

New SARS-like virus found in traveller from China, says Thailand



Patient tested positive for the novel coronavirus linked to the outbreak in Wuhan.
(Twitter pic/dr_foda)

BANGKOK: A traveller from China who arrived in Bangkok was infected with the newly identified virus believed to have triggered a pneumonia outbreak in central China, Thai officials said Monday (January 13, 2020).

The patient, who was hospitalised on Jan 8 at the Bamrasnaradura Infectious Diseases Institute, tested positive for the novel coronavirus linked to the outbreak in Wuhan, in Hubei province, the Thai Ministry of Public Health said in a statement Monday.

The patient has since recovered and is well enough to be repatriated.

It's the first reported case of someone outside China being infected with the novel virus, which has captured international attention because of similarities with the one that sparked Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, 17 years ago.

Unlike SARS, which killed almost 800 people, the new virus doesn't appear to spread easily between people.

"I'd like to ask the public not to be alarmed," Anutin Charnvirakul, Thailand's deputy premier and health minister, said in the statement. "The detection of the patient shows that we have an efficient system of surveillance. We're confident that we can control the situation."

No new related pneumonia cases have been detected in China since Jan 3, the municipal health commission in the city of Wuhan said Saturday.

Genetic studies of virus material collected from patients indicated that 41 people had been infected with the novel coronavirus, instead of the 59 previously counted, it said Sunday.

Among the Chinese cases, seven were in serious condition and six were discharged. A 61-year-old man died, although doctors said he also suffered from an abdominal tumour and chronic liver disease.

Seafood market

The outbreak was linked to a wholesale seafood market in Wuhan that also sold live animals and meat from wildlife.

That had prompted concern that an infectious respiratory pathogen from animals had emerged, potentially setting off a deadly contagion reminiscent of SARS.

So far, no infections among health-care workers have been reported, and there is no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission, the World Health Organisation said Sunday. The outbreak started in late 2019.

“It is too early to breathe a collective sigh of relief, as tempting as it may be,” the International Society for Infectious Diseases’ ProMED-mail programme, an internet service to identify unusual health events, said in an email Monday.

Scientists still don’t know the source of the virus, and it’s possible it might lurk in animals sold at other markets in China, ProMED-mail said.

“We still do not know the host or possible intermediary host of this virus,” it said. “And with the coming Chinese New Year (Jan 25), there will be massive population movement in the country and the region, and wildlife meals are delicacies.”

Gene sequence

Genomic data pertaining to the novel virus was made publicly available by a team of doctors and researchers in Wuhan, Shanghai, Beijing and Sydney, enabling scientists outside China to study its genetic fingerprint for clues about where and how it might have emerged.

Researchers from other cities have been invited to Wuhan to exchange information.

Coronaviruses are a large family of respiratory viruses that can cause diseases ranging from the common cold to SARS or the Middle-East Respiratory Syndrome, or MERS-COV, the WHO said.

Andrew Rambaut, a professor of molecular evolution at the University of Edinburgh, said the novel coronavirus is 89% similar to a SARS-related bat coronavirus.

“But that doesn’t mean it comes from bats,” he said in a post on Twitter.

Pig virus

Linfa Wang, a professor and director of the emerging infectious diseases programme at the Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore, said he was travelling to Wuhan Tuesday.

Two scientists from Taiwan's Centres for Disease Control will also visit the city "within days," Chou Jih-haw, director-general of the centre, told the South China Morning Post on Sunday.

Wang and colleagues showed in April 2018 that a novel bat coronavirus caused acute diarrhoea in pigs, leading to a large-scale outbreak that killed almost 25,000 piglets on four farms in southern China's Guangdong province from 2013 to 2016.

While that particular virus isn't known to infect humans, coronaviruses cause illness in people more frequently than previously thought, said Wang.

It's only when they cause large clusters of cases, like in Wuhan, that they are investigated and discovered, he said in a phone interview on Tuesday.

"This whole investigation is almost like SARS No 2," Wang said. "The only difference is that there were no health-care workers infected. Everything else looked just like SARS." - Bloomberg, Bangkok, January 13, 2020