



Covid-19: China's president Xi visits Wuhan amid confidence that virus is under control

Owen Dyer

Montreal

China's leader, Xi Jinping, toured the city of Wuhan on 10 March, appearing to claim at least a provisional victory in the battle to limit the spread of covid-19. The visit came as reported new cases in China continued to plummet and schools reopened in some parts of the country, even in the hardest hit Hubei province.

China reported just 20 new confirmed cases on 10 March, 17 of them in Hubei province and the other three in Beijing, Guangdong, and Hong Kong. Over each of the previous five days China had reported 143 new confirmed cases, followed by 146, 102, 46, and 45. On 11 March the country reported 24 cases.

Citing China's declining rate of new infections, Xi suggested that a corner had been turned in the "people's war" against the virus.

"Hubei and Wuhan have been the decisive battleground in this struggle to contain the epidemic," he said in remarks reported by the state media agency Xinhua. "Through hard work, there has been a promising turn in epidemic containment in Hubei and Wuhan, and we've achieved important interim results."

But he warned, "This is a critical moment, and you must clench your teeth and hang on. Don't drop your guard, don't relax. Pay attention to every detail of prevention and control."

Touring Wuhan, which he labelled a "city of heroes," Xi waved to people in their apartment windows, as most still cannot leave home. A week earlier some residents had come to their balconies to heckle the vice premier, Sun Chunlan, during a similar visit, shouting, "Fake, it's all fake!" Photos on social media claimed to show police being sent to these apartments before Xi arrived, to ensure no repeat.

Criticism of early response

Workers in key Wuhan industries are being allowed to resume work. Telephone apps collect people's health information and must send a green signal before the person can enter a shop or use public transport.

In an indication that the state media believe that they have a positive story to tell, Xinhua reported that Xi "has always personally directed and deployed" the epidemic prevention and control effort.¹ And a Communist Party publication seemed to suggest that Xi first learnt of the epidemic on 7 January, two weeks before Wuhan's lockdown.

China's government was stung by criticism of its early response. Provincial and municipal authorities initially hid the full facts

from Beijing, fearful that a long awaited political conference would be cancelled. Experts who had been sent out from the capital were unable to demonstrate human transmission because hospital directors concealed infections of medical staff. Eventually, one of Beijing's experts was himself infected.²

In an interview with the Chinese magazine *Renwu*, which is being rapidly censored and reposted on the Chinese web, Ai Fen, director of emergency at Wuhan Central Hospital, said that superiors had reprimanded her for reporting a SARS-like virus. Four doctors from the hospital are among the 3158 people in China to have died from covid-19.

"If I'd known what was to happen, I wouldn't have cared about the reprimand," she said. "I would have talked about it wherever I could."

Other countries

On 22 January China's central government switched into high gear. A system of penalties and rewards encouraged infection control in districts and apartment blocks, and movement was drastically restricted and monitored by facial recognition software.

State media now describe China as a model of infection control—one already being followed by Italy. China's nightly news reports of its improving situation now juxtapose with the advance of the virus in other countries.

South Korea—whose model involves few movement restrictions but widespread testing—has also seen a steady fall in new confirmed cases over the past week. But it experienced a setback on 11 March as 242 new cases were confirmed, up from 131 the day before. Many of the new cases were in the city of Daegu, where the virus has raced through the members of a religious sect. But 90 were from a call centre in Seoul, where workers had allegedly been prevented from wearing masks because it muffled their voices.

Japan saw 59 new cases confirmed on 10 March, its biggest rise in one day. The country has now reported 1278 infections, including 696 from the Diamond Princess cruise ship.

1 Jiayu J. Wuhan! Wuhan! The concern of netizens is the concern of the general secretary. *Xinhuanet* 2020 Mar 10. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/xxjxs/2020-03/10/c_1125689789.htm.

2 Yang DL. Wuhan officials tried to cover up covid-19—and sent it careening outward. *Washington Post* 2020 Mar 10.

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/> permissions