



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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The Situation

As of 28 April, a cumulative total of 5,050 probable Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) cases with 321 deaths have been reported from 26 countries, including 13 countries from the Asia Pacific region. This represents an increase of 214 cases and 28 deaths when compared with the last report, issued on Saturday 26 April.

China and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region have been hardest affected by SARS with respectively 3,106 and 1,557 cases. On the mainland of China, the “Affected Areas” of Beijing and Guangdong have the highest number of cases with 1,199 and 1,395 cases reported in each. The “affected areas”, defined by WHO as a region at the first administrative level where the country is reporting local transmission of SARS, within the last 20 days, include Singapore, Beijing, Guangdong, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi and Taiwan. The list also includes the United States (area not specified), United Kingdom (London), and Toronto, Canada.

Individual countries in the region have introduced their own extraordinary restrictions. Thailand is implementing strict quarantine rules for all residents returning from mainland China and Taiwan, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and Singapore. Taiwan, on Monday, began enforcing a 10-day quarantine for visitors arriving from areas hit by SARS. Other countries in the region are introducing similar restrictions on residents as well as foreign visitors. China has been taking strong actions in recent days. On Sunday, Beijing closed the city’s theatres, cinemas, Internet cafes and other public entertainment venues to “stop the possible spread of the SARS virus and ensure public health”, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. A new 1,000 bed isolation camp for SARS victims located on Beijing’s northern outskirts is under construction.

At the eve of the May Day holiday, reduced from seven to five days, the streets of Beijing are half empty as the population was asked not to travel and stay home as much as possible. The closure of many shops, restaurants, markets, bars, universities, schools and many other businesses will have an impact on the economy.

In the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), although no cases of SARS have been reported, the government announced harsh restrictions in a bid to prevent the spread of the respiratory disease. Incoming passengers from affected or non affected areas who display any SARS symptoms are hospitalized or sent back, while those who do not are quarantined for 10 days at two specially designated hotels. As this quarantining procedure represents public health risks, the International Federation in coordination with the DPRK Red Cross and the UN Resident co-ordinator, are having meetings with DPRK government to discuss the possible revision

of these procedures. The mobilization of five new delegates (water and sanitation, health and disaster management) in April and May has been postponed. At this stage, the Federation position is that no delegates are to travel to DPRK until quarantine procedures are revised.

WHO has removed Vietnam from the list of SARS affected areas, making it the first country to successfully contain its SARS outbreak. This follows 20 consecutive days (the duration of two incubation periods) since the last new case was detected. Key actions in containing the spread of SARS in Vietnam have included early recognition of the outbreak, the consolidation of SARS patients in a single hospital, strict infection control, diligent contact tracing, and thorough investigation of all rumored cases. Vietnam has heightened its border surveillance with China, and the Vietnamese Health Ministry has asked the Prime Minister to authorize the closing of the country's land borders with China.

WHO currently recommends postponing non-essential travel to Beijing, Guangdong Province, Hong Kong SAR and Shanxi Province, China, and to Toronto, Canada; in addition, international travelers departing from the affected areas should be screened for possible SARS at the point of departure. These affected areas have shown transmission of the SARS infectious agent from human to human. Such screening involves answering two or three questions. Travelers with one or more symptoms of SARS and who have a history of exposure or who appear acutely ill should be assessed by a clinician and may be advised to postpone their trip until they feel better. WHO does not recommend the quarantine of asymptomatic travelers arriving from or having transited through affected areas.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

In affected countries from east and southeast Asia, the global SARS outbreak is having an impact on Red Cross and Red Crescent activities. In East Asia, the Red Cross Society of China is putting SARS prevention at the top of its agenda. Following advice from the health authorities, the Red Cross Society of China has decided to either cancel or postpone all large events and meetings for the next few weeks, including the mass-gathering events planned for World Red Cross Day and several national meetings and workshops planned for May. Traveling both within the country and abroad is also restricted unless it is absolutely necessary. In the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, although the Hong Kong Red Cross continues its prevention campaign, activities are also reduced to its minimum. Most of the Hong Kong Red Cross Youth volunteers activities have stopped including the celebrations for World Red Cross Day.

On 28 April, the Chinese Government called for the Red Cross Society of China to accept donations for combating SARS. The RCSC National office has opened a 24-hour hot line to receive donations and to answer inquiries. Cash and in-kind donations including disinfectant, anti-SARS medicine and medical equipment will be accepted by the National Society.

The RCSC's national office has so far received in-kind donations worth 650,000 RMB and 11,359 RMB in cash. On April 18, 1,000 boxes of disinfectant, donated by a medical corporation, were distributed to some 50 hospitals/clinics in Beijing.

Red Cross branches in Beijing, Shanxi, Liaoning, Jilin, Jiangxi, Guangdong and Guangxi are also mobilized to provide the following services : collecting and distribution of public donations, spraying and disinfecting affected areas, disseminating information on SARS.

In Mongolia, due to government restrictions on large public events, Mongolia Red Cross has had to cancel its World Red Cross Day cultural show. As an alternative, the Mongolia Red Cross will telecast a 20-minute special TV programme focusing on HIV/AIDS and other activities of the national society. HIV/AIDS posters will be distributed throughout Aimag and Soum branches as part of the May 8 activities.

In Japan, 12 hospitals with special ventilation systems have been designated as first-category medical institutions for serious infectious diseases. One is the Red Cross hospital in Narita, near Tokyo International Airport, a possible entry point for new cases. Some 18 medical staff of the Red Cross hospital are ready to cope with SARS and have been provided with specialized protective clothing. Some 22 Red Cross hospitals in Japan are designated as second-category medical institutions for serious infectious diseases.

In DPRK, the International Federation took part in a SARS workshop organized by the WHO in Pyongyang, aimed at raising awareness of the disease and promoting good practices among health workers.

In Laos and Cambodia, the national Red Cross Societies are involved in health promotion activities linked to the SARS outbreak. The Singapore Red Cross continues to provide ambulance services to transport suspected cases to the designated hospitals in the city. In Vietnam, where the disease has been contained, the government's efforts were led by the Vietnam Red Cross Secretary-General, Professor Nguyen Van Thuong, who is the vice-minister of health.

In most countries in the South East region, the celebrations around World Red Cross Day will go ahead but are likely to be muted, as health authorities are discouraging large public gatherings. Many national societies within the region are reluctant to travel, even to countries that are not classified as SARS affected and several regional events have already been canceled upon request from the host and/or participating national societies.

In view of this situation the regional delegation in Bangkok has decided to take the following measures:

- Travel to areas on WHO's list of restricted travel advisory is not allowed.
- Travel to SARS affected countries that are not on WHO's list of restricted travel advisory, is only allowed with the explicit approval of the head of regional delegation.
- All scheduled regional events involving national societies (meetings, workshops) will be postponed until further notice.

In East Asia, as previously mentioned, all delegate travel to DPRK has been canceled until quarantining procedures are revised. The East Asia Partnership Meeting which was to take place in the first week of June has been postponed. In all other respects the Beijing Regional Delegation is encouraging that work continue as normal. Three International Federation delegates are still working on the sanitation and health promotion project in Guanxi and Hunan. The Netherlands Red Cross, Australian Red Cross and Swiss Red Cross bilateral delegates are also continuing their work in Beijing, Yunnan and Tibet.

For a full description of the National Society profile, see www.ifrc.org

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