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Taiwan's Swift Response to Virus Threat Allowed It to Contain Outbreak

BY FRANK FANG March 18, 2020 Updated: March 18, 2020

TAIPEI, Taiwan—It's been roughly three months since the CCP virus, commonly known as the novel coronavirus, first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

It has now spread to more than 140 countries and territories around the world, killing thousands outside China.

The Epoch Times refers to the novel coronavirus as the CCP virus because the Chinese Communist Party's coverup and mismanagement allowed the virus to spread throughout China and create a global pandemic.

Despite Taiwan's proximity to mainland China—just 80 miles away—it has managed to control the outbreak with a relatively low 100 confirmed cases and one death as of March 18.

Community spread has not occurred among Taiwan's population. Thus, life on the island is largely uninterrupted—without the widespread restrictions currently adopted in the United States and Europe.

Taiwan's response has earned praise from health experts.

Local lawmaker Chao Tien-lin, a member of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), said the island's successful containment efforts demonstrate that

countries need not adopt draconian measures such as those in authoritarian nations.

“We can share with other countries how the outbreak can be contained under a democratic system,” Chao said.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has made it difficult for Taiwan to do so, as it has refused to grant Taiwan membership, or invite Taiwanese health experts to recent health meetings related to the pandemic held by the WHO Emergency Committee.

As the Chinese regime claims Taiwan as part of its territory, it has asserted that Beijing can sufficiently represent the island in international organizations. Since 2017, Taiwan has been barred by China from taking part in WHO-related meetings.

Local experts criticized the WHO for catering to Beijing and not responding swiftly to the virus’s threat—leading to a global pandemic.

Taiwan’s Response

“When it comes to fighting enemies, we must anticipate the worst and prepare for the worst,” said Chao, using a Chinese idiom to explain Taiwan’s approach to limiting the virus’s spread.

He added: “Whether it is border control, regulations on people’s movements, or the control of equipment and supplies, I think we are way ahead compared to other countries.”

On Dec. 31 last year—the same day Wuhan authorities publicly acknowledged that there was an outbreak of a mysterious pneumonia-like illness—Taiwan’s Centers for Disease Control (CDC) announced that it activated its border quarantine measures. These included having Taiwanese officials board planes and assess passengers for fever and pneumonia symptoms on direct flights from Wuhan.

On Jan. 5, Taiwan's CDC urged people who traveled to Wuhan in the past 14 days to be tested at hospitals if they exhibited a fever or respiratory symptoms.

Fifteen days later, the CDC activated the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) and named Taiwan's minister of health and welfare as its commander, to coordinate efforts among different government ministries to combat the virus.

On Jan. 25, Taiwan suspended all group tours to China and on Feb. 6 the island banned entry to all mainland Chinese visitors.

These early actions lowered the possibility of the virus spreading in local communities, Chao said.

The Taiwan government also recognized the importance of having adequate supplies of medical equipment—in particular, protective masks for health professionals and the public. It banned the export of surgical masks on Jan. 24 while boosting local production of masks to 10 million per day.

Local authorities also adopted big data analysis, integrating the national insurance database with customs data to draw up people's travel history during clinical visits.

Wu Ming-tsang, distinguished professor at the public health department of Taiwan's Kaohsiung Medical University, explained that another key factor in Taiwan's success fending off the virus was how the government was able to build up public trust.

“The government found a commander, who is willing to be transparent and holds daily press conferences to build up a foundation of trust among people,” said Wu in a phone interview, praising the CECC's commander Chen Shih-chung.

WHO

Meanwhile, the WHO may have neglected early warnings from Taiwan about the virus.

Taiwan's Vice President Chen Chien-jen recently told a local magazine that Taiwanese authorities warned a WHO point of contact on Dec. 31, about the risk of human-to-human transmission of a pneumonia-like disease in China.

Beijing did not openly acknowledge the virus was being transmitted between people until Jan. 20.

Chen said that the WHO should have taken action after Taiwan's warning, instead of waiting until Jan. 30 to declare the outbreak a "public health emergency."

Asked about the VP's warning, WHO's spokesperson Tarik Jasarevic did not admit to or deny it.

Jasarevic said in an email response to The Epoch Times that the WHO was informed of a "pneumonia of unknown cause" in Wuhan on Dec. 31, and since then it has "regarded the event as very serious and applied the full range of attention to it from across the organization."

Lawmaker Chao accused the WHO of "making erroneous judgments and decisions" by considering the outbreak in political terms, wary of upsetting the Chinese regime.

The poor judgment led to the virus spreading from China and nearby Asian countries to the rest of the world, Chao added.

On Jan. 27, the WHO admitted in a report that it had wrongfully assessed the risk of the virus. In a footnote, it explained that it had stated "incorrectly" the global risk as "moderate" in its earlier reports from Jan. 23 to 25.

It added that the risk is in fact "very high in China, high in the region, and high globally."

Professor Wu similarly said that the WHO has failed to recognize the virus is an “enemy to all people.”

“It seems that the WHO has dealt with the [outbreak] as if it were a political event. But the virus does not distinguish your political affiliations,” said Wu.

Currently, there are over 26,000 signatures on a White House petition, calling on the United States government to nominate CECC commander Chen to be WHO’s new secretary-general, replacing Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Future Coordination

Taiwan’s containment measures have garnered international recognition.

On March 15, New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern stated that her country was “going to follow, pretty closely, the Taiwanese model,” including by canceling mass gatherings, according to New Zealand’s news website Stuff.

On March 4, Taiwan’s CDC announced a set of guidelines on large-scale public gatherings, such as the importance of having air ventilation in indoor venues.

Cooperation between the United States and Taiwan also intensified on March 18, when the two sides agreed to cooperate on research and development of rapid diagnostic tests and vaccines, according to a joint statement by Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the American Institute in Taiwan, the U.S. de-facto embassy on the island.

Also on Wednesday, Taiwan’s Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said the new partnership with the United States will include Taiwan exporting 100,000 protective masks every week, once the island has enough supply for itself.

Meanwhile, Wu said the U.S. government will provide the island raw materials for making 300,000 protective suits, according to local government-run outlet Central News Agency.

In the immediate future, Wu urged other countries to take on a strategy based on the “precautionary principle.” For instance, he called on hospitals to set up temporary tents outside of their buildings to check suspected patients, in an effort to prevent patients with the virus from roaming around inside hospitals and infecting those particularly vulnerable to the virus—the elderly and people with underlying illnesses.

Wu also called on people to drop the social stigma surrounding protective masks, since it is an effective way to limit the spread of the virus. Keeping a distance from others and avoiding direct personal contact are also effective measures, Wu added.

The U.S. CDC does not recommend wearing masks for healthy individuals who do not exhibit symptoms of the virus.

In May, the World Health Assembly (WHA), the decision-making body of the WHO, will hold its 73rd assembly.

Taiwan’s participation is important to the global effort in containing the outbreak, Chao said. The WHA has not yet invited the island state.

In early March, 16 U.S. lawmakers wrote a joint letter to Ghebreyesus, urging Taiwan to be included in the WHO.

Taiwan could still hold meetings on the sidelines of the WHA if it is not invited, said Chao.

“Coming to participate in meetings organized by Taiwan, who is not accepted by the WHO, can be more helpful than taking part in other [WHO] meetings,” Chao concluded.