

China digs in on zero-COVID strategy despite public's frustrations

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China must press ahead with its "magic weapon" zero-COVID strategy, health officials said Friday, despite mounting economic costs and more signs of public frustration in locked-down Shanghai.

The government has repeatedly backed its policy of stamping out infections swiftly with lockdowns and mass testing, but it has been severely challenged by the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

Several major cities have been fully or partially sealed off this year, including Shanghai, where 25 million residents have been almost completely locked down for weeks.

China's virus policy is a "magic weapon for preventing and controlling the pandemic", Li Bin, deputy director of the National Health Commission (NHC), told reporters on Friday.

"If we relax... and let the virus spread, a big number of people will be infected."

But the strategy has led to economic pain and disruptions, especially snarled supply chains, with Shanghai struggling to provide fresh food to those confined at home and patients reporting trouble accessing non-COVID medical care.

More signs emerged Thursday of public anger and frustration with the restrictions in the metropolis.

Videos posted on [social media](#) showed residents banging on pots in their homes on Thursday night, in an apparent response to calls for protest against the lockdown.

One resident who declined to be identified said she joined a protest that involved banging on pots after hearing such noises in her neighbourhood.

"I see a lot of similar videos from different people living in different districts," she told AFP.

As of Friday, content about such protests appeared to have been censored and could not be found on Chinese social media platforms such as Douyin and the Twitter-like Weibo.

Weibo said it was "taking care" of hundreds of accounts each day that were breaking content rules related to the Shanghai outbreak.

On Thursday, it "checked and cleared"—usually a euphemism for deletion—more than 8,000 posts, according to Weibo's official moderation page.

The latest videos follow similar footage from earlier this month showing residents scuffling with hazmat-suited police, and others bursting through barricades demanding food.

'Serious risks'

China is facing its worst COVID outbreak since the early days of the pandemic. It reported 52 deaths—all of them in Shanghai—on Friday.

Other nations have started dropping restrictions entirely to live with the virus, but Chinese officials say that is not an option because it poses "serious risks" to the country's public health system.

NHC expert Liang Wannian on Friday also pointed to the fact that the vaccination rate among China's elderly was not high enough.

The government's vow to continue with zero-COVID policies came ahead of the Labour Day break, traditionally one of China's busiest travel periods.

A transport official said the number of trips made over the five-day period this year is expected to be down 62 percent from 2021.

The economic shockwaves of the strict policies in China—the world's second-largest economy—have been felt around the world.

Tech giant Apple on Thursday warned that COVID lockdowns in China were among the factors that would dent its June quarter results by \$4-8 billion.

Joerg Wuttke, president of the EU Chamber of Commerce in China, told The Market NZZ that the priority is clear for officials.

"The mayors, the regional politicians, they all have only one metric right now: Zero COVID," he said in an interview published Thursday.

"They don't care about the economy in the short term."

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