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The Wuhan Virus Pandemic: What Next?

By Mely Caballero-Anthony

SYNOPSIS

The WHO has just declared the fast-spreading Wuhan coronavirus as a global health emergency. It is more urgent than ever to boost regional and global efforts to help China fight and contain the spread of this new pandemic.

COMMENTARY

AS CHINA grapples with containing the spread of the Wuhan coronavirus, on a massive scale never seen before, the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 30 January 2020 declared the new coronavirus (nCoV) as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

As more updates about the outbreak come in, global concern heightens over the speed by which the number of infected persons is growing within and outside China. Since news reports came out about the health emergency from the nCoV in China's Wuhan city, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases has continued to rise rapidly.

China: 'Complicated and Grave'

The latest count puts the number of confirmed cases in China to more than 8,000 exceeding the number of confirmed cases globally during the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis.

The virus has also claimed 212 lives. Twenty countries and territories outside China have also reported confirmed cases of nCoV, with the United Arab Emirates and Finland recording their first cases. Chinese Premier Le Keqiang has described the situation as 'complicated and grave'.

Given Asia's recent history of SARS and MERS influenza pandemic, emerging diseases like nCoV pose a grave threat to health security in the region. A serious national health emergency can easily escalate into a global health crisis and can have wide-ranging consequences.

Impact of nCoV

The nCoV is a pneumonia-like illness; it is also like SARS that had killed 813 people and infected more than 8,000 globally. Unlike SARS, nCoV is reported to be less fatal, with a rate of 2.9% compared to SARS' 9.6%. The nCoV, however, is highly infectious and has longer incubation period to up to 14 days.

The leaps and bounds in reported confirmed cases in China are fuelling concerns that this new virus could be worse than previous pandemic outbreaks in the region.

The Chinese government has pulled out all the stops in its efforts to aggressively contain the disease. It has ordered a lockdown of the city of Wuhan, the central source of the disease, and neighbouring cities in Hubei province, affecting more than 60 million people. The economic and financial impact of the crisis are already showing.

International travel has been disrupted as international flights in and out of China have either been reduced or suspended. British Airways, Lufthansa, and United have just announced suspension of flights in and out of China. Business activities are also increasingly disrupted. IKEA has closed its stores in China indefinitely, asking its employees to stay home with paid leave, while Starbucks has also announced the closure of about half of its stores in China.

Car manufacturers like Toyota, Hyundai and Ford have delayed re-opening their factories after the Lunar holidays. Meanwhile, Apple has already warned about the impact of the virus on its production while it reconsiders plans for its supply-chain.

Health Security: Need for Stronger Global Cooperation

It may be too early to assess the full impact of the nCoV on the global economic growth. China's GDP growth, however, could be worse hit by the Wuhan virus than SARS in 2003.

An economist from the top government think tank, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has estimated a one percentage point reduction in China's economic growth for Q1 2020 to around 5% or lower. Given China's size and interconnectedness to the global economy, the economic consequences can be amplified and wide-ranging.

A 2017 study by the World Bank noted that the annual global cost of moderately severe to severe pandemics is roughly US\$570 billion or 0.7% of global income. The WHO had similar estimates.

The nCoV outbreak once again highlights the importance of pandemic preparedness and response, including sustained disease surveillance, reporting and control. It underscores the importance of having a clear and comprehensive public health

emergency strategy which covers, among others, proper communication in managing public perceptions, fears and anxieties.

More importantly, it also highlights the need to strengthen multilateral cooperation in health security at the regional and global levels to help affected countries contain the spread of the disease.

Boosting Regional Cooperation in Health Security

Higher population density and greater connectivity of urban centres make for the rapid spread of any pandemic outbreak. Thus, despite the aggressive containment measures undertaken by Chinese authorities, more proactive efforts in stepping up disease surveillance and control capacity at both national and regional levels are required.

These involve, among others, boosting capacity for hospital preparedness, expanding laboratory facilities and manufacturing for vaccines.

Since the SARS crisis, ASEAN countries have made progress in strengthening their capacity to fulfill the International Health Regulations (IHR) requirements. As parties to the IHR agreement, ASEAN countries are required to 'build their capacities to detect, assess and report public health events'.

Under the current circumstances, ASEAN members would need to go beyond capacity building at the national level; they also need to boost efforts at the regional level. Given the current uncertainties over the origin and transmission of nCoV, information-sharing and pooling of expertise at the regional level should now be pursued with even greater urgency.

ASEAN's Role

It is useful to note there are existing regional health frameworks that have been promoting closer cooperation in pandemic preparedness and response. Learning from the SARS experience, the practice of disease surveillance and timely reporting has since been institutionalised within the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) regional disease surveillance framework, bringing together the ASEAN 10 with China, Japan and South Korea.

This has standardised the protocol for information sharing and encouraged member states to report all cases of diseases categorised as a PHEIC.

Thus, even without the WHO declaring nCoV as a PHEIC, China had reported the outbreak of the 'then unknown virus' in early January to the ASEAN Secretariat. This in turn readily transmitted the information to ASEAN member states and the ASEAN Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) Network for Public Health Emergencies.

The ASEAN EOC is a network of focal points from each ASEAN member state that is involved in the prevention, detection and response to health threats. This network has been mobilised since the outbreak began, providing an effective communication channel among affected ASEAN and the Plus Three countries.

As the nCoV pandemic outbreak continues to evolve, there is definitely more room to expand regional efforts to contain the disease. The list of what else needs to be done urgently is long: from quickly developing vaccines to stop the disease; providing immediate assistance to infected persons within and outside their home states; and to carefully managing public's perception through effective risk communication strategy.

Thus, ASEAN and the wider region cannot let their guard down. ASEAN urgently needs to be more vigilant, step up efforts in disease surveillance and reporting, as well as push for greater transparency and public awareness.

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