, systematic hand washing and masks could help drive down the average number of infected people. If the rate falls below one, the epidemic will die down.

AGENCIES

President Xi Jinping yesterday said China was sure of defeating a "devil" coronavirus that has killed 106 people, spread across the world and rattled financial markets.

Despite his confidence, alarm was rising, with nations from France to Japan organising evacuations and Hong Kong - scene of anti-China unrest for months - planning to suspend high-speed rail and ferry links with the mainland.

Among countries pulling nationals out of Wuhan, the central city of 11 million people where the outbreak started, the United States' Embassy in Beijing said a chartered plane would take its consulate staff away on Wednesday.

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

- Confirmed cases now exceed 4,500, deaths 106
- WHO chief says evacuations not needed now
- Hong Kong to stop rail links with mainland China
- Chinese expert says outbreak could peak in ten days

VIRUS MORTALITY RATE

2019-nCoV	Around 3-4%
Spanish flu (1918-1919)	2.5
SARS-CoV (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)	9.5
MERS-CoV (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome)	34.4
H7N9 (avian influenza)	39
Ebola virus (West Africa)	63
Marburg virus	88*

Source: CDC/WHO/Munster et al/ New England Journal of Medicine

World Health Organisation (WHO) chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Xi met in Beijing to discuss how to protect Chinese and foreigners in areas affected by the virus and "possible" evacuation alternatives, a WHO spokesman said.

"The virus is a devil and we cannot let the devil hide," state television quoted Xi as saying.

"China will strengthen international cooperation and welcomes the WHO participation in virus prevention ... China is confident of winning the battle against the virus."

At a meeting with authorities in Beijing,



Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said he approved of the Chinese government's measures to curb the outbreak so far, according to a statement posted on the foreign affairs ministry's website.

The WHO called the epidemic "an emergency in China" on Jan 23, but stopped short of declaring it a global public health emergency.

Tedros said he does not advocate the evacuation of foreign nationals currently in China, and urged people to stay calm.

The flu-like virus has spread overseas, but none of the 106 deaths has been beyond China and all but six were in Wuhan, where the virus emerged last month, probably from illegally-traded wildlife.

The WHO said only one of 45

confirmed cases in 13 countries outside China involved human-to-human transmission, in Vietnam.

But a Japanese official said there was a suspected case of human-to-human transmission there and Germany confirmed a case after a man contracted the virus from a colleague visiting his workplace from Shanghai.

Chinese-ruled Hong Kong said high-speed rail services to the mainland will be suspended from midnight on Thursday, while the number of flights would be halved.

Thailand confirmed six more infections among visitors from China, taking its tally to 14, the highest outside China. Far eastern Russian regions would close their borders with China

until Feb. 7, Tass news agency said. Wuhan is under virtual quarantine, with a lockdown on transport and bans on gatherings. Tens of millions of others in Hubei province, of which Wuhan is the capital, live under some form of travel curbs.

The number of confirmed cases in China surged to 4,515 as of Monday from 2,835 the previous day, the government said.

Meanwhile, a top Chinese government expert yesterday said the viral outbreak t could reach its peak in around 10 days.

Zhong Nanshan, a renowned scientist at China's National Health Commission, told the official Xinhua news agency that the outbreak "will not increase at a large scale."

"I believe it should reach a peak in a week or around ten days," Zhong said.

Zhong told Xinhua that the "fatality rate would certainly continue to fall" even though no cure had been found so far, thanks to life support technology and efforts of researchers and medical workers.

Known as "2019-nCoV", the newly identified coronavirus can cause pneumonia and, like other respiratory infections, it spreads between people in droplets from coughs and sneezes.

It has an incubation of between one and 14 days.



The wreckage of a US Bombardier E-11A jet is seen after it crashed in a mountainous territory of Deh Yak district in Ghazni Province, yesterday. US forces in helicopters yesterday recovered the remains of the crew killed when one of its military jets went down in a Taliban-controlled area.

PHOTO: AFP

Netanyahu formally indicted in court on graft charges

AGENCIES

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been formally indicted in court on corruption charges after he withdrew his request for parliamentary immunity from prosecution.

Netanyahu was in Washington for meetings with US President Donald Trump ahead of the release of Trump's long-delayed US-Israeli "peace" plan for the Middle East when Israel's attorney-general filed the charges in a Jerusalem court yesterday.

Earlier, Netanyahu said he was withdrawing his bid for parliamentary immunity from prosecution on corruption charges, paving the way for a trial to begin.

Israel's longest-serving prime minister issued a statement on Facebook yesterday, saying the immunity proceedings in parliament would have been a "circus" and he did not want to take part in a "dirty game".

"I informed the Knesset speaker that I am withdrawing my immunity request," Netanyahu said.

Israel's parliament, the Knesset, had been set to convene to discuss the formation of

a committee to debate the prime minister's request for immunity from prosecution yesterday.

The Knesset was widely expected to reject the request, which would have dealt Netanyahu a blow ahead of a parliamentary election scheduled for March 2 - the third national vote in less than a year.

His retraction paves the way for legal proceedings against him to go forward. A trial could take months or years and the 70-year-old leader is under no legal obligation to resign.

Netanyahu was indicted in November on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust over allegations that he granted state favours worth hundreds of millions of dollars to Israeli media barons in return for gifts and favourable

coverage. He denies any wrongdoing, saying he is the victim of a witch hunt by the media and the political left aiming to remove a popular right-wing leader.

Netanyahu could face up to 10 years in prison if convicted of bribery and a maximum three-year term for fraud and breach of trust.



Bolton revelations roil Trump trial

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump's lawyers, eager to attain his swift acquittal, pushed back forcefully Monday against explosive new allegations from former national security advisor John Bolton, insisting the US president's dealings regarding Ukraine were not impeachable.

The defense also injected Joe Biden and his family directly into the argument for why the president should not be ousted.

At only the third impeachment trial in US history, they stressed that Trump's requests to Ukraine to investigate his potential Democratic White House challenger were motivated by concerns about corruption.

Republicans faced fresh pressure to subpoena Bolton as a firsthand witness at Trump's Senate impeachment trial following new revelations, which could amount to damning evidence about the president's actions.

As Clinton impeachment investigator Ken Starr and Harvard constitutional expert Alan Dershowitz defended the president, three Republican senators indicated they could favor hearing testimony from the 71-year-old Bolton.

According to The New York Times, Bolton, in a draft of his forthcoming book, says Trump told him in August that he wanted to freeze military aid to Ukraine until Kiev helped with investigations of political rivals including Biden, his potential election opponent.



The allegation that Trump withheld the aid for his own political purposes was at the heart of Trump's December impeachment by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

Dershowitz argued emphatically that such charges were "unconstitutional grounds" for impeachment.

The 81-year-old also directly sought to neutralize the Bolton developments.

"Nothing in the Bolton revelations, even if true, would rise to the level of abuse of power or impeachable offense," Dershowitz said.

And he sought to downplay the controversy over Trump's pressure campaign against Kiev.

"Quid pro quo alone is not a basis for abuse of power," Dershowitz added. "It's part of the way foreign policy has been operated by presidents since the beginning of time."

Bolton's manuscript leak has rattled the Senate trial, where lawmakers will vote this week on whether to accept witnesses.

Four Republicans would need to join Democrats in the Senate, where Republicans hold a 53-47 edge, to allow testimony from Bolton and others. While just 51 senators are required to allow trial witnesses, 67 senators -- a two-thirds majority -- are needed to remove Trump from office.

Starr argued that efforts to remove Trump from office were unconstitutional because unlike in the cases of Clinton and Richard Nixon the articles of impeachment did not allege any actual crime by the president.

Iran house to debate on quitting NPT

AFP, Dubai

A motion for Iran to quit the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was introduced in parliament yesterday, the assembly's news site ICANA reported, in a move that appears to raise the stakes in Tehran's confrontation with the West.

The report did not say when parliament might vote on the motion. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the highest authority in the Islamic Republic, makes the final decisions regarding the country's nuclear policy.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said last week that Iran could withdraw from the NPT if European countries refer it to the UN Security Council over a nuclear agreement, a move that would overturn diplomacy in Tehran's turbulent relations with Western powers.

The 1968 NPT has been the foundation of global nuclear arms control since the Cold War, including a 2015 deal Iran signed with world powers that offered it access to global trade in return for accepting curbs to its atomic program.

The fate of the 2015 pact has been in doubt since US President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of it in 2018 and reimposed sanctions. Iran has responded by scaling back its commitments, although it says it wants the pact to survive.



Israelis can't visit for now

Says Saudi FM

AFP, Dubai

Israeli citizens are not allowed to come to Saudi Arabia, the kingdom's foreign minister announced Monday after the Jewish state said it gave its citizens the green light to visit.

Israel's interior ministry on Sunday said Israeli citizens, both Muslims and Jews, have the right to travel to Saudi Arabia for religious and business visits.

But Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told CNN Israelis are not welcome at the moment in Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites.

"Our policy is constant. We don't have relations with Israel and holders of Israeli passports cannot visit the kingdom for now," he said, according to CNN's Arabic website.

Like most Arab countries, Saudi Arabia does not have diplomatic relations with Israel.

Israel has peace deals with only two Arab countries -- Jordan and Egypt -- but its occupation of Palestinian territory has long served as a major factor preventing similar accords with the rest of the Arab world.

"We strongly encourage the reaching of a solution" to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, said Bin Farhan.

"When a peace treaty between the Palestinians and Israel is reached the question of Israel's integration in the region will be on the table (for negotiations) I believe," he added.

RENEWED VIOLENCE AGAINST PROTESTERS IN IRAQ

2 killed, dozens wounded

AFP, Baghdad

Two Iraqis were killed and dozens wounded in protest-related violence yesterday, as authorities suspended a television station which has broadcast intensive coverage of the months-long movement demanding regime change.

The youth-led campaign has pressed on despite violence that has killed more than 480 people, a vast majority of them protesters, since rallies erupted in Baghdad and Shiite-majority southern Iraq on October 1.

Demanding snap elections, an independent prime minister and accountability for long-standing corruption and bloodshed, youths have occupied squares, blockaded streets and boycotted university classes for nearly four months.

Security forces have responded with live rounds and tear gas, and on Tuesday one protester was shot dead in clashes with riot police in the southern protest hotspot of Kut, according to medical and security sources.

Further north in the capital, a professor at the famed Mustansariyah University was

shot dead early yesterday while driving in his car, medics and police said.

Near Tahrir, protesters carrying makeshift shield tried to seal off roads and threw rocks at riot police firing tear gas and live rounds. Around 15 protesters were wounded, medics said.

Other rallies and skirmishes rocked the port city of Basra in the south, as well as Amarah, Hillah and Nasiriyah.

Political factions have thus far failed to agree on a replacement for the prime minister, Adel Abdel Mahdi, who resigned in December but has stayed on in a caretaker role. And while parliament has passed a new law to oversee parliamentary elections, it falls short of protesters' demands and has yet to be signed into law by the president.

The delays have infuriated protesters, and even Iraq's top Shia religious authority and the United Nations have criticised authorities for failing to enact reform.

The government has also come under fire for not doing enough to protect journalists in the country. Iraqi authorities this week suspended Al-Dijla television station for a month, media and police sources said yesterday.



Iraqi medical aid volunteers help an anti-government protester suffering from tear gas effects during clashes with security forces in al-Khillani Square off central Baghdad's Sinak bridge which links the Iraqi capital's Green Zone with the rest of the city, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP