

INFORMATION BULLETIN



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

EAST & SOUTH EAST ASIA: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)

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This Information Bulletin is for information only. The Federation is not seeking any funding or other assistance from donors at this time but this may change according to circumstances.

Background

The current outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) afflicting countries across East and South East Asia is already affecting the daily lives of millions and presenting governmental authorities with one of the most serious public health challenges in recent years. Media coverage of SARS has added to the very real fears of inhabitants of densely populated areas, including Hong Kong and Singapore, with growing threats to economic and commercial stability.

According to latest statistics from the World Health Organisation, the total number of cases reported to date worldwide is 2,223 across 16 countries (including five in Asia Pacific) with 78 deaths.

Briefly, the virus is spread by body contact and contact with fluids (sneezing droplets for instance) of a person with SARS symptoms. It is less contagious than ordinary flu. The people mainly at risk from SARS would be those who have travelled in area with SARS within the last 10 days or have been in close contact with SARS cases within the previous 10 days. 'Close contact' would mean having cared for, having lived with and/or had direct contact with saliva/body fluids from suspected cases.

While 90 per cent of those affected have flu symptoms for six to seven days and then recover, 10 per cent progress to the severe form. Most at risk are elderly, people with previous illnesses, in particular those with coronary heart disease, kidney problems, liver dysfunction, etc. The overall case fatality rate is approximately 3 per cent. Even so, there are already some encouraging signs, with no new cases reported in recent days in Vietnam, giving rise to cautious optimism that the outbreak in this country at least, is over.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Federation's health department in Geneva, working with health delegates in East and South East Asia, has maintained regular contact with the World Health Organisation and is monitoring the situation daily. Earlier this week, the Federation issued an advisory note, widely circulated within the Red Cross Red Crescent, covering inter alia, the symptoms and precautions to avoid the disease, travel advice, treatment, testing and recovery.

Within East and South East Asia, the Red Cross Society of China is monitoring the situation closely and is ready to cooperate with the country's health ministry. The Hong Kong Red Cross has launched a twofold prevention campaign and funds are being collected to purchase 100,000 hygiene kits for vulnerable people. While distributing the kits, the Hong Kong volunteers will provide recipients with up-to-date information on how to protect themselves. The second part of the campaign comprises the distribution of greetings cards. More than 300,000 'Heart-to-Heart' cards have been distributed by the volunteers. The cards contain simple tips on prevention and are also being used to exchange comfort words with patients and medical personnel in hospitals. While there has been no case reported from Japan, Republic of Korea, Mongolia and Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea, the Japanese Red Cross has been asked by the Ministry of health for their cooperation.

At present, the Vietnam Red Cross is not involved directly in the massive measures being taken in Vietnam, but the society's Secretary-General, also the vice-minister of health, is heading the government task force on SARS, working closely with WHO. The border areas, especially the northern border with China, are being monitored with special care. Singapore Red Cross has its three ambulances on standby to transport suspected cases to the hospital in the city state, as requested by the government.

Particular efforts are being made to ensure that all Red Cross Red Crescent expatriate delegates and national staff who have to travel in the affected area are kept fully informed of developments and necessary precautions, including information and advice from health ministries. Non essential travel is being deferred for the time-being.

For further details please contact :

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For longer-term programmes, please refer to the Federation's Annual Appeal.

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