
China Virus Epicentre Wuhan To Open Up As World Locks Down

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Beijing, China: China announced Tuesday an end to travel curbs at the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic, as governments around the world tightened lockdowns affecting 1.7 billion people in a desperate effort to slow the spread of the deadly disease.

Hubei province, where the novel coronavirus emerged late last year, will allow healthy residents to travel from midnight, officials said, two months after they were ordered to stay indoors.

The relaxation of rules, which will not apply to the hardest-hit city of Wuhan until April 8, comes as Britain and New Zealand joined nations in Europe, the Middle East, North America and Asia in declaring countrywide lockdowns in a bid to staunch the flow of new infections.

The extraordinary measures around the world continued to throw up horrifying tales; soldiers in Spain tasked with fighting the outbreak reported finding abandoned elderly people -- some dead -- at retirement homes.

And on the deserted streets of New York, one psychologist who ventured out voiced fears over the long-term mental health of everyone affected.

"I'm scared for me and patients that this could go on" for months, said Lauren, who declined to give her surname.

Anxiety and depression "all gets heightened at a time like this," she added.

The financial impact of economies grinding to a halt continued to unnerve policymakers, who opened the spigots and flooded the markets with yet more cash -- their latest effort to keep the wheels turning.

In the United States, the Federal Reserve unveiled an unprecedented bond-buying programme, in a move not seen

since the global financial crisis more than a decade ago.

The Fed, which has already slashed interest rates to record lows, said it will buy unlimited amounts of Treasury debt and take steps to lend directly to small and medium-sized firms hammered by state lockdowns across the country. Asian markets cheered the news, with Tokyo, Hong Kong and Seoul rocketing in their latest rollercoaster session.

Its daily death toll also fell slightly, although cumulatively the country has recorded more than 6,000 fatalities, far-exceeding even that of China. In the United States, New York city was under lockdown, with its usual logjam commute now just a trickle of pharmacists, grocery store workers and medical staff. But Trump -- who faces re-election in November and is keen to avoid extended economic damage in the US -- told reporters he would soon be "opening up our country to business because our country was meant to be open."

China's authoritarian government has trumpeted its response to the crisis since doctors began to get a handle on cases of COVID-19, and on Tuesday state media proudly reported that a popular section of the Great Wall would re-open.

Visitors have to wear a mask and stay a metre from everyone else, media said.

Overall, China had 78 new infections on Tuesday, the vast majority brought in from overseas.

Meanwhile, pressure was growing on the International Olympic Committee to speed up its decision about postponing the Tokyo Games as athletes criticised the four-week deadline and the United States joined calls to delay the competition.

A growing group of national Olympic committees and sports bodies including World Athletics have called for the Games, set to start on July 24, to be pushed back, an outcome that now appears inevitable.