

Hong Kong school doors back open

Some normalcy returns in SARS-stricken country

By Dirk Beveridge
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HONG KONG — Hong Kong reopened most secondary schools Tuesday three weeks after they were closed to keep the SARS virus from spreading, but thousands of students in surgical masks were walking proof the territory still has a long way to go.

The daily number of new SARS cases here has declined in recent days, but World Health Organization officials say that is not enough to consider the disease under control.

At the same time, Hong Kong reported five new deaths Tuesday, bringing the total to 99. Most officials have consistently avoided any predictions about when they might overcome the worst disaster here in years, despite Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's expression of optimism Monday.

He said the former British colony was "slowly, but surely getting the figures stabilized" after quarantining households of SARS patients and tracking down more possible contacts.

But experts say they are looking for a sharp and sustained drop in new infections — lasting for weeks, not just days — that would show severe acute respiratory syndrome is coming under control.

The WHO says there are several signs needed to indicate the

outbreak is finally contained: when the spread in the local community is stemmed; when no new infections have been exported to other countries for a certain amount of time; when the total number of cases falls to a certain level; and when the number of new infections detected each day is under a particular number.

WHO officials have not determined what the required thresholds are, but they expect to have that worked out within the next few days, said Dr. David Heymann, WHO's communicable diseases chief.

Dr. Lo Wing-lok, president of the Hong Kong Medical Association and an infectious disease expert, said he believed "in three months time Hong Kong can return to almost normal, not completely normal."

Even then, Hong Kong might continue to have sporadic cases, he said.

Health Secretary Dr. Yeoh Eng-kiang acknowledged Tuesday that SARS "is going to be with us for some time."

"We do not anticipate that it will be eradicated completely, because it's a highly infectious virus," he said.

And although some 200,000 Hong Kong secondary students went back Tuesday to schools closed since March 9, some administrators refused to open.

Some students, too, were fearful. Tom Leung was annoyed that only some grades had to go back and accused authorities of treating him and classmates as "lab mice." Another 900,000 younger students are expected to return to class Monday.

Hong Kong still is feeling the sting of the WHO advisory urging against travel there. The de facto Hong Kong airline, Cathay Pacific Airways, announced more temporary cuts in service Tuesday, saying it now has scrapped 281 flights — about 45 percent of its schedule — due to a plunge in traffic believed to be costing it \$3 million a day.

An estimated 4,000 people worldwide have been infected by SARS, and the WHO reports at least 229 deaths, mostly in Asia. The United States reports just 38 probable cases and no deaths.

Even if new infections keep tapering off in Hong Kong,

some experts fear the territory's proximity to mainland China, where the disease is believed to have originated and is still spreading, could complicate matters.

Dr. Henk Bekedam, the chief WHO representative in China, said Tuesday he was especially worried about SARS in the mainland's poorer western provinces, where "the public health system has collapsed in the last 10 or 20 years because the government has not supported it."

If mainland China cannot control the disease, he said, "it will be very problematic to deal with it globally. Diseases like this do not respect borders."

Hit by international criticism that it covered up information about SARS and aggravated the outbreak, Chinese officials appear to be making bolder public efforts to contain the disease. One example was a radio message broadcast across Beijing seeking two taxi drivers, who may have contracted the virus from an infected "male passenger dressed in a long green military-style coat," the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported Tuesday.

Both drivers eventually were found, Xinhua said without elaboration.

Mainland China reported 11 new deaths Tuesday, pushing its toll to 97 as its number of SARS cases surged well past 2,000, according to Xinhua.

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— Dr. Yeoh Eng-kiang
Hong Kong doctor

NEWS IN BRIEF

Arafat faces off against prime minister-designate

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Yasser Arafat defied international pressure Tuesday by challenging his prime minister-designate over Cabinet appointments even at the risk of scuttling a U.S.-backed

plan for Palestinian statehood.

At the root of the turmoil is Arafat's refusal to share power with Mahmoud Abbas after decades of unchallenged leadership, Palestinian legislators and commentators said.

Abbas, who enjoys the support of international Mideast mediators, has until Wednesday to present his Cabinet to

Arafat. Without Arafat's blessing, Abbas is not likely to win approval for the Cabinet in parliament, where the ruling Fatah party is siding with Arafat in the current crisis.

President Bush has said he will unveil an international peace plan, the so-called "road map" to full Palestinian statehood, only once Abbas and his Cabinet are sworn in.

EU-U.S. Research and Public Policy Symposium

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"The Interface Between Research and Public Policy in the EU and the U.S."

Thursday, April 24

8:30 a.m., Panel Discussion:

"Prospects of Research Collaboration Between the EU and the U.S."

10 a.m., Roundtable Discussions:

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- Dr. Albert H. Teich, Director of Science & Policy Programs, American Association for the Advancement of Science
- Dr. Jeanne Hudson, European Union Regional Director, Office of International Science and Engineering, National Science Foundation
- Dr. William Hallman, Associate Director for the Food Biotechnology Program, Food Policy Institute, Rutgers University
- Dr. Laurent Buisson, Scientific Attaché, Office for Science and Technology, French Embassy to the U.S.

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