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# China didn't warn public of likely pandemic for 6 key days

By The Associated Press today



In the six days after top Chinese officials

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secretly determined they likely were facing a pandemic from a new coronavirus, the city of Wuhan at the epicenter of the disease hosted a mass banquet for tens of thousands of people; millions began traveling through for Lunar New Year celebrations.

President Xi Jinping warned the public on the seventh day, Jan. 20. But by that time, more than 3,000 people had been infected during almost a week of public silence, according to internal documents obtained by The Associated Press and expert estimates based on [retrospective infection data](#).

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Six days.

That delay from Jan. 14 to Jan. 20 was neither the first mistake made by Chinese officials at all levels in confronting the outbreak, nor the longest lag, as governments around the world have dragged their feet for weeks and even months in addressing the virus.

But the delay by the first country to face the new coronavirus came at a critical time — the beginning of the outbreak.

China's attempt to walk a line between alerting the public and avoiding panic

set the stage for a pandemic that has infected almost 2 million people and taken more than 126,000 lives.

“This is tremendous,” said Zuo-Feng Zhang, an epidemiologist at the University of California, Los Angeles. “If they took action six days earlier, there would have been much fewer patients and medical facilities would have been sufficient. We might have avoided the collapse of Wuhan’s medical system.”

Other experts noted that the Chinese government may have waited on warning the public to stave off hysteria, and that it did act quickly in private during

that time.

But the six-day delay by China's leaders in Beijing came on top of almost two weeks during which the national Center for Disease Control did not register any cases from local officials, internal bulletins obtained by the AP confirm. Yet during that time, from Jan. 5 to Jan. 17, hundreds of patients were appearing in hospitals not just in Wuhan but across the country.

It's uncertain whether it was local officials who failed to report cases or

## China didn't warn public o...

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record them. It's also not clear exactly what officials knew at the time in Wuhan, which

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**AP**

only opened  
back up last  
week with  
restrictions after  
its quarantine.

But what is clear,  
experts say, is  
that China's  
rigid controls on  
information,  
bureaucratic  
hurdles and a  
reluctance to  
send bad news  
up the chain of  
command  
muffled early  
warnings. [The  
punishment of  
eight doctors for  
"rumor-  
mongering,"](#)  
broadcast on  
national  
television on  
Jan. 2, sent a  
chill through the  
city's hospitals.

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# The coronavirus spread around the world

Confirmed global cases, deaths and recoveries from

## Confirmed cases

- 1 to 1,000
- 1,001 to 10,000 +
- 10,001 to 25,000 -
- 25,001 to 75,000 .
- More than 75,000

Map updates hourly. Figures are as reported by governments and health authorities.

Source: Esri; Johns Hopkins

/ Graphic: Phil Holm & Nicky Forster **AP**

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“Doctors in Wuhan were afraid,” said Dali Yang, a professor of Chinese politics at the University of Chicago. “It was truly intimidation of an entire profession.”

Without these internal reports, it took the first

case outside  
China, in  
Thailand on Jan.  
13, to galvanize  
leaders in Beijing  
into recognizing  
the possible  
pandemic before  
them. It was  
only then that  
they launched a  
nationwide plan  
to find cases —  
distributing  
CDC-sanctioned  
test kits, easing  
the criteria for  
confirming cases  
and ordering  
health officials  
to screen  
patients, all  
without telling  
the public.

The Chinese  
government has  
repeatedly  
denied  
suppressing  
information in  
the early days,  
saying it  
immediately  
reported the  
outbreak to the  
World Health  
Organization.

“Allegations of a  
cover-up or lack



of transparency  
in China are  
groundless,” said  
foreign ministry  
spokesman Zhao  
Lijian at a  
Thursday press  
conference.

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The documents  
show that the  
head of China’s  
National Health  
Commission, Ma  
Xiaowei, laid out  
a grim  
assessment of  
the situation on  
Jan. 14 in a  
confidential  
teleconference  
with provincial  
health officials.  
A memo states  
that the  
teleconference  
was held to  
convey  
instructions on  
the coronavirus  
from President  
Xi Jinping,  
Premier Li  
Keqiang and Vice  
Premier Sun  
Chunlan, but  
does not specify  
what those  
instructions

were.

“The epidemic situation is still severe and complex, the most severe challenge since SARS in 2003, and is likely to develop into a major public health event,” the memo cites Ma as saying.

The National Health Commission is the top medical agency in the country. In a faxed statement, the Commission said it had organized the teleconference because of the case reported in Thailand and the possibility of the virus spreading during New Year travel. It added that China had published information on the outbreak in an “open, transparent, responsible and

timely manner,”  
in accordance  
with “important  
instructions”  
repeatedly  
issued by  
President Xi.

The documents  
come from an  
anonymous  
source in the  
medical field  
who did not  
want to be  
named for fear  
of retribution.

The AP  
confirmed the  
contents with  
two other  
sources in public  
health familiar  
with the  
teleconference.

Some of the  
memo’s contents  
also appeared in  
[a public notice  
about the  
teleconference](#),  
stripped of key  
details and  
published in  
February.

Under a section  
titled “sober  
understanding of  
the situation,”  
the memo said

that “clustered cases suggest that human-to-human transmission is possible.” It singled out the case in Thailand, saying that the situation had “changed significantly” because of the possible spread of the virus abroad.

“With the coming of the Spring Festival, many people will be traveling, and the risk of transmission and spread is high,” the memo continued. “All localities must prepare for and respond to a pandemic.”

In the memo, Ma demanded officials unite around Xi and made clear that political considerations and social stability were

key priorities during the long lead-up to China's two biggest political meetings of the year in March. While the documents do not spell out why Chinese leaders waited six days to make their concerns public, the meetings may be one reason.

"The imperatives for social stability, for not rocking the boat before these important Party congresses is pretty strong," says Daniel Mattingly, a scholar of Chinese politics at Yale. "My guess is, they wanted to let it play out a little more and see what happened."

In response to the teleconference, the Center for

Disease Control and Prevention in Beijing initiated the highest-level emergency response internally, level one, on Jan. 15. It assigned top CDC leaders to 14 working groups tasked with getting funds, training health workers, collecting data, doing field investigations and supervising laboratories, an internal CDC notice shows. The memo directed Hubei province, where Wuhan is located, to begin temperature checks at airports, bus and train stations, and cut down on large public gatherings. The National Health Commission also distributed

a 63-page set of instructions to provincial health officials, obtained by the AP. The instructions ordered health officials nationwide to identify suspected cases, hospitals to open fever clinics, and doctors and nurses to don protective gear. They were marked “internal” — “not to be spread on the internet,” “not to be publicly disclosed.”

In public, however, officials continued to downplay the threat, pointing to the 41 cases public at the time.

“We have reached the latest understanding that the risk of

sustained  
human-to-  
human  
transmission is  
low,” Li Qun, the  
head of the  
China CDC’s  
emergency  
center, [told  
Chinese state  
television on  
Jan. 15](#). That was  
the same day Li  
was appointed  
leader of a group  
preparing  
emergency plans  
for the level one  
response, a CDC  
notice shows.

On Jan. 20,  
President Xi  
issued his first  
public  
comments on  
the virus, saying  
the outbreak  
“must be taken  
seriously” and  
every possible  
measure  
pursued. A  
leading Chinese  
epidemiologist,  
Zhong Nanshan,  
[announced for  
the first time  
that the virus  
was](#)



transmissible  
from person to  
person on  
national  
television.

If the public had  
been warned a  
week earlier to  
take actions such  
as social  
distancing, mask  
wearing and  
travel  
restrictions,  
cases could have  
been cut by up  
to two-thirds,  
[one paper later  
found](#). An earlier  
warning could  
have saved lives,  
said Zhang, the  
doctor in Los  
Angeles.

However, other  
health experts  
said the  
government took  
decisive action  
in private given  
the information  
available to  
them.

“They may not  
have said the  
right thing, but  
they were doing  
the right thing,”

said Ray Yip, the retired founding head of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control's office in China. "On the 20th, they sounded the alarm for the whole country, which is not an unreasonable delay."

If health officials raise the alarm prematurely, it can damage their credibility — "like crying wolf" —and cripple their ability to mobilize the public, said Benjamin Cowley, an epidemiologist at the University of Hong Kong.

The delay may support accusations by President Donald Trump that the Chinese government's secrecy held back the world's

response to the virus. However, even the public announcement on Jan. 20 left the U.S. nearly two months to prepare for the pandemic.

During those months, [Trump](#) ignored the warnings of his own staff and dismissed the disease as nothing to worry about, while the government failed to bolster medical supplies and deployed flawed testing kits. Leaders across the world turned a blind eye to the outbreak, with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson calling for a strategy of “herd immunity” — [before falling ill himself](#). Brazilian President [Jair Bolsonaro](#) sneered at what

he called “a little cold.”

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The early story of the pandemic in China shows missed opportunities at every step, the documents and AP interviews reveal. Under Xi, China’s most authoritarian leader in decades, increasing political repression has made officials more hesitant to report cases without a clear green light from the top.

“It really increased the stakes for officials, which made them reluctant to step out of line,” said Mattingly, the Yale professor.

“It made it harder for people at the local level to

report bad information.”

Doctors and nurses in Wuhan told Chinese media there were plenty of signs that the coronavirus could be transmitted between people as early as late December.

Patients who had never been to the suspected source of the virus, the Huanan Seafood Market, were infected. Medical workers started falling ill.

But officials obstructed medical staff who tried to report such cases. They set tight criteria for confirming cases, where patients not only had to test positive, but samples had to be sent to Beijing and

sequenced. They required staff to report to supervisors before sending information higher, [Chinese media reports show](#). And they punished doctors for warning about the disease.

As a result, [no new cases were reported for almost two weeks from Jan. 5](#), even as officials gathered in Wuhan for Hubei province's two biggest political meetings of the year, internal China CDC bulletins confirm.

During this period, teams of experts dispatched to Wuhan by Beijing said they failed to find clear signs of danger and human-to-

human  
transmission.

“China has many  
years of disease  
control, there’s  
absolutely no  
chance that this  
will spread  
widely because  
of Spring  
Festival travel,”  
the head of the  
first expert team,  
Xu Jianguo, [told  
Takungpao, a  
Hong Kong  
paper](#), on Jan. 6.  
He added there  
was “no  
evidence of  
human-to-  
human  
transmission”  
and that the  
threat from the  
virus was low.

The second  
expert team,  
dispatched on  
Jan. 8, similarly  
failed to unearth  
any clear signs of  
human-to-  
human  
transmission.  
Yet during their  
stay, more than  
half a dozen  
doctors and

nurses had  
already fallen ill  
with the virus, a  
retrospective  
China CDC  
study published  
in the New  
England Journal  
of Medicine  
would later  
show.

The teams  
looked for  
patients with  
severe  
pneumonia,  
missing those  
with milder  
symptoms. They  
also narrowed  
the search to  
those who had  
visited the  
seafood market  
— which was in  
retrospect a  
mistake, said  
Cowling, the  
Hong Kong  
epidemiologist,  
who flew to  
Beijing to review  
the cases in late  
January.

In the weeks  
after the severity  
of the epidemic  
became clear,  
some experts



accused Wuhan officials of intentionally hiding cases.

“I always suspected it was human-to-human transmissible,” said Wang Guangfa, the leader of the second expert team, in a Mar. 15 post on Weibo, the Chinese social media platform. He fell ill with the virus soon after returning to Beijing on Jan. 16.

Wuhan’s then-mayor, Zhou Xianwang, blamed national regulations for the secrecy.

“As a local government official, I could disclose information only after being authorized,” Zhou told state media in late

January. “A lot of people didn’t understand this.”

As a result, top Chinese officials appear to have been left in the dark.

“The CDC acted sluggishly, assuming all was fine,” said a state health expert, who declined to be named out of fear of retribution. “If we started to do something a week or two earlier, things could have been so much different.”

It wasn’t just Wuhan. In Shenzhen in southern China, hundreds of miles away, a team led by microbiologist Yuen Kwok-yung used their own test kits to confirm that six members of a

family of seven had the virus on Jan. 12. [In an interview with Caixin](#), a respected Chinese finance magazine, Yuen said he informed CDC branches “of all levels,” including Beijing. But internal CDC numbers did not reflect Yuen’s report, the bulletins show.

When the Thai case was reported, health authorities finally drew up an internal plan to systematically identify, isolate, test, and treat all cases of the new coronavirus nationwide.

Wuhan’s case count began to climb immediately — four on Jan. 17, then 17 the next day and 136 the day after. Across the country,

dozens of cases began to surface, in some cases among patients who were infected earlier but had not yet been tested. In Zhejiang, for example, [a man hospitalized on Jan. 4 was only isolated on Jan. 17 and confirmed positive on Jan. 21](#). In Shenzhen, the patients Yuen discovered on Jan. 12 were finally recorded as confirmed cases on Jan. 19.

The elite Peking Union Medical College Hospital held an emergency meeting on Jan. 18, instructing staff to adopt stringent isolation — still before Xi's public warning. A health expert told AP that on Jan. 19, she toured a hospital built after the

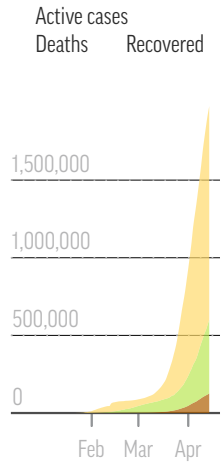
SARS outbreak,  
where medical  
workers had  
furiously  
prepared an  
entire building  
with hundreds of  
beds for  
pneumonia  
patients.

“Everybody in  
the country in  
the infectious  
disease field  
knew something  
was going on,”  
she said,  
declining to be  
named to avoid  
disrupting  
sensitive  
government  
consultations.

“They were  
anticipating it.”

# COVID-19: worldwide cases

This chart is updated  
once a day.



Source: Johns Hopkins &  
Datawrapper **AP**  
/ Graphic: Phil Holm

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Contact AP's  
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# A Physician's Guide to COVID-19

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