

International Reactions to COVID-19

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Received Date: 02-18-2020; **Published Date:** 03-05-2020

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Keywords

Coronavirus; COVID-19; Central epidemic command center; Disinfectants; Vaccines

Introduction

The recent outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus in China, which was tentatively named 2019-nCoV, and now officially declared as COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO), [1] has caused a lot of panic around the world and forced nations to react with extreme measures. Whereas some of these reactions sought to support China, which is the central source of the outbreak, most of the reactions were meant to protect the international community from the risk of exposure to the fast-spreading infection. This commentary reviews the reactions from many countries across the globe, with regards to international supports rendered to China, closure of borders and visa restrictions, and expat evacuation and quarantining.

Supports from the Global Community

Many nations have rendered their support to China in diverse ways, spanning donations to vaccine developments. One of such nations is Malaysia. The Malaysian NGO OPS Harapan donated a total of 2.4 tons of medical supplies to Wuhan to fight the outbreak. These items, as noted by the founder of the NGO, Ng Yeen Seen, comprise of 338,000 surgical masks valued at RM338,000; 540 N95 face masks worth RM4,320; 107,900 rubber gloves valued at RM32,370; as well as 876 safety goggles worth RM34,922 [2]. Being the world's largest producer of medical gloves, the nation equally donated 18 million pieces of medical gloves to medical authorities in Wuhan. This donation was made when Malaysian officials went to evacuate their citizens from the epicenter of the outbreak [3]. To help in curbing the novel coronavirus along with other contagious diseases in Malaysia, MR DIY has also distributed 3.5 million free face masks nationwide [4].

Aside Malaysia, the United States has also announced its readiness to spend up to \$100 million in aid to China and other nations affected by the virus. The deputy secretary of state, Stephen Biegun, also revealed that the US has already sent nearly 17.8 tons of medical supplies to China. The supplies are believed to include masks, gowns and other protective clothing [5]. Additionally, the White House top economic advisor, Larry Kudlow, also reported that the country has arrived at a decision to deploy a team of experts from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help the Chinese government in overcoming the viral infection [6]. The nation's pharmaceutical company, Gilead Sciences Incorporation, has also developed the antiviral drug remdesivir which is currently in use in China to treat COVID-19. Chinese drug makers are expected to begin mass production of the antiviral drug to fight the disease [7]. The American business magnate and philanthropist, Bill Gates, and his wife, who founded the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has also pledged to donate up to \$100 million to combat the outbreak. The money is meant to improve detection, isolation and treatment efforts; protect at-risk populations in Africa and South Asia; and accelerate the development of vaccines, drugs and diagnosis [8].

In attempts to speed up the development of proven vaccines against the 2019-nCoV, the Norway-based Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) has disclosed funding for three respective projects with Inovio, the University of Queensland and Moderna [9]. The organization has also announced its partnership with Glaxo Smith Kline (GSK) to aid the vaccine development against the fatal disease. In support of the CEPI projects, the government of UK has committed £20 million additional funding to help the financing of the vaccine production [10]. Similarly, the European Union has also mobilized a sum of €10 million in aid of research projects that seek to understand the epidemic and contribute to a more efficient clinical management of patients [11].

Meanwhile, WHO has announced a \$675 million preparedness and response plan through April 2020 to further curb the virus' spread and to help countries with inadequate health systems. The organization is also set to send an international team of specialists to China to investigate the outbreak, and devise the quickest means of containing the disease. In addition to WHO, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund has also contributed materials ranging from medicine to face masks, protective suits, gloves, and disinfectants to alleviate shortages in China [12].

Closure of Borders and Visa Restrictions

Since the COVID-19 has been detected to have high pandemic potentials, several countries have imposed travel restrictions on Chinese nationals and other expats who have history of visiting Wuhan and China at the time of the emergence of the outbreak. Aside cancelling flights to and from China, some of these nations have closed their borders to Chinese citizens, and also banned travel visas to Chinese nationals. To a larger extent, some countries have even closed their borders to everyone travelling from an Asian country with a record of the infection. Whereas these bans are meant to be temporary, most of the countries intend to keep the bans in place until the outbreak is fully contained and dealt with.

Despite being China's special administrative region, Taiwan has announced the temporary closure of its borders to citizens from mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau. The decision, announced by the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) on Monday February 10, is part of the state's efforts to limit the spread of the new virus. However, the CECC noted that the ban will not apply to people on business contracts, international workers transferred to Taiwan, and holders of Taiwan resident permits, alongside their spouses and minor children [13,14]. Moreover, Hong Kong has also closed 13 borders crossings with mainland China, and announced the suspension of all ferries and rail services from 6th of February. The state has equally reduced all incoming flights from China by 50%. That notwithstanding, medical workers of Hong Kong were reported to have embarked on a strike asking the government to close all borders to mainland China. It is however not certain if Prime Minister Carrie Lam will grant their request [15]. Aside Taiwan and Hong Kong, several other Asian countries and beyond have imposed some forms of restrictions on China (Table 1) [16,17]. Most of these nations are shown on (Table 1). Whereas almost all the countries impose bans on China only, Papua New Guinea has announced shutting its air and seaports to all expats from Asia. The country has equally suspended its visa program to Asians [18]. Similarly, the Royal Caribbean ship has banned all guests with Chinese, Hong Kong, and Macau passports [19].

Table 1: Countries with flights and visa restrictions on China.

No.	Countries	Restrictions
1	Indonesia	Banned Chinese visitors and expats who have been to China within the last 14 days Barred Indonesian workers from travelling to China
2	Laos	Sealed off Golden Triangle Road borders with China and Myanmar Suspended flights to China
3	Malaysia	Banned visitors from Hubei, Zhejiang and Jiangsu Provinces
4	Myanmar	Suspended visa on arrival for all travelers from China
5	Philippines	Suspended visa on arrival service on flights from China
6	Singapore	Banned visitors who have been to China within the last 14 days Suspended visa applications for Chinese citizens Suspended flights to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Xiamen, Chengdu and Chongqing until March 29
7	Thailand	Barred passengers of the MS Western cruise ship from disembarking No official restrictions on Chinese nationals
8	Vietnam	Suspension of all flights to China Banned all expats who have been in China within the past 14 days
9	Japan	Banned travelers from Zhejiang and Hubei province
10	Maldives	Banned travelers from China
11	North Korea	Barred all foreign tourists, including visitors from China

12	Pakistan	Suspended flights to China
13	Russia	Closed far east borders with China
14	Mongolia	Closed borders with China until March 2
15	Sri Lanka	Suspended all visas on arrival for visitors from China
16	Australia	Deny entry to anyone arriving from mainland China
17	Canada	Halted flights to Beijing and Shanghai
18	Egypt	Suspended flights to China
19	Finland	Cancelled all flights to and from mainland China between Feb 6 and Feb 29
20	India	Suspended entry to travelers from China
21	Israel	Deny entry to foreigners from China Suspended flights to Beijing until March 25
22	Italy	Suspended flights to mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan until April 28
23	New Zealand	Deny entry to expats from mainland China
24	Oman	Suspended all flights to China
25	US	Temporary ban on foreigners from China
26	UK	In the process of barring all foreign nationals from China
27	Mozambique	Suspended visas for Chinese citizens and banned its citizens from travelling to China

Evacuation, Screening and Quarantining

Apart from cancelling flights to and from China, many countries have equally evacuated their citizens from Wuhan. Almost all of these countries have resorted to isolating the evacuees from the public for a minimum of 14 days. This would allow health specialists to monitor and test the evacuees for the novel coronavirus over the quarantine period. As an added measure, all nations across the world are screening passengers from China at various ports to ensure anyone with symptoms of fever and cough could be quickly quarantined and tested for the COVID-19. Most of the countries which have evacuated their citizens from Wuhan, and a few of them who are still in the process, are presented in Table 2 [20,21].

Table 2: Countries which have evacuated their citizens from China:

No.	Countries	Evacuation Status
1	Uzbekistan	Evacuated 251 citizens from China and quarantined them in Tashkent
2	Taiwan	Evacuated first batch of estimated 500 Taiwanese

3	Kazakhstan	Have evacuated 391 Kazakhs
4	Singapore	Evacuated two batches of citizens from Wuhan
5	Philippines	Evacuated 30 Filipinos
6	Britain	Evacuated final batch of citizens from Wuhan
7	Brazil	Evacuated 34 Brazilians from Wuhan and planned to quarantine them for 18 days
8	US	Evacuated roughly 540 Americans from Wuhan
9	Australia	Evacuated roughly 243 citizens and permanent residents from Wuhan and quarantined them on a Christmas Island for 14 days
10	New Zealand	Evacuated New Zealanders, Australians and Pacific Islanders to Auckland
11	Italy	Evacuated 56 nationals from Wuhan and quarantined them in a military hospital for two weeks
12	Saudi Arabia	Evacuated 10 students from Wuhan
13	Indonesia	Evacuated 243 Indonesians from Hubei and quarantined them on a military base Borneo Island
14	South Korea	Evacuated roughly 718 citizens from Wuhan
15	Japan	Repatriated approximately 565 citizens from Wuhan
16	Spain	In the process of evacuation
17	Canada	Evacuated 176 citizens and in the process of evacuating 304 more
18	Russia	Evacuated first batch of citizens with plans to evacuate a total of 600 in few days
19	Netherlands	In the process of evacuating 20 Dutch nationals
20	France	Evacuated unspecified number of nationals with plans of evacuating more on unspecified dates
21	Switzerland	Planned to evacuate 10 Swiss nationals from China on a French flight
22	Thailand	Evacuated 138 citizens from Wuhan
23	Morocco	Evacuated 100 citizens, mostly students, from around Wuhan
24	Germany	Evacuated more than 100 citizens on a military plane

Whiles appropriate measures need to be taken to avoid infected nationals from traveling across the borders of the country; it is unfair for the international community to block even healthy citizens of China from returning to their employments in foreign countries. This will further weaken the financial standings of the citizens and prolong the economic effects of the outbreak, not only on China, but the world. International ties with China could also be

affected for the same reason. It is therefore important for the international community to revise their measures and reactions to the outbreak and make corrections where necessary.

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