

China readies thousands of new hospital beds in virus outbreak epicentre

February 4 2020

Hundreds of empty beds lined an exhibition centre converted into a makeshift hospital at the epicentre of China's deadly virus epidemic on Tuesday, awaiting coronavirus patients.

Authorities are scrambling to provide facilities, beds and [medical treatment](#) for an influx of sick people in Wuhan in central Hubei province, the ground-zero of China's fight against the virus.

The disease has killed more than 400 people and infected a further 20,000 in China, nearly all of them in Hubei, and spread to two-dozen countries since it emerged in December.

Hong Kong and the Philippines have also reported deaths, and the World Health Organization has declared the crisis a global health emergency.

State media said the converted exhibition centre, along with a nearby gymnasium, will house an extra 3,400 beds and provide "emergency treatment and clinical testing" for those infected with the virus in Wuhan.

In its daily update Tuesday, China's National Health Commission said there had been 64 new deaths from the virus—all in hardest-hit Hubei province—bringing the national toll to 425.

Other coronavirus patients began arriving Tuesday at a field hospital in Wuhan built from scratch in under two weeks, state media said,

following a round-the-clock construction marathon that became a national [social media](#) sensation.

Fifty patients arrived at the military-run facility, the state-backed China Daily reported, with images showing workers in protective suits pushing people in wheelchairs up a ramp and into the pre-fabricated structure.

As reports surfaced of bed shortages in hospitals in Wuhan, construction began on Huoshenshan—"Fire God Mountain" in Chinese—on Friday January 24.

Workers toiled day and night amid a forest of earthmovers and trucks carting materials around the site, southwest of the centre of the city of 11 million.

On the side of one of the trucks, the isolated city's new rallying cry—"Let's go Wuhan!"—was written on a banner.

Leishenshan ("Thunder God Mountain"), another hospital on an adjacent site, is set to start admitting patients on Thursday, with 1,600 beds.

Fire and thunder are traditionally associated in China with protection against illnesses.

Fire and thunder

All workers wore masks, as mandated by the authorities for the entire population of Wuhan, and were checked for fevers during their breaks.

By the following Friday, they had laid 400 prefabricated shipping-container-like rooms, after setting concrete foundations and routing the power supply to the complex.

The two-floor facility was handed over to the army on Sunday and will be staffed with 1,400 military medics, including some with experience dealing with SARS and Ebola.

State media had initially reported that patients would begin arriving Monday—inside the 10-day timeframe authorities had set out when construction began.

Authorities said the Wuhan facilities were modelled on the Xiaotangshan hospital in Beijing, which was built from prefabricated structures in barely a week to treat patients infected by SARS in 2003.

That pathogen killed 349 people in China and hundreds more in Hong Kong and abroad.

However, with the death toll surging in Wuhan and elsewhere in Hubei province, it was not immediately clear what overall impact the hospitals would have on the virus spreading elsewhere.

The city also plans to convert three existing venues, including a gymnasium and an exhibition centre, into hospitals, the Wuhan government said.

The three buildings will be turned into healthcare facilities with a total of 3,400 beds to take in patients with mild symptoms.

Livestreamed

Footage of the mammoth construction effort was livestreamed continuously on social media and watched tens of millions of times.

It has also been feted endlessly in state media as an example of the decisive response to the public health crisis after authorities in Hubei

faced a torrent of public anger for perceived incompetence, including delays in announcing the public health emergency.

Local Communist Party secretary Ma Guoqiang acknowledged Friday that officials had worsened the spread of the virus by failing to restrict travel earlier.

When a lockdown and blanket travel ban were finally introduced, they swept up more than 50 million people in Wuhan and nearby cities.

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