

Asia, Australia ramp up defence against coronavirus



Body temperatures of arriving passengers are scanned at Incheon International Airport. (AP pic)

BANGKOK: Asia stepped up its defences Tuesday (January 21, 2020) against a new SARS-like virus, introducing mandatory screenings at airports of arrivals from high-risk areas of China as authorities move to head off a billowing regional health crisis.

From Bangkok to Hong Kong and Seoul to Sydney, authorities have gone into high alert over the new coronavirus, following China's confirmation of the first case of human-to-human transmission of the deadly illness.

Four people have died in China while scores more have been infected with the virus.

Cases have been detected in Thailand, Japan and South Korea as the World Health Organisation said it would meet to discuss declaring a global public health emergency over the outbreak.

Thai authorities have introduced mandatory thermal scans of passengers arriving from high-risk areas of China at its airports in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket and Krabi.

Those passengers will be screened "without exemption", health minister Anutin Charnvirakul said in a statement, adding if they exhibit signs of fever they will be quarantined for 24 hours for monitoring.

A quarter of all international flights from Wuhan – the epicentre of the deadly virus – arrive in Thailand.

Around 1,300 passengers are expected each day from Wuhan over Chinese New Year, which starts this weekend.

Thailand is desperate to avoid a damaging outbreak during peak tourist season.

Two Chinese arrivals in Thailand have been found with the new strain of the virus – one of whom has since been discharged from hospital and has returned to China.

In Hong Kong, the southern Chinese city where memories of a 2002-3 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that killed hundreds still haunt the city, authorities said they were on “extreme high alert”.

“We are ... preparing for the worst. We have not lowered our guard,” Hong Kong’s No 2 leader, Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung, told reporters.

Hong Kong airport already routinely screens the temperatures of all passengers arriving at the airport, one of the world’s busiest.

Those arriving from Wuhan have to fill out health declarations and face fines and up to six months jail if they fail to declare symptoms.

On Monday, hospital authorities said they would monitor anyone with a fever who had been to Hubei province, where Wuhan is located.

Taiwan meanwhile went onto its second-highest alert level for those travelling to and from Wuhan, advising visitors to avoid visiting any live poultry markets while screening has been stepped up at airports.

China’s vast land borders with its neighbours have also come under scrutiny.

Vietnam’s health ministry has ordered more border checks as “the risks of infection are high” given the daily cross-border flow of goods and people.

As fears over the reach of the outbreak mount, Australian health officials said they have restricted a man to his home after he returned from Wuhan showing symptoms of the virus – the country’s first suspected case. – **AFP, January 21, 2020**