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SARS contained in Vietnam, still spreading across China

By Daniel Lovering
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BANGKOK, Thailand — The World Health Organization said Monday the worst of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak appears to be over in Singapore, Hong Kong and Canada, while Vietnam has become the first country to contain the highly infectious respiratory disease.

SARS is spreading in China even as the government takes increasingly aggressive steps to halt the disease, said David Heymann, the chief of communicable diseases for WHO.

Heymann, who is in Bangkok to attend an emergency summit on SARS with Southeast Asian leaders Tuesday, said the situation is worrisome in China.

"In China, as you know, we are receiving more and more reports of cases and it doesn't appear it has peaked as far as spread" of the disease is concerned, Heymann told reporters.

Hong Kong, Singapore, and Toronto are having fewer cases every day and Vietnam has reported no new SARS victims, WHO said.

"It appears that the outbreak has peaked in those countries," Heymann said.

Heymann also said wearing a mask in public for protection against SARS is not necessary, and the risk of getting the illness was not as great as people believed.

"SARS is not transmitted when you are walking down the street," Heymann said. "We have concerns about the perceived risks of people living in Asia. The perception that these people have in many places appears to be greater than the actual risk."

There were eight new fatalities in China, five in Hong Kong and one in Singapore reported Monday, raising the worldwide death toll for SARS to at least 333, mostly in China and Hong Kong. It has sickened around 5,000 people.

India reported two new SARS cases Monday, raising the number of cases in the country of 1 billion to nine so far. One of the cases was a taxi driver apparently infected by members of a family with SARS.

Asian governments kept up the fight with quarantines and travel restrictions. Taiwan began enforcing a 10-day quarantine for visitors arriving from areas hit hard by SARS, prompting airlines to cancel some flights there. Taiwan's Premier Yu Shyi-kun warned hospitals Monday not to reject patients suspected of having SARS after the city of Hsinchu refused to take seven people sent there.

Eleven new cases were reported in Taiwan, the largest jump so far on the island. Heymann said the virus had not yet peaked in Taiwan.

SARS has prompted a rare global alert from WHO and travel advisories against affected countries.

WHO lifted all travel advisories Monday for Vietnam, which had five deaths from SARS after the virus spread in February through Hanoi's only international hospital.

Sixty-three people contracted the virus in Vietnam. But the Hanoi French Hospital was cordoned off March 11, a move credited with slowing the rate of infection and keeping SARS from spreading beyond its doors.

No new SARS cases have been reported in Vietnam since April 8. WHO has set a 20-day window — double the disease's incubation period — as the standard for lifting travel advisories and declaring that an outbreak is no longer spreading.

In Hong Kong, authorities said Monday that another five SARS patients died, while 14 new cases were confirmed, the lowest yet since the government began releasing daily statistics last month. The latest deaths in Hong Kong brought the territory's toll to 138.

Hong Kong's political leader, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, said the "downward trend" indicated that the territory's battle against the disease was yielding results. But he warned against complacency.

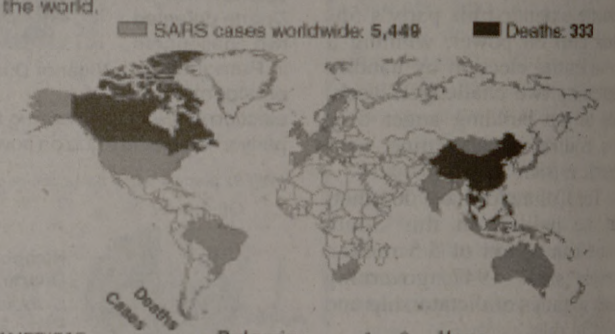
"The situation is still not totally under control," Tung said. "We must not take the disease lightly; we must not let up our guard."

In China, health officials raised the mainland's death toll to 140 on Monday and said 3,106 people have been confirmed infected — an increase of 203 cases from the previous day's figures.

In contrast to Vietnam, China has been widely criticized for failing to respond earlier to pleas for action to contain the disease, which surfaced in the southern province of Guangdong in November and spread internationally via travelers from Hong Kong.

SARS virus contained in Vietnam

The World Health Organization announced Monday that Vietnam was the first country to contain the SARS virus and said there was still time to halt the disease from spreading further around the world.



	Cases	Deaths
AMERICAS		
Canada	344	21
Brazil	2	0
United States	41	0
AFRICA		
South Africa	1	0
MIDDLE EAST		
Kuwait	1	0
EUROPE		
Britain	6	0
Bulgaria	1	0
France	5	0
Germany	7	0
Ireland	1	0
Italy	8	0
Romania	1	0
Spain	1	0
Switzerland	1	0
ASIA/SOUTH PACIFIC		
Australia	4	0
China	3,106	140
Hong Kong	1,557	138
India	9	0
Indonesia	1	0
Japan	2	0
Malaysia	6	2
Mongolia	5	0
Philippines	4	2
Singapore	199	23
Taiwan	66	0
Thailand	7	2
Vietnam	63	5

International figures as of April 28, 5 p.m. GMT

SOURCES: Associated Press; World Health Organization; Health Canada; Swedish Institute for Infectious Disease Control — AP

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