

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

9,844,003

TOTAL NUMBER OF VACCINES ADMINISTERED IN HONG KONG

279,549,067

CASES

5,398,446

DEATHS

8,946,389,654

VACCINE DOSES

* Figures as of 11pm

Hopping safely

A young girl wears a mask as she enjoys a ride on the Frog Hopper during her family's Christmas Day visit to an amusement park in Quezon City, the Philippines. Filipinos traditionally travel to their hometowns during the holiday season. The nation reported 433 new Covid-19 infections yesterday, taking the total number of confirmed cases to 2,838,640. The national health department also reported 13 deaths, bringing the country's pandemic death toll to 51,200. Metro Manila tops the regions with the most active and new cases. Photo: AP



Sharp rise in cases as Xian struggles to contain outbreak

City records 155 locally confirmed infections on Saturday – almost double previous day's total

Wendy Wu and Phoebe Zhang

The number of locally transmitted Covid-19 cases on the mainland keeps rising as the northwestern city of Xian grapples with the latest cluster of cases.

The National Health Commission reported 158 locally confirmed cases from Saturday, a sharp increase on the previous day's 87 cases.

The caseload includes 155 in Xian, two in the neighbouring city of Xianyang and one in the southern region of Guangxi.

Calling on the public not to panic, authorities in Xian said yesterday that the number of cases would probably continue to be high over the next few days.

Xian, home to 13 million residents, went into lockdown on Thursday in an effort to contain community infections.

The capital of Shaanxi province, best known as the home of the terracotta warriors, has reported a total of 485 locally confirmed cases since December 9.

Some 26 officials in the city have been punished for mishandling the response to the surge, which is believed to have originated in a flight from Pakistan. Authorities have so far been unable to establish a clear chain of transmission for some cases.

The city has introduced measures to stop people hoarding food and other necessities and to stop retailers from ramping up prices during lockdown. Authorities said the city would ensure the public, especially the elderly, the disabled and the sick, had access to daily necessities during the lockdown, and was working with local organisations.

Starting at 6pm yesterday, the entire city would be disinfected, the government said, advising the

public to close windows and bring essential items indoors.

Amid the lockdown, more than 13,000 applicants sat the annual national graduate school entrance exam in Xian on Saturday. According to media reports, the government sent taxis to pick up students in restricted areas, while other students needed to show two nucleic test results taken in the previous 48 hours to take the test.

A special testing area was set up at a hospital to enable one Covid-19 patient to take the exam.

Zhang Boli, a Covid-19 specialist and president of the Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, said in an interview with state media yesterday that Xian was expected to contain the outbreak within a month.

The infections will be cut in the middle of January and come under control in late January

ZHANG BOLI, COVID-19 SPECIALIST

"We have to be on high guard against the virus ... I believe it is very likely the infections will be cut in the middle of January and come under control in late January," Zhang said.

Faced with the threat of the Omicron variant, China has rolled out more stringent quarantine and border control rules and once again stressed the general policy of "dynamic zero infection".

> LIFE IN LOCKDOWN A12

QUARANTINE POLICIES FORCING HOLIDAY BREAK IN SUPPLY CHAIN

Shipping companies to suspend service to let Chinese workers spend Lunar New Year with families

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Spending months at sea is part of the job for Chinese crewmen like Geng, but as the coronavirus pandemic drastically alters the way people move around the world, the stretches away from home are getting longer and longer.

After finishing a seven-month contract in late October and disembarking at the Egyptian seaport of Suez, Geng, who only gave his surname, is still in quarantine one and a half months later.

"Two more weeks to go," he said recently from his third and final hotel-room stay in his hometown in Hebei province.

Before this, it was 19 days in isolation in Egypt, followed by two weeks in Chengdu, when he first arrived in China. Even when he finishes his latest quarantine, he will not be able to leave the family home for seven more days, as China has some of the strictest Covid-19 controls in the world.

Some 800km away in Shenyang in the northeast, second mate Hu Cheng has also just started another stint of hotel quarantine after two weeks stuck in Tianjin, where he got off a bulk carrier shuttling across Asia, after nearly eight months at sea. He is looking forward to leaving the hotel, but knows he too faces another week's home isolation.

Being confined for weeks on end in tiny hotel rooms after months at sea is the new reality for hundreds of thousands of Chinese seafarers on international routes this year.



Dockyard workers in Qingdao.

Facing shipping companies, crew members are ... very vulnerable

HU CHENG, SECOND MATE

And as most seamen look to reunite with their families for the Lunar New Year, which falls on February 1, the strict quarantine measures are threatening more disruptions to supply chains, especially for raw materials destined for Hong Kong, according to industry insiders.

Because mainland crews have to factor in weeks of quarantine before they can see loved ones, many shipping companies based in the country's south – including in Hong Kong – are extending service suspensions by at least six weeks ahead of the holiday, from late December to mid-February next year.

Global shipping giants such as Ocean Network Express, Hapag-Lloyd and Evergreen have told

customers they are temporarily stopping bookings for cargo going to small ports in the Pearl River Delta and Fujian province because of the situation.

For vessels with an international crew, the Lunar New Year does not pose a big problem. Even if most Chinese seamen go home, they can be replaced with others from Southeast Asia.

But for ships with all-Chinese crew, like those plying the waters of the Pearl River Delta – home to some of the busiest ports in the world – the impact on supply chains could be severe.

Construction materials would be among the products facing the biggest shortages in Hong Kong, said Ambrose Linn, CEO of the Hong Kong Construction Materials Association.

The materials are carried by barges – flat-bottomed boats with an average capacity of 5,000 tonnes – that travel back and forth between Hong Kong and small ports in Guangdong.

"In Hong Kong, the annual consumption of aggregate is 10 million tonnes, and 90 per cent is imported from Guangdong province," Linn said, adding that this was too much to transport by truck.

Managing costs is another incentive for small shipping companies to bring forward service suspensions. Under new regulations, companies will need to pay salaries to crew in quarantine starting from January 1.

According to Linn, the supply of construction materials for Hong Kong will be disrupted for at least one-and-a-half months due to the service suspensions.

"If we don't have enough rocks and aggregate, we won't have enough concrete," he said.

"If we don't have enough concrete, a lot of projects, including public and private ones, have to be suspended or delayed substantially."

"If the projects are delayed, the labourers will be affected, because they are paid on a job basis. If you don't have any jobs for them, it means their earnings will be affected, and their livelihoods," Lin said.

Crew members on international vessels must quarantine for at least 14 days after they disembark at Chinese ports, and sometimes up to three weeks in the country's north.

Once they finish and head home, many local governments – especially in northern provinces where rules are stricter – require further isolation for up to 21 days.

Chinese seafarers getting off at overseas ports need to quarantine locally for two to three weeks – depending on the requirements of local different jurisdictions – before they can fly back to the country and isolate again like regular inbound travellers.

Geng still considers himself lucky because he managed to disembark in Egypt, then return for quarantine in his hometown. Others have been stuck with different fates.

In the past two years, some boats have been refused the right to dock at all because crew were infected with the virus. Even for healthy people, disembarking on time can be a luxury.

Some foreign ports – including many in Europe, where seafarers

are granted visas for just a few days – do not have conditions that allow Chinese crew to disembark and quarantine for at least two weeks.

If a seafarer does successfully disembark at a foreign port, a flight home may be unavailable, as Beijing has imposed "circuit breaker measures" for inbound international flights – a flight will be suspended if too many passengers from the country test positive for the virus.

"A colleague of mine has been stuck in Bangladesh for three months and still has not yet got home," Geng said.

Authorities have demanded all Chinese ports allow crew to disembark, but some private ports still refuse to do so, seafarers said.

Shipping companies may also delay shift changing due to the cost. China crew's pay index, which reflects the salary of seamen, has increased 27 per cent since the beginning of the year.

Paying for airline tickets and quarantine for the old crews, plus higher salaries for the new ones was unpalatable for many firms, they have said.

"Facing shipping companies, crew members are a very vulnerable group of people," said Hu, the seafarer.

In mid-December, Li Hongyin, deputy director general of the China Maritime Safety Administration, said the agency was working to make changing shifts easier for seamen and to provide them with medical help, according to *People's Daily*.

"Since the pandemic began, their working and living environments have undergone great changes, and they have made tremendous efforts and sacrifices for this," Li was quoted as saying.



Workers disinfect packages in Xian, Shaanxi province. Photo: Xinhua

Omicron fuels surge in cases, hospital admissions over Christmas holiday

Bloomberg

Covid-19 cases across the world have surged over the Christmas holiday period, with New Zealand's cases more than doubling in the two days since Friday. The country yesterday reported 126 new infections in the community with 45 people admitted to hospital, eight in intensive care.

In Australia, the country's most populous state reported a record number of new cases yesterday and a sharp jump in hospital admissions while thousands of people were isolating at home after contracting the virus or coming into contact with someone who has.

A major laboratory in Sydney, which is located in New South Wales, said 400 people who had been informed a day earlier they had tested negative for Covid-19 had in fact tested positive. The lab's medical director said those people were being contacted and informed of the error.

"An emergency response team is now investigating the cause of this mistake, which is believed to be due to human error. We sincerely apologise," said SydPath medical director Anthony Dodds.

Doctors and pharmacists in New South Wales have said they were running short of vaccine doses amid a

rush for shots spurred by concern over the Omicron variant.

New South Wales reported 6,394 new infections, up from 6,288 a day earlier. Case numbers in the state have surged over the past two weeks but hospitalisation has lagged behind new infections.

More than 70 per cent of cases in some Australian states are the Omicron variant of the coronavirus but New

South Wales does not routinely carry out genome testing to identify the strain. State Health Minister Brad Hazzard indicated that Omicron was widespread.

"We would expect that pretty well everybody in New South Wales at some point will get Omicron," Hazzard said. "If we're all going to get Omicron, the best way to face it is when we have full vaccinations including our booster."



People scramble for Covid-19 testing kits in Brooklyn, New York City. Photo: AFP

Health officials reported 458 active cases in hospitals across the state, up sharply from 388 the day before. There were 52 people in intensive care in New South Wales.

Victoria, Australia's second-most populous state, reported 1,608 new Covid-19 cases and two deaths, with 374 people in hospitals, including 77 in intensive care.

More than 30,000 people in Victoria spent Christmas isolating at home, unable to celebrate with family or friends. Of those, about half were reported to be active cases who contracted the virus in the days leading up to the festival.

Meanwhile, Singapore reported a new cluster linked to the Omicron variant, warning that it expects to see further spread in the community.

The primary case in the cluster at The Vinyl Bar near the city's downtown was a passenger who flew in from the US using Singapore's quarantine-free vaccinated travel lane on December 14. He tested negative upon arrival but received a positive result in a further government-mandated test four days later.

All 10 cases linked to the cluster were fully vaccinated and had mild or no symptoms, the Health Ministry said, adding that it was contacting staff and visitors to the bar deemed to be close contacts so they could be quarantined.

We would expect that pretty well everybody in New South Wales at some point will get Omicron

BRAD HAZZARD, NEW SOUTH WALES MINISTER

The city state has 448 Omicron cases so far, with 369 coming from those arriving from overseas. "Given its high transmissibility, it is a matter of time before the Omicron variant spreads in our community," the Health Ministry said.

New daily Omicron cases in the US have surpassed those in the Delta wave, CNN reported. US airlines scrapped almost 1,900 flights for the holiday weekend because of personnel shortages linked to a spike in cases.

France reported a daily record of more than 100,000 new cases as President Emmanuel Macron weighs measures to contain the fast-spreading Omicron variant.

New cases totalled 104,611 on Saturday, according to data from the public health office, topping the 94,124 infections recorded the previous day.

Italy recorded its most daily cases for a third straight day, as the government tightened coronavirus measures. The first country in Europe to move into lockdown last year reported 54,762 cases on Saturday, up from 50,599 a day earlier.

Ireland's chief medical officer warned people to avoid shops and not to mix with people from other households indoors, as coronavirus cases soar.

People should "avoid crowded places including retail environments" and shop online "where possible," chief medical officer Tony Holohan said in an emailed statement. "Do not socialise or meet indoors with people from other households," he added.

Ireland saw its highest number of daily confirmed cases on Christmas Eve, with even higher case numbers expected. The government has already curbed opening hours for bars and restaurants and ordered nightclubs closed.

India would begin vaccinating teenagers aged 15 to 18 starting on January 3 and would administer booster doses for health care workers a week later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said.

Citizens who were older than 60 and suffered from co-morbidities could also get booster shots in January, Modi said in a televised national address.