The Standard Top News

Extracted at 31/01/2020 10:25:26

China to soften viral blow to economy

China to soften viral blow to economy  
China is expected to unveil efforts to cushion the economic blow from the novel coronavirus, with the central bank set to keep liquidity ample and the government likely to step up spending.  
  
Authorities will need to break their fiscal rule of a 3 percent deficit relative to GDP to "slow the downward spiral of economic activities," according to Li-Gang Liu at Citigroup.   
  
Measures such as cutting interest rates and the proportion of deposits banks must set aside as reserves are possible, said Larry Hu, head of China economics at Macquarie Securities in Hong Kong.  
  
JPMorgan Chase economists led by Zhu Haibin revised their growth forecast for 2020 to factor in the "large negative shock" in the first quarter - mainly to retail sales. They lowered the year-on-year prediction for the first quarter to 5.6 percent from a previous estimate of 6 percent and the 2020 forecast to 5.8 percent from 5.93 percent earlier.  
  
Meanwhile, China's promises in its phase-one trade deal to increase purchases from the United States will be even harder to fulfill now that the virus is affecting demand and interfering with supply chains.  
  
Attention is now focused on Article 7.6 of the agreement, which states the US and China will consult "in the event that a natural disaster or other unforeseeable event" delays either nation from complying with the deal.  
  
"It obviously is going to have some ramifications economy-wide, which we hope will not inhibit the purchase goal that we have for this year," US Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said yesterday. "We'll have to look ahead and see. But the honest answer is we just don't know yet."

Bonjour soars 24pc on news of stake sale

Bonjour soars 24pc on news of stake sale   
Bonjour (0653) saw its shares increase by 24 percent to HK$0.12 after resuming trading yesterday.   
  
The local cosmetics chain said late Wednesday night that substantial shareholder Chen Jianwen has been in discussions with its controlling shareholder Wilson Ip Chun-heng and his spouse Chung Pui-wan concerning the possibility of purchasing all or part of their shares involving about 40.4 percent of the total issued shares of the company. Chen holds a 19.5 percent interest in the company.  
  
In December,Bonjour warned it will record a heavier loss in 2019 compared with HK$39.6 million loss the previous year due to the social unrest.   
  
Meanwhile, department store operator Wing On Company International (0289) says it expects to see a 55 percent drop in net profit for 2019. However, its underlying profit, which excludes net valuation gain on the investment properties and related deferred tax, is expected to be better than in 2018 by about 48 percent.   
  
Shares of Wing On Company International fell 3.67 percent to HK$21 yesterday.   
  
Meanwhile, Liu Chong Hing (0194) expects to record an approximately 50 percent year-on-year decrease in net profit for 2019, mainly due to the expected decrease in revaluation gains in the company's Hong Kong investment properties as well as reduced sales revenue from its Foshan property development as that project approaches its conclusion.

Virus crisis delays Lohas Park 9C launch

Virus crisis delays Lohas Park 9C launch  
Hong Kong property developer Wheelock and Company (0020) said yesterday that it may delay the launch of its Lohas Park Phase 9C development as the city's home transactions fell amid coronavirus fears, but said it is unlikely to affect pricing.   
  
Wheelock will announce a time for the launch, which had originally been scheduled in the first quarter, when the atmosphere becomes "less tense," executive director Ricky Wong said.   
  
The developer expects to roll out three to four projects this year, including Lohas Park Package 9C and a project on Sin Fat Road in Kwun Tong.   
  
Wong estimates property prices will see a fluctuation of about 5 percent in the first half of the year.   
  
He said property prices will not increase sharply due to uncertainties, and that the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak currently has no impact on the pricing of new projects.   
  
Wong believes the real estate market will heat up after the spread of the disease is contained.   
  
Separately, Wing Tai Properties (0369) sold two 458-sq-ft apartments in Oma Oma in Tuen Mun for a total of HK$13.15 million.   
  
The secondary market, meanwhile, continued to see more price cuts.   
  
In in Cheung Sha Wan, a 604-sq-ft flat at Liberte changed hands for HK$9.99 million, or HK$16,540 per sq ft, after HK$2.01 million was cut from the original asking price.   
  
A 855-sq-ft flat at Mei Foo Sun Chuen in Lai Chi Kok fetched HK$11 million, or HK$12,865 per sq ft, after HK$12 million was cut from the initial asking price.   
  
Meanwhile, K Wah International (0173) will launch more than 3,800 units this year, including MTR Kam Sheung Road Station Project Phase 1, which provides about 2,200 flats.   
  
In 2017, a consortium formed by Sino Land (0083), China Overseas Land & Investment (0688) and K. Wah International won development rights for the residential project for HK$8.33 billion, or HK$6,735 per sq ft.   
  
In other news, some local property developers have cancelled Lunar New Year media receptions, including Sun Hung Kai Properties (0016), Emperor International (0163), K Wah International, Sino Land and Wheelock and Company (0020), due to concerns over the coronavirus.

Mainland property sales to fall 10pc, says HSBC

Mainland property sales to fall 10pc, says HSBC  
HSBC (0005) expects property sales in the mainland to drop 10 percent year-on-year in 2020 as several cities have required developers to close sales offices and stop construction amid fears of the fast-spreading SARS-like coronavirus.  
  
HSBC said the closure of sales offices will hamper housing demand and the suspension of construction will impact the developers' cash flow, which increased uncertainties for the profit outlook of mainland developers this year.  
  
Meanwhile, more than ten mainland property developers have pledged to slash rents for tenants in shopping malls, as the novel coronavirus infection spreads. Longfor (0960) said will halve rents, property management fees and promotion fees for all tenants in its shopping malls from January 25 to March 31, which is estimated to benefit more than 4,500 brands.  
  
More than 60 mainland property developers, including China Vanke and Country Garden, have made donations to Wuhan, the epicenter of the viral outbreak, mainland media China Real Estate Business reported.   
  
Previously, Wanda has said it will exempt rents and property management fees for the tenants in all the Wanda Plaza shopping malls across the mainland and expects to receive 3-4 billion yuan (HK$3.36-4.48 billion) fewer in rent.

Fed keeping a watchful eye over China

Fed keeping a watchful eye over China  
Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said the outbreak of the coronavirus will likely hit the Chinese economy and could spill wider, but it was too early to judge what impact it would have on the US   
  
"We are very carefully monitoring the situation," Powell told a press conference Wednesday in Washington after the US central bank held its benchmark interest rate steady. "There will clearly be implications at least in the near term for Chinese output."   
  
The outbreak of the SARS-like coronavirus in China has rattled financial markets as investors assess how much it will hurt the country's economy and whether that will weigh on US and global growth. Equity and oil prices have swung sharply in recent days.   
  
"There are some signs that global growth may be stabilizing," including some of the diminished tensions around trade, Powell told reporters. "Nonetheless, uncertainties about the outlook remain," he said, noting that these include the coronavirus, though it was very uncertain how far it would spread.   
  
In Hong Kong, The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation kept its best lending rate on hold at the current level of 5 percent, in lockstep with the Federal Reserve's decision to hold the benchmark rate unchanged.   
  
The bank also will keep its Hong Kong dollar savings deposit interest rate steady. The savings interest rate for an account balance of less than HK$5,000 remains at zero, and that for an account balance of HK$5,000 or above remains at 0.001 percent a year.  
  
Meanwhile, The Hong Kong Monetary Authority said it will keep close tab on any possible impact of the coronavirus outbreak and will maintain the stability of the Hong Kong dollar exchange rate through the Linked Exchange Rate System.   
  
In the capital market, the overall Hong Kong Interbank Offered Rate saw a pickup yesterday. The one-month Hong Kong Interbank Offered Rate, which is linked to the mortgage rate, rose to 2.20964 percent, hitting a four-week high.

Sands China's income rises but lower revenue on cards

Sands China's income rises but lower revenue on cards  
Sands China (1928) announced its net income for the fourth quarter last year rose 10.32 percent to US$513 million (HK$4 billion), but the novel coronavirus outbreak has stymied the outlook for the Macau casino operator.  
  
For 2019, total net income grew by 7.37 percent to US$2.04 billion (HK$15.84 billion).   
  
Net revenue slid 0.44 percent to US$2.24 billion last quarter as net revenue for 2019 advanced 1.61 percent to US$8.81 billion.  
  
In Macau, adjusted property EBITDA rose 3 percent to US$811 million in the fourth quarter, with EBITDA margin reaching 36.2 percent, up another 140 basis points compared to the prior year.  
  
Mass gaming revenues grew by 3 percent year-on-year and retail sales increased by 11 percent from the previous year.   
  
Sands China said the visitations to Macau has been affected by the viral outbreak, which is affecting all segments of its business. The company told institutional investors that it expects the virus's impact will be reflected in its February revenue, and it is trying to reduce costs during the outbreak.  
  
Mainland visitors to Macau slumped 81.7 percent to 139,580 over the first six days during the Lunar New Year Holiday from January 24 to January 29, as the total number of visitor arrivals fell 76.5 percent to 243,204, the official data showed yesterday.  
  
Shares of Sands China fell 4.10 percent to HK$37.4 yesterday.

Former Cathay CEO calls it a day

Former Cathay CEO calls it a day  
Cathay Pacific Airways (0293) has announced that former chief executive Ivan Chu Kwok-leung, 58, has resigned as a non-executive director due to his retirement.  
  
Zhang Zhuoping has been appointed as a non-executive director, and the resignation and appointment take effect on April 14. Zhang will replace Chu as chairman of John Swire & Sons China.  
  
Cathay Pacific named Rupert Hogg its chief executive, replacing Chu in 2017 after reporting its first annual loss in eight years. Hogg resigned last year, after the carrier faced backlash from China's civil aviation regulator due to staff involvement in anti-Beijing protests. Zhang joined the Swire group in 2002, where he first worked in corporate finance, including on Swire projects in mainland China. Shares of Cathay Pacific fell 2.13 percent HK$9.66 yesterday.

Firms risk missing earnings deadline due to outbreak

Firms risk missing earnings deadline due to outbreak  
The deepening novel coronavirus outbreak is raising risks that many Hong Kong-listed companies won't be able to get their earnings reports done in time, lining them up for a suspension in trading if they run afoul of exchange rules.  
  
The Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accountants and senior executives at the Hong Kong Exchanges & Clearing (0388) held an emergency meeting yesterday to discuss the issue. Auditors are concerned that companies whose fiscal year ended in December might not be able to meet a March 31 deadline for filing their accounts.   
  
Travel restrictions to and from China, as well as difficult working conditions in Hong Kong, are delaying efforts. Meanwhile, the virus has also seen the Lunar New Year holiday extended in mainland China.   
  
"We have suggested the exchange extend the deadline," HKICPA vice president Nelson Lam said in an interview. "The health of audit professionals is our utmost priority."  
  
The accountant group met with HKEX head of listing Bonnie Chan and the bourse agreed to consider possible remedies, but also stressed that the main responsibility lies with companies to handle the situation, according to Lam. The parties agreed to stay in touch but haven't scheduled any further meetings, he said.  
  
"We're closely monitoring developments and are working with our regulator and other stakeholders to consider the circumstances of the issuers in fulfilling their obligations to publish financial results under the Listing Rules," an HKEX spokesman said.  
  
More than 1,200 mainland Chinese companies are listed in Hong Kong. With a December 31 year-end, auditors have three months to review and audit their accounts. Companies that fail to announce results in three months after the end of the result period are suspended from trading.  
  
Meanwhile, Fu Shek Financial, a Hong Kong-based financial services provider which is set to debut early February, will continue to have an initial public offering press conference today.   
  
In other news, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority announced a delay in its briefing to the Legislative Council Panel on Financial Affairs, which was scheduled for next Monday, due to the virus crisis.

Thirteen-month-long export decline ends

Thirteen-month-long export decline ends  
Hong Kong's exports saw an end to a 13-month decline, increasing by 3.3 percent year-on-year to HK$351.3 billion in December, driven by an increase in exports to the mainland, data from the Census and Statistics Department showed.  
  
However, imports fell 1.9 percent year-on-year to HK$383.8 billion in December. A visible trade deficit of HK$32.5 billion, equivalent to 8.5 percent of the value of imports of goods, was recorded.  
  
For 2019, total exports dropped by 4.1 percent over 2018 and total imported fell by 6.5 percent.   
  
The visible trade deficit reached HK$426.8 billion last year, equivalent to 9.7 percent of the value for imports of goods.  
  
Hong Kong's export performance is still subject to high uncertainties in the near term, a government spokesman said.  
  
While global economic conditions showed some signs of stabilization in the latter part of last year, partly helped by reduced trade tensions between the US and the mainland, external uncertainties are still high including those associated with lingering trade disputes among major economies, elevated geopolitical tensions and the development of Brexit, the spokesman said.  
  
Particular attention should also be paid to the development of the novel coronavirus infection as it may weigh on the economic performance of some Asian economies and disrupt economic activities in Hong Kong, he added.

More attacks and vandalism

More attacks and vandalism  
Erin Chan  
  
Three attacks, including petrol bomb attacks and vandalism, were targeted at police stations and a retail shop yesterday in an apparent attempt to force the government to close all boundary control points with the mainland.  
  
The latest attacks came two days after the government announced that the three largest ports of entry into the city, including Lo Wu, Lok Ma Chau, and Hong Kong International Airport, will remain open despite other measures to reduce the flow of arrivals from the mainland.  
  
A branch of snack-selling chain store, Best Mart 360, in a shopping mall in Tin Shui Wai was firebombed at 1.39am yesterday, with multiple burn marks and glass fragments left at the scene.  
  
The police said security guards at the mall heard loud bangs and later saw two black-clad males with masks throwing two petrol bombs at the shop before fleeing the scene.  
  
At 2am, three black-clad attackers were seen hurling fire bombs at the entrance of Hung Hom Police Station in Ho Man Tin, leaving burn marks and shattered petrol bomb fragments.  
  
Later in the morning at 5am, Mong Kok Police Station in Prince Edward was also struck by an arson attack, with petrol bomb fragments and burn marks found outside.   
  
CCTV footage released by the police on Facebook shows two people hurling two ignited petrol bombs at the entrance of the police station, which is encircled by several plastic barriers.  
  
"The CCTV footage shows that at around 5am today, rioters arrived at the entrance of Mong Kok police station and were seen throwing several petrol bombs," said police inspector Henry Chau Ho-haung.  
  
The petrol bomb attacks came after both Kwai Chung and Tin Shui Wai police stations, as well as a police emergency unit vehicle in Mong Kok, were struck by petrol bomb attacks the day before.  
  
No one was injured, and there have been no arrests so far. All the petrol bomb attacks have been classified as "arson" by the police.  
  
From June until December last year, at least 22 police stations were struck by fire bomb attacks, with the police stations in Mong Kok and Tsim Sha Tsui being flashpoints, according to the police.  
  
Both the police and pro-Beijing businesses have frequently been targeted by anti-government protesters for petrol bomb attacks and vandalism during the more than seven months of social unrest triggered by the now-shelved fugitive bill.  
  
erin.chan@singtaonewscorp.com

Anthem bill won't be stalled

Anthem bill won't be stalled  
Jasmine Ling  
  
Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Patrick Nip Tak-kuen says he has no intention of postponing legislation on the national anthem as it is not an "evil bill."  
  
The purpose of the law was to call for respect for the Chinese national anthem, and believed the law would not conflict with freedom of speech.  
  
"The law is enacted through the SAR's legislature for constitutional responsibility," he said. "It caters to the SAR's legal system and local situation. If we are dedicated to fulfilling One Country, Two Systems, we should do better work on the national anthem law."  
  
The second reading debate on the bill was supposed to resume in mid-October last year for its passage within this legislative year. But pan-democratic lawmakers brought the Legislative Council's House Committee to a standstill for more than four months with attempts at filibustering.  
  
The House Committee - which is responsible for scrutinizing a bill after the second reading - has failed to elect a new chairman after 12 rounds of meetings since the new Legco year in October last year.  
  
Other bills such as the government's proposal to extend maternity leave to 14 weeks were also halted in the now-paralyzed House Committee.  
  
Nip said the bill has undergone thorough scrutiny across panels and the Bills Committee for a total of 65 hours and questions the intention of pan-democrats to paralyze the legislation.  
  
"At this stage, pan-democrats are still exhausting means to bar the bill from passing. What messages are we sending to the central government with this?" Nip said.  
  
If passed, the national anthem law would prohibit people from deliberately altering the anthem and singing it in a distorted or derogatory manner. Anyone found guilty of insulting the anthem is liable to a maximum fine of HK$50,000 or three years' imprisonment.  
  
Nip said the bureau is reviewing voting policies for the Legco election in September.  
  
He said citizens have lost trust in the government due to the now-shelved fugitive bill, thus the District Council election last November had attracted rumors and disinformation.  
  
He said the bureau would draw on experience from the last District Council election to refine measures favorable to elderly voters and restrict the number of people entering counting stations.  
  
Nip said setting up a limit was for better management, and cited incidents from the last District Council election in which too many people entered and shouted in counting stations and even used abusive language to threaten other people.  
  
"The limit is based on practical concerns," said Nip. "The counting stations have their capacity and cannot be overloaded. I think this is a fair and orderly way, and I believe everyone would accept this arrangement if they want the election to be held peacefully and orderly."   
  
jasmine.ling@singtaonewscorp.com

Virus halts legislative talk about money

Virus halts legislative talk about money  
Michael Shum  
  
The chairman of the Legislative Council Finance Committee, Chan Kin-por, has canceled a meeting scheduled to run for eight hours today.  
  
This came after lawmakers from the pro-democracy camp wrote to Chan on Wednesday to urge him to call off the meeting based on the "principles of epidemic prevention."  
  
Chan said in response that he had decided to cancel the meeting as experts said the next 14 days are vital for containing the coronavirus and citizens should stay home.  
  
The administration backed the action, saying the cancellation would allow more officials to deal with virus issues.  
  
Chan noted too that his committee has made slow progress, with 50 applications involving HK$100 billion of funding yet to be scrutinized.   
  
So the committee may now hold 14 hours of extra meetings in June and July on top of 28 hours of scheduled additional meetings from March to May.  
  
"I hope members of the committee can focus on scrutinizing funding applications and government officials are well prepared to answer questions from members," Chan said.  
  
One outstanding issue - it was to have gone to a vote today - is pay increases for civil servants due to legislators' opposition to police getting the same increase.  
  
The issue has been stuck in the committee since mid-December because pan-democratic lawmakers demanded that hikes for police be separated from other civil servants to reflect anger at officers' handling of protests.  
  
Another controversial funding application is HK$10.6 billion to bail out financially-strapped Ocean Park.  
  
The park has dipped into the red for four consecutive years and still has to repay HK$8 billion for loans from public funds.  
  
michael.shum@singtaonewscorp.com

Tears and laughter as Brexit clicks in

Tears and laughter as Brexit clicks in  
The European Parliament gave final approval to Britain's divorce from the European Union, paving the way for the country to quit the bloc today after nearly half a century and delivering a major setback for European integration.  
  
After an emotional debate during which several speakers shed tears, EU lawmakers voted 621 for and 49 against the Brexit agreement sealed between Britain and the 27 other member states last October, more than three years after Britons voted out.  
  
Thirteen lawmakers abstained and the chamber then broke into a rendition of Auld Lang Syne, a traditional Scottish folk song of farewell. Britain's 73 departing EU lawmakers headed for an "Au Revoir" party in the EU chamber.  
  
Earlier, Britain's ambassador to the EU handed documents formalizing Brexit to a senior EU official. Against a backdrop of British and EU flags at the bloc's Brussels headquarters, Tim Barrow, smiling, passed over a dark blue leather file embossed with the emblem of the United Kingdom.  
  
Britain will leave the club it joined in 1973 at midnight Brussels time today when British flags will be removed from EU offices and the EU flag lowered on the British premises there.  
  
With a status-quo transition period running only until year-end, fresh talks - covering everything from trade to security - will begin soon on a new relationship.  
  
European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen told the chamber: "We are considering a zero-tariff, zero-quotas free trade agreement. But the precondition is that EU and British businesses continue to compete on a level playing field. We will certainly not expose our companies to unfair competition."  
  
Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier told envoys of the remaining 27 members that a loose association agreement like the EU has with Ukraine should serve as the basis for new relations, diplomatic sources said. "We will not give ground on issues that are important to us," Barnier said, according to sources briefed on the closed-door meeting.  
  
On his last working day as a member of the European Parliament, laughing Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage told reporters there was no going back once Britain leaves.  
  
"The UK didn't fit, we'd be better off out," he said, describing euroscepticism as a settled view in Britain, where "Leave" won the 2016 referendum by a narrow 52 to 48 percent margin.  
  
He said British Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised him there would be no so-called 'level playing field' clauses on fair competition in the new EU-UK deal, highlighting a major point of contention in the coming talks.  
  
Farage's Brexit Party lawmakers waved goodbye to the chamber with mini Union Jack flags and chanted "Hurray!" but their Socialist compatriot Jude Kirton-Darling choked back tears.  
  
"It's probably the saddest day of my life so far," said Kirton-Darling, who plans to stay in Brussels with her Belgian husband. "Brexit is something that attacks the very foundation of our identity."  
  
Guy Verhofstadt, a liberal EU lawmaker from Belgium and a staunch europhile, lamented Brexit as a historic debacle: "It's sad to see a country leaving that twice liberated us, twice gave its blood to liberate Europe."  
  
Britain's permanent representation to the EU, or UKRep, will become a foreign mission.  
  
REUTERS  
   
  
Editorial Page 4

Man held over alleged suicide aid

Man held over alleged suicide aid  
Angel Kwan  
  
A 56-year-old man was arrested for murder after he allegedly lit a basin of coal to assist the suicide of his wife, who was suffering from cancer.  
  
At about 3.30am yesterday, police received a report from the man, surnamed Kwok, that his 54-year-old wife collapsed inside a unit on Lee Man Road in Aberdeen.  
  
On arrival officers found the woman lying unconsciously on a bed with a basin of burnt charcoal next to her. She was rushed to Queen Mary Hospital in an unconscious state and was certified dead at 4.18am.  
  
Police said initial investigation revealed that the man had placed the basin of burning charcoal inside his wife's bedroom. It was understood that the man told police he could not bear to see his wife suffering from cancer, and therefore helped her with her suicide.  
  
He was arrested for murder and is detained for further investigation. His younger sister, who was also at the scene, was taken to the police station to assist with the investigation as well.  
  
The district crime squad of Western District is handling the case and a post-mortem will be conducted to ascertain the cause of death.  
  
Under Hong Kong law, a person who aids, abets, counsels or procures the suicide of another, or an attempt by another to commit suicide shall be guilty of an offense triable upon indictment and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for 14 years. But anyone who is convicted of murder shall be imprisoned for life.  
  
Clarence Tsang Chin-kwok, executive director of Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong, said family members of those terminally ill may be stressed when they see their beloved ones suffering.  
  
"Of course it is not easy for them to take care of a patient, but what heartbreaking for them is that when they see their family member suffering from pain," Tsang said. "Some of them would think that ending the patient's life is the way to help [the patient]."  
  
He added it is important for the family to actively seek help from supporting networks built by members of the community with similar backgrounds. They can share experiences on taking care of patients and talk to each other about their stress and emotions.  
  
He also suggested them to seek help from the Social Welfare Department in case they find it too difficult to take care of their ill family members - especially if they need to take care of patients on their own.  
  
angel.kwan@singtaonewscorp.com

Trump card over Republicans hard to beat

Trump card over Republicans hard to beat  
The two articles of impeachment against US President Donald Trump were drafted in the House of Representatives, but the trial is taking place in the Senate and requires a two-thirds majority, or 67 out of 100 senators, to remove him from office.   
  
Chief Justice John Roberts is presiding over the trial and the 100 senators are the "jury."   
  
I have been watching it every night. You can catch the main highlights on The Daily Show with Trevor Noah.  
  
The rules are murky and the question now is whether witnesses can be subpoenaed, as former national security adviser John Bolton has blown the whistle on Trump in his upcoming book.   
  
The leading impeachment manager, Adam Schiff, managed to extract from Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, a three-day opening submission for his team and three days for the Trump defense team. Schiff made a powerful opening with the help of video testimony.  
  
Assuming all 47 members of the Democratic Party stick together, it would require at least four Republicans to carry a motion to subpoena Bolton.   
  
The four most likely to break ranks could be Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Mitt Romney of Utah.   
  
I say this because Collins has gone on Twitter to say that "reports about Bolton's book have strengthened the case for witnesses and have prompted a number of conversations among my colleagues."   
  
I understand that if the vote is split 50:50, the chief justice makes the final decision, although the rules for impeachment trials are silent on this point.   
  
Even McConnell has acknowledged privately that he currently does not have the votes to avoid calling witnesses, which the Democrats want to do.  
  
In the impeachment trial of then president Bill Clinton, the issue never came up, so there is no precedent.   
  
But three legal experts have written in the New York Times that Roberts could call witnesses as he is the presiding officer.   
  
Even if Bolton was subpoenaed, Trump may apply to prevent him from speaking on grounds of executive privilege, to which the Democrats will argue there are limits.   
  
In the meantime, the 100 senators are suffering as they can only drink water or milk on the Senate floor and must lock up their phones and not communicate with each other during the trial.   
  
Most, if not all of them, are wearing Apple Watches and trying not to fall asleep.   
  
Schiff has a law degree from Harvard University and is a former federal prosecutor.   
  
Assisting him are Jerry Nadler, who served on the judiciary committee, Zoe Lofgren, Jason Crow, Sylvia Garcia, Hakeem Jeffries and Val Demings - all appointed by Nancy Pelosi.  
  
Trump's defense team consists of Alan Dershowitz, Eric Herschmann, Ken Starr, Pam Bondi, Pat Cipollone, Mike Purpura and Trump's personal attorney Jay Sekulow.   
  
They argued that Trump did not do anything wrong and even if he did, it does not amount to an impeachable offense.   
  
But what I find so strange is the lack of power on the part of the House to obtain documents and to call witnesses, as well as a similar lack of power on the part of the chief justice to order that they be produced, leading Trump to brag at the Davos summit that he has all the material and the Democrats do not.   
  
The biggest jury trial may well turn out to be a farce and a travesty of justice unless the Republicans show some backbone.  
  
Susan Liang is a lawyer who likes to speak her mind on issues that concern the man on the street

Investing in unsettled times

Investing in unsettled times  
I ran into Midland Holdings chairman Freddie Wong Kin-yip at the Hong Kong Jockey Club clubhouse, where he had just finished swimming laps.  
  
Wong takes good care of his health and keeps a diligent swimming schedule, so he is very fit. A strong, healthy body is more important than money, he said.  
  
A prominent real estate broker for many years, Wong has long achieved financial security. He is savvy in investment, so I asked him for tips regarding the market outlook.  
  
He laughed and told me to perhaps look at bonds. For example, he says, higher risk mainland real-estate bonds are paying a rather handsome interest of more than 10 percent per annum. Companies that are generally safe are also paying 6 to 7 percent. Individual bonds issued by overseas financial institutions, such as the Royal Bank of Scotland, are also an option.  
  
Locals like to invest in real estate, and as the market has come down recently, is it a good time to buy? Wong said self-use buyers may consider buying if they come across "bargain" properties that are priced at 10 percent or more below market value. Such properties do exist as some people who want to emigrate are in a hurry to sell.  
  
Some feel that recent local social developments have diminished the SAR's prospects. Wong said one should first ask if Hong Kong, having a deposit stockpile of HK$13 trillion and foreign reserve at HK$3 trillion, would lose its role as the mainland's treasure trove.  
  
Recently, he said, a mainland tycoon spent HK$290 million to purchase multiple new apartments through Midland. Hong Kong immigrants in foreign countries live the life of second-class citizens earning third-class incomes. After death, a big chunk of the assets they have left behind would go to the government, he observed.  
  
Would those who had been immigrants before not treasure a life in Hong Kong as a first-class citizen making a first-class income?  
  
So Wong ventured to conclude that so long as the Lantau Tomorrow Vision project is not implemented, it is highly unlikely that the local property market will crash.  
  
Siu Sai-wo is publisher of Sing Tao Daily

Crisis management for all to Practice, Support and Observe

Crisis management for all to Practice, Support and Observe   
The statutory Lunar New Year holidays have come and gone, although most of us are on extended leave from the office and school to avoid spending time on crowded public transport and areas to minimize exposure to deadly viruses, in particular the Wuhan coronavirus, for which human-to-human transmission is now confirmed as one possible mode of infection.   
  
Although this is not officially confirmed, the virus is thought to be carried by bats, which are hunted and eaten by palm civets, which are in turn hunted and illegally sold live in markets in regions where the locals have a rather exotic taste for wild animals, especially in the winter.   
  
Viral outbreaks do occur from time to time in history and have killed many until cures are found.   
  
In the past, they were contained locally. But with modern-day high speed rail and air travel, human carriers can go from local to global in no time.  
  
Short of closing border crossings and banning travel completely, enforcement of selective closures is easier said than done.   
  
Take two of the Hong Kong cases for example, both involving Wuhan residents.   
  
One family flew from Wuhan to Singapore and spent a few days there before flying here. Their fever only surfaced after they had checked into their hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui.  
  
Another couple took the high-speed rail from Wuhan to Shenzhen, and then took another train here.   
  
They developed a fever only after arriving at their relative's flat in Ma On Shan.  
  
So, do we stop all land, sea and air travel altogether, short and long haul?   
  
That is not practical.   
  
And with the number of Hong Kong residents going abroad for their Lunar New Year break in the six-figures, we are obliged to take them back, regardless of whether they are sick or not.   
  
On the closure of borders, there is another dimension.  
  
The fact is that a very high percentage of our fresh food comes from the mainland.   
  
Any slowdown in or ban on travel and transportation in the mainland and at our border may mean the food supply chain may be constrained for a few months, as the virus and associated emergency health and hygiene measures are forecast to continue until the summer months.  
  
Despite the above complications, the latest emergency measures by the government to close high-speed train and through-train services are to be supported.   
  
Let's hope they reduce unnecessary travel and enable more concentrated border checks.  
  
The yearly National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference meetings are scheduled to take place in early March in Beijing.   
  
Priority must be given to legislation or strengthening of existing laws that ban and criminalize the catching, breeding, trafficking, selling, cooking and eating of wild animals and birds that are capable of carrying and transmitting viruses which endanger health.  
  
 Edward Chow is a current affairs commentator

Australians in new line of fire

Australians in new line of fire  
Australia is braced for a heatwave to sweep across its fire-ravaged southeast in the coming days.  
  
Temperatures topped 40 degrees Celsius yesterday in South Australia state, where dangerous fire-weather warnings were issued in bushfire-prone areas.  
  
The heatwave is set to hit Melbourne and Canberra today before parts of Sydney reach 45 degrees at the weekend.  
  
Authorities say the heat and dry winds mean severe hazards in parts of New South Wales and Victoria. More than 80 fires are still burning across those states.  
  
"We've had the benefit of benign conditions for a few days," Victoria emergency services commissioner Andrew Crisp said, urging residents to be prepared for bushfires to flare.   
  
"If you're going to wait until you see smoke or fire at your doorstep it's far too late," he added. "You've got to get out early."  
  
Storms are forecast to follow the heatwave, delivering rain that could dampen fires but also cause flash flooding.  
  
Extreme weather has battered parts of Australia in recent weeks, causing giant hail, floods and landslides.  
  
The renewed fire threat came as worst-hit New South Wales announced an inquiry into the bushfire season, which has left at least 32 people dead and devastated vast swathes of land since September.  
  
That comes on top of an inquiry announced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison this month.  
  
The crisis has renewed calls for Australia to take immediate action on climate change, with street protests urging a reduced reliance on coal.  
  
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Akihito collapses, but doctors are calm

Akihito collapses, but doctors are calm  
Former Japanese emperor Akihito, who abdicated last year, temporarily lost consciousness and collapsed at his Tokyo residence, but doctors did not find anything alarming.  
  
Akihito, 86, had an MRI exam yesterday after Wednesday's incident, an official of the Imperial Household Agency said. Doctors did not any "abnormalities," but he was being monitored.  
  
In July, Akihito suffered cerebral anemia, which involves an insufficient blood supply to the brain. He had surgery for prostate cancer and heart problems previously.  
  
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Gunman fires at Delhi protesters

Gunman fires at Delhi protesters  
An unidentified man fired at a protest against India's new citizenship law near a university in New Delhi yesterday, the first such incident in the capital in more than a month of demonstrations.  
  
Witnesses said the man holding a gun shouted slogans against the more than 1,000 protesters near Jamia Millia Islamia University before firing at them.  
  
One student was wounded.   
  
"The police stood nearby," Ahmed Zahir, a witness, said.  
  
Police later said they had detained the suspected gunman but gave no details.  
  
Protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, which fast-tracks Indian citizenship for non-Muslim minorities from three neighboring countries, have flared since last December.  
  
Some of the biggest protests have taken place near the university. Yesterday, police barricaded the road outside the university.  
  
A group of students, most of them women, were holding a sit-in near the barricade after they were stopped from marching to a memorial for independence leader Mahatma Gandhi on the anniversary of his assassination in 1948.  
  
Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government insists the citizenship law is needed to help members of persecuted religious minorities who fled to India before 2015 from Muslim-majority Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.  
  
But protesters say the law, and a proposed national register for citizens, discriminates against Muslims and violates India's secular constitution.  
  
REUTERS

Facial-recognition tech set for EU green light

Facial-recognition tech set for EU green light  
The European Union has scrapped the possibility of a ban on facial recognition technology in public space, under the latest proposals.  
  
An earlier draft by the European Commission had broached the idea of a moratorium of up to five years to give the bloc time to work out how to prevent abuses.  
  
Facial recognition artificial intelligence has sparked a global debate about the pros and cons of a technology widely used by law enforcement agencies but abused by authoritarian regimes for mass and discriminatory surveillance.  
  
Critics say the technology can infringe people's fundamental rights and breach data privacy rules.  
  
The revised proposal, part of a package of measures to address the challenges of artificial intelligence, could still be tweaked as the commission is seeking feedback before it presents its plan on February 19. The proposed rules would cover so-called high-risk sectors such as health care and transport.  
  
The US government has unveiled its own regulatory guidelines on artificial intelligence aimed at limiting overreach by authorities and urged Europe to avoid aggressive approaches. Microsoft president Brad Smith has said that a facial recognition technology ban is akin to using a cleaver instead of a scalpel to solve potential problems.  
  
REUTERS

Feds raid Filipino church in LA over 'human trafficking'

Feds raid Filipino church in LA over 'human trafficking'  
Federal agents raided a Philippines-based church in Los Angeles in a human trafficking investigation that led to arrests of three church leaders in what prosecutors said was a decades-long scheme to trick followers into becoming fund-raisers and arranging sham marriages to keep them in the US.  
  
The local leader of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ church was arrested on immigration fraud charges in Wednesday's bust along with a worker who confiscated passports of the victims of the scheme and another who handled finances, the US attorney's office said.  
  
Workers who managed to escape from the church told the FBI that they had been sent across the US to work long hours soliciting donations and suffered abuse if they didn't make daily quotas, according to an affidavit filed in support of the charges. Some described having to live in cars at truck stops.  
  
The immigrants essentially became full-time workers, sometimes referred to as "miracle workers,'' in a crusade to raise money for the nonprofit Children's Joy Foundation USA, which was supposed to benefit poor children in their homeland. But the complaint said most of the money raised was used to finance church operations and the lavish lifestyle of church leader Apollo Quiboloy.  
  
The church claims a membership of 6 million people and backed the 2016 candidacy of President Rodrigo Duterte, a close friend of Quiboloy.   
  
Quiboloy claims to be "the appointed son of God'' and in October last year claimed he stopped a major earthquake from hitting the southern Philippines.  
  
Between 2014 and the middle of last year, US$20 million (HK$155 million) was sent back to the church in the Philippines, the FBI said. "Most of these funds appear to derive from street-level solicitation," according to the affidavit by FBI Special Agent Anne Wetzel. "Little to no money solicited appears to benefit impoverished or in-need children."  
  
Investigators documented 82 sham marriages over a 20-year period between top fund-raisers and church members who were US citizens.  
  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

No let-up for runaway Reds

No let-up for runaway Reds   
Jurgen Klopp insists Liverpool are not motivated by making history after the leaders took another step towards the English Premier League title with a 2-0 win at West Ham.  
  
A whopping 19 points clear of Manchester City at the top of the table with their 23rd victory from 24 league games, Liverpool are on course for their first English league title since 1990.  
  
Mohamed Salah's first-half penalty put the Reds ahead at London Stadium before Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain wrapped up the win.  
  
Liverpool have only dropped points in a 1-1 draw at Manchester United in October.   
  
That has fueled talk of an unbeaten season but Klopp is only concerned about getting his side over the finish line. "I'm not too much concerned about records We had a record at Dortmund and Bayern beat it the next season," he said. "I don't want to be boring. We just don't feel like that."  
  
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Kobe's widow 'completely devastated' by tragic deaths

Kobe's widow 'completely devastated' by tragic deaths   
Vanessa Bryant spoke out for the first time since her husband Kobe Bryant and daughter Gianna were killed in a horrific helicopter crash, saying the family is "completely devastated" by the tragedy.  
  
Vanessa, who married Kobe in 2001 when she was still a teenager, took to Instagram to communicate her grief but said she was at a loss for words.  
  
"We are completely devastated by the sudden loss of my adoring husband, Kobe - the amazing father of our children; and my beautiful, sweet Gianna - a loving, thoughtful, and wonderful daughter, and amazing sister to Natalia, Bianka, and Capri," she wrote on her account.  
  
"There aren't enough words to describe our pain right now. I take comfort in knowing that Kobe and Gigi both knew that they were so deeply loved."  
  
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

No contest

No contest  
Novak Djokovic beat an injured Roger Federer in straight sets last night to reach his eighth Australian Open final as unheralded American Sofia Kenin stunned top seed Ashleigh Barty to end home hopes.  
  
Djokovic twice fought back from a break down in the first set and after dominating the tiebreaker he never looked back, winning 7-6 (7/1), 6-4, 6-3 as Federer, who needed a medical time-out, faded.  
  
"Respect to Roger for coming out," said the Serb, who is closing on his 17th Grand Slam title. "He was obviously hurt. He wasn't even close to his best in terms of movement."  
  
Djokovic, who has never lost a Melbourne semi-final or final, will now play the winner of today's clash between Austrian Dominic Thiem - who shocked world No 1 Rafael Nadal - and Germany's Alexander Zverev.  
  
In the women's competition, Kenin, 21, upset Australia's Barty and Garbine Muguruza downed Wimbledon champion Simona Halep to join the American in tomorrow's final.  
  
Federer was hampered by a groin injury in his five-set quarter-final with Tennys Sandgren, and rumors swirled that he might pull out of the semi-final.  
  
The 38-year-old Swiss, a six-time champion at Melbourne Park, was cleared by a scan but he took the court rating his chances at only "three percent" against Djokovic.  
  
"I was playing with nothing to lose," Federer said, adding: "Today was horrible ... Nice entrance, nice send-off, and in between is one to forget because you know you have a three percent chance to win."  
  
Despite the defeat, Federer said he had no plans to retire.  
  
Earlier, Barty had sent Australian expectations soaring of a first home-grown winner since 1978, but aggressive 14th seed Kenin saved two set points in each set to win 7-6 (8/6), 7-5.  
  
Kenin looked stunned at reaching her first Grand Slam final, at a tournament where she has often gone unnoticed while fellow Americans Serena Williams and Coco Gauff, 15, hogged the headlines. "I'm just speechless, I honestly can't believe this," she said. "I've dreamed about this moment since I was five years old."  
  
Kenin's win came on a day when temperatures hit 38 degrees Celsius, prompting play to be suspended on outside courts.  
  
In the second women's semi Muguruza, a two-time Grand Slam winner but out of the seedings after a form slump, scrapped her way to a 7-6 (10/8), 7-5 win over fourth seed Halep.  
  
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Lesson time for final-bound City

Lesson time for final-bound City  
Pep Guardiola called on Manchester City to learn the lessons of a 1-0 home defeat to Manchester United despite heading to a third successive League Cup final 3-2 on aggregate.  
  
The holders enjoyed the vast majority of chances but could not find a way past David de Gea and went behind to United's first attempt on goal 10 minutes before half-time when Nemanja Matic fired home.  
  
United's hopes of completing a miraculous comeback were extinguished when Matic was then sent off 15 minutes from time and City held on to face Aston Villa at Wembley on March 1.  
  
"We created chances to score a lot of goals," Guardiola said. "We need to learn to be more clinical."  
  
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Season on hold as virus knocks out Chinese football

Season on hold as virus knocks out Chinese football   
China yesterday suspended all domestic football and postponed indefinitely the top-flight Chinese Super League season in response to the deadly viral outbreak sweeping the country.   
  
The CSL season had been due to kick off on February 22, but was shelved along with "all types of football matches" in order to "carry out prevention and control of the pneumonia epidemic," the Chinese Football Association said.  
  
The announcement comes just a few hours after the World Indoor Athletics Championships, scheduled to take place in Nanjing in March, were postponed until 2021.  
  
Football is the latest sport to be hit by the virus, which by yesterday had seen more than 7,700 cases confirmed in China and at least 170 fatalities.   
  
Earlier, World Cup skiing races, the first test events for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, were cancelled because of the outbreak.   
  
The men's downhill and super-G races were scheduled for February 15 and February 16 in Yanqing, 70 kilometers northwest of Beijing.  
  
In Australia, the China's women's football team has been quarantined in a Brisbane hotel after arriving for an Olympic qualifying competition which had been originally due to take place in Wuhan.  
  
And the Asian Football Confederation ordered all four Chinese clubs' first three fixtures in the continent's Champions League's group stage in February and March to be played away from home.  
  
The AFC said the decision was a "precautionary measure to ensure the safety and well-being of all participating players and teams".  
  
The Chinese fedaration said any decision on postponing or moving international fixtures would be made later. China are due to host the Maldives in a World Cup qualifying match on March 26 and travel to Guam for another qualifier on March 31.  
  
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Immigration still a post-Brexit question

Immigration still a post-Brexit question  
Britain will cease to be a member of the European Union at midnight (7am tomorrow, Hong Kong time).  
  
It marks a massive victory for Prime Minister Boris Johnson after his resounding "do-or-die" pledge to leave the EU as he led the Conservative Party to a landslide election victory in December.  
  
But the midnight milestone will be celebrated in low profile. Indeed, the change may not be noticeable at all to the British public.  
  
That's because a transition period will immediately kick in and little will change before midnight on 31 December: only then will one of the most significant EU features - free movement of people - come to an end.  
  
In principle, EU and non-EU citizens wishing to live and work in Britain will be treated exactly the same after the transition. That is in contrast to the existing arrangement which allows EU nationals to live and work in Britain without having to go through the Home Office bureaucratic red tape faced by people from outside the EU.  
  
Immigration was a key issue dominating the debate prior to the 2016 referendum that sensationally voted in favor of Brexit, with a steady influx of citizens from eastern Europe raising the eyebrows of many British traditionalists.  
  
Johnson's government is expected to have readied an alternative form of immigration control by the time the gate fully closes on 1 January, 2021.  
  
The question is: will he make immigration more difficult, not just for EU citizens but also non-EU nationals, including Hongkongers?   
  
Almost every time an immigration law is changed, the admission criteria usually become harder.   
  
Johnson has not really revealed how he is going to control immigration, apart from referencing a points-based system resembling that of Australia.  
  
The Australian-style system is designed to admit immigrants with skills that the country needs - and applicants do not necessarily need to secure a job offer in advance.  
  
However, an independent commission tasked by the Conservative government refrained from endorsing that idea.   
  
Instead, its report unexpectedly expressed preference for the Austrian model whereby skilled immigrants are generally required to have first secured a job offer - with the exception of medical services where doctors, nurses and carers have always been in short supply.  
  
Although Johnson does not necessarily have to accept the commission report in full, it does again open up differing views on an issue that has always been at the heart of the Brexit argument and the British public.  
  
If the divisive subject of immigration influenced the course of the Brexit debate over the past years, it will likely determine political talks again during the year-long transition, after which British people may discover they will still have to accept immigration - albeit in a different form.

People in a panic do the very worst thing

People in a panic do the very worst thing  
Aieeyah! I couldn't be bothered to join the long queue to buy masks outside my local Mannings yesterday. I told my kids to wear their old Halloween masks instead. Much more fun.  
  
A doctor told me that masks are only helpful if you're in crowded spaces - and the only crowded spaces yesterday were crowds outside shops selling masks.   
  
O, the irony.  
  
Others agreed. Keeping your hands washed is more important than wearing masks, I heard from Dr John Nicholls of Hong Kong University.   
  
Another doctor told me why hands not mouths were the main source of infection: "We touch things and people all the time, but we don't kiss things and people all the time."   
  
Speak for yourself, madam!  
  
\* \* \*  
  
Around the corner at Marketplace, the expensive yuppie supermarket, managers didn't have to raise prices to sky-high levels to profit magnificently from the panic buying which emptied several shelves.   
  
Prices have been sky-high since the chain opened. "Marketplace managers have been waiting all their lives for this moment," one shopper said to me. "They must be so happy."  
  
\* \* \*  
  
O, the irony #2: You hear doctors on television say that the coronavirus can stay alive on objects for awhile. And then you look at the address on the box of masks to see where they were made (see picture). Ah yes, the delightful city of Wuhan.  
  
\* \* \*  
  
Hong Kong's China-haters yesterday: "How come Hong Kong leaders didn't immediately shut down all the borders with the mainland? We are outraged!"  
  
Also Hong Kong's China-haters yesterday: "How come everyone's panic-bought all the food out of the shops? We are outraged!"  
  
\* \* \*  
  
Actually, this city's loud and annoying anti-China brigade probably has no idea that most of Hong Kong's food, drink and everything else comes from the mainland.   
  
If the government did shut out all mainland products for awhile, it would be a nice "learning opportunity" for them.  
  
No food and drink for a couple of months: do them good.  
  
\* \* \*  
  
The people who wanted an instant total closure of this city's entry gates have no idea how many Hongkongers visit China. An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Hong Kong residents headed off to the mainland for the holidays.  
  
One reader said: "An immediate shutdown would have been like nailing your door closed while your children were out at school and a visiting electrician was in your house fixing your water heater."  
  
\* \* \*  
  
Since Monday, Customs officers have been swooping on hundreds of pharmacies in a crackdown on sales of masks with false trademarks.   
  
Why? People aren't going to care. "Oh the maker of my surgical mask is using someone else's trademark, I'd better throw it away and die of coronavirus instead."  
  
\* \* \*  
  
Due to concerns about the virus, the official Death Registry in Wan Chai will close tomorrow at 1 pm and remain shut all day on Sunday, the government said yesterday.  
  
In other words, if you're going to die, kindly wait until Monday. Or else.  
  
\* \* \*  
  
Teachers were amazed to see an official-looking press announcement from Hong Kong's Education Bureau saying that the school holidays would be extended further, to the end of February.  
  
It was a fake. Some kid somewhere deserves to be grounded for a week. And given an "A" in Design Technology for his Photoshop skills.  
   
  
Talk to me! Send ideas and comments via the Facebook pages of the author or The Standard

Three More countries hit by cases

Three More countries hit by cases   
Michael Shum and Mary Ann Benitez  
  
The Philippines, India and Finland saw their first cases of the Wuhan coronavirus yesterday, as three Japanese who were airlifted back to Tokyo from the Hubei provincial capital were also confirmed to have the virus.  
  
The three now join 15 other countries grappling with the SARS-like outbreak, along with China where the novel virus initially emerged from a seafood market in Wuhan last month. Total confirmed cases have topped 7,828, with the death toll standing at 170 as of yesterday.  
  
World Health Organization director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus is set to decide overnight with his emergency committee whether to declare the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern.  
  
Tedros, who met President Xi Jinping Tuesday night, said yesterday that he was "very encouraged and impressed by the president's detailed knowledge of the outbreak and his personal involvement in the response."  
  
But Tedros said the continued increase in cases and evidence of human-to-human transmission outside China "are both deeply concerning."   
  
"Although the numbers outside China are still relatively small, they hold the potential for a much larger outbreak," he said.  
  
The Philippines said a 38-year-old Chinese woman arrived in the country from Wuhan via Hong Kong last Tuesday and had been to Cebu and Dumaguete City. She is among a dozen foreign nationals being monitored.  
  
Health Secretary Francisco Duque said the woman was admitted to a hospital three days later on January 25 with a mild cough but is "currently asymptomatic." He recommends a temporary travel ban against visitors from Hubei and maybe also other parts of China depending on the WHO's assessment.  
  
Elsewhere, India's government said a student of Wuhan University who is living in the southern state of Kerala was their first confirmed case.  
  
The patient is stable and in isolation at a hospital, it added.  
  
In Finland, a Chinese from Wuhan was confirmed with the virus, its Institute for Health and Welfare said yesterday. The traveler remains in isolation and 15 others are being monitored by the authorities.  
  
Meanwhile, two of the three Japanese confirmed with the virus were asymptomatic, its health ministry said yesterday.   
  
The three were among the 206 Japanese who were evacuated from Wuhan on Wednesday. A second chartered flight carrying 210 Japanese arrived in Tokyo yesterday, where 13 felt unwell.   
  
Three Russian regions have closed their borders with China until next Friday, a local news agency said.   
  
Although the country has not had any confirmed cases, it runs direct flights to several Chinese cities daily.   
  
"We have taken special control when alarming signs appear, emergency medical teams will be sent to carry out a thorough examination," Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyanin wrote on his website.

Volunteers set for Hubei duty

Volunteers set for Hubei duty  
Angel Kwan  
  
More than 200 medical workers at a University of Hong Kong-linked hospital in Shenzhen have volunteered to help in Hubei.  
  
The Health Commission of Guangdong sent two medical teams to Hubei earlier as part of a nationwide help operation at ground zero of the new coronavirus.  
  
A microbiologist at the University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen Hospital volunteered to join a third team for Hubei.   
  
Then, on Tuesday, a hospital call for more volunteers saw 212 medical workers signed up by Wednesday night.  
  
The hospital is a public facility funded by the Shenzhen government and managed by HKU.  
  
Meanwhile, the central government will provide cash subsidies for medical staffers.  
  
Those in close contact with suspected and confirmed cases or who are working on causes will get 300 yuan (HK$335) a day, while people assisting with epidemic prevention work will get 200 yuan.  
  
In Macau, schools will maintain class suspensions until further notice, and mainland students in Macau have been advised to stay home.  
  
Meanwhile, schools are operating online with homework.   
  
Macau authorities have also started using a hotel, the Pousada Marina Infante, which is far from residential areas, to house tourists from Hubei starting after a youth hostel being used for the same purpose was filled.  
  
The gambling hub also has two new suspected cases yesterday, with one a hospital nurse.  
  
The 51-year-old nurse had contact with a confirmed case last Thursday, though she was wearing protective gear.  
  
Another suspected case is a Hubei resident, 36, who stayed in the hostel.  
  
Tibet also reported a first confirmed case yesterday.

Med cruise dream turns into nightmare for 6,000

Med cruise dream turns into nightmare for 6,000   
  
Agencies and Charlotte Luo  
  
More than 6,000 tourists were under lockdown aboard a cruise ship at an Italian port yesterday after two Chinese passengers were isolated over fears they could be carrying the coronavirus.  
  
Samples from the two were sent for testing after three doctors and a nurse boarded the Costa Crociere ship, Costa Smeralda, in Civitavecchia to tend to a woman running a fever during a Mediterranean cruise.  
  
It said a 54-year old woman from Macau "was placed in solitary confinement in the on-board hospital last night with her travel companion."   
  
The couple flew in to Milan from Hong Kong on January 25, before getting on the cruise ship, which is manned by a 1,000-strong crew, in northern Italy.  
  
The news came as several tour agencies in Hong Kong have canceled all tours to the mainland for next month.  
  
Hong Thai Travel scrapped all tours from February 1 to 29 and would fully refund customers or give them the option of switching to other tours.  
  
It will notify customers they can choose to change tours to other regions, keep the paid fees with the agency for up to six months, or receive a full refund.  
  
Another agency, WWPKG Holdings, will cancel all 40 package tours between February 1 and February 29, affecting 800 customers.  
  
Chief executive Yuen Chun-ning said people do not want to join tour groups and guides are refusing to lead mainland tours. He said 70 percent of customers for package tours before February 11 chose to let the agency keep the fees for later bookings.  
  
However, if customers wish to cancel the trip, they will still need to pay the handling fees, he said.  
  
China Travel Service said it has suspended mainland package tours until February 11.  
  
Assistant general manager Yeung Sai-hing said customers can let the agency keep tour monies for 180 days, with the option of receiving a HK$500 discount for a cruise, HK$300 discount for an overseas tour, or HK$50 to HK$100 off for future mainland tours.  
  
At least 3,340 tour groups to the mainland have been canceled as of Wednesday afternoon, involving more than 116,000 people, the Travel Industry Council said.  
  
The groups were scheduled to depart between January 24 and February 29.  
  
Immigration Department statistics showed West Kowloon station has seen an increase of nearly 7,000 arrivals compared to two days ago before it shut down midnight yesterday.  
  
Lo Wu saw an increase of 5,350 arrivals on Wednesday while Lok Ma Chau Spur Line and Shenzhen Bay crossings saw an increase of 2,650 people and 1,523, respectively.  
  
A total of 236,078 people arrived in Hong Kong through all the border crossings, up by 12,886 from Tuesday. A total of 124,412 people departed, down by 3,555.

Health officials steam  
over mask-reuse claim

Health officials steam  
over mask-reuse claim   
Charlotte Luo  
  
Health officials yesterday took pro-Beijing lawmaker Ann Chiang Lai-wan to task over her claim that one can reuse a face mask after putting it through steam.  
  
The Centre for Health Protection said in its Facebook page that people should "absolutely not reuse" a face mask after "disinfection."  
  
Featuring a graphic showing a mask in a pan of boiling water, the post said: "dispose of surgical mask after using, do not steam it and reuse."  
  
It said that used surgical masks are contaminated with pathogens and must be dumped in a covered bin.  
  
"The efficacy of face masks would be affected when they are wet. Don't easily believe online messages from unreliable sources," it wrote.  
  
Chiang, a member of Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, hit back on her Facebook page yesterday.  
  
"The Centre for Health Protection stated that masks can only be used once, which I agree is the best way, but I would like to point out that according to the documents, there are three layers to a general mask, the main one is the middle layer, which is used to filter viruses," she said.  
  
"The material of the middle layer of general masks is made of polypropylene fibers. The melting point of polypropylene fibers is as high as 167 degrees Celsius. The temperature for usage is between minus 30 degrees and 140 degrees Celsius. [They are] heat resistant and steam sterilizable," she said.  
  
She quoted National Health Commission expert Li Lanjuan as saying that the coronavirus can be killed at above 56 degrees, while top microbiologist Yuen Kwok-yung of the University of Hong Kong said the virus could easily die at 30 degrees.  
  
"The approach of using 100 degrees Celsius water to steam and kill the virus is not unworkable," she wrote.  
  
Pro-democracy lawmakers expressed shock yesterday after Chiang posted a one-minute video on Wednesday night demonstrating how to steam face masks so they can be reused.  
  
Democrat Roy Kwong Chun-yu said Chiang even told members of the Legislative Council's health services panel, which she chairs, that she was currently wearing a mask that she had steamed.  
  
Pierre Chan, the medical sector lawmaker, and a medical professional, said it is simply a "horrible" idea and appealed to people not to take up the suggestion.  
  
charlotte.luo@singtaonewscorp.com

Hang Seng hit   
again as the

Hang Seng hit   
again as the   
yuan tumbles  
Avery Chen and Reuters  
  
Hong Kong shares ended lower for a second straight session yesterday and the offshore yuan tumbled past seven yuan per dollar as the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus in the city rose to 10.  
  
The Hang Seng Index fell another 711.50 points, or 2.6 percent, to 26,449 points, but daily market turnover rose to HK$125.56 billion. The benchmark has fallen more than 1,500 points in two days.   
  
The China Enterprises Index lost 2.8 percent to 10,325 points. China's stock, currency, and bond markets have all been closed since January 23 for the Lunar New Year celebrations and are scheduled to reopen on February 3.  
  
All blue-chip stocks in Hong Kong fell yesterday. The top performer was Link REIT, which slid 0.88 percent to HK$79.3.  
  
Shares of smartphone equipment suppliers generally dropped as the Wuhan coronavirus caused phone makers such as Apple to close retail stores, reduce hours at others and restrict employee travel.   
  
AAC Technologies slumped 7.51 percent to HK$55.4, becoming the top loser among blue-chip stocks.  
  
Sunny Optical Technology went down 7.43 percent to HK$128.20 and Q Technology dropped by 11.92 percent to HK$11.08.  
  
In Hong Kong, an index tracking consumer goods and services companies dropped 3.3 percent. Cosmetics retailer Sa Sa International plunged six to HK$1.41.   
  
Macau casino operators in Macau slid, with Wynn Macau falling 5.21 percent to HK$16.36 and MGM China shedding 6.38 percent to HK$10.86.  
  
Pharmaceutical stocks with small capitalizations continued to outperform. Extrawell Pharmaceutical (0858) jumped 132.39 percent to HK$0.33. while Tianda Pharmaceuticals surged 49.04 percent to HK$0.31.  
  
Shares of China Health (8225) soared another 388.37 percent to HK$2.10 yesterday after resuming trading in the morning.  
  
The mainland biotech firm said its two drugs Lopinavir and Ritonavir oral suspension have been recommended by the Chinese health commission for treatment of Wuhan pneumonia. Trading of China Health was suspended after surging 280 percent on Wednesday.  
  
Meanwhile, the yuan in the offshore market, considered a barometer of risk sentiment toward Chinese assets when mainland and Hong Kong markets are shut, once tumbled to a one-month low below the psychological seven yuan per dollar level.   
  
The offshore yuan fell 0.34 percent to 6.9933 yuan per dollar last night.

Chief secretary urges Hubei visitors to leave

Chief secretary urges Hubei visitors to leave  
Sophie Hui  
  
Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung Kin-chung urged Hubei visitors in Hong Kong to leave as soon as possible.   
  
This came after government officers patrolled 110 hotels on Wednesday and found 15 tourists from the province at the epicenter of the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak, who were offered health advice.  
  
Asked whether the government will follow Macau in deporting Hubei visitors, Cheung said, adding that, for the time being, the government would only advise them to leave as soon as possible or they should isolate themselves.  
  
"They should wear a mask, not go to crowded places, and isolate themselves. This is very important," he said.  
  
"They have to contact the authorities if they feel unwell as we have the responsibility to ensure the safety of Hong Kong citizens," he added.  
  
Cheung said the government has informed 15 Hubei visitors to go back to their hotel and remain there.  
  
Meanwhile, deputy secretary for security Hinny Lam Shuk-yee said some 1,600 people were stopped from entering Hong Kong at the borders from Monday to Wednesday night, while 1,300 people had already left the city.  
  
At an emergency meeting of the Legislative Council's health services panel yesterday, Lam said: "We believe there are very few Hubei visitors in Hong Kong currently."  
  
"Our colleagues in the Immigration Department are also working with the hotel industry to see how many Hubei visitors are at the hotels," she added.   
  
Lam said the department has searched 110 hotels on Wednesday night and found 15 Hubei travelers. As those visitors did not have symptoms of the coronavirus, they were only given health advice by the Center for Health Protection and their contact details were recorded.  
  
She added that mainland visitors who arrived in Hong Kong in early December may have already left the city as their visas normally allow them to stay for seven days.  
  
"So they [the Hubei visitors] can ignore you completely, then what's the use?" said Roundtable lawmaker Michael Tien Puk-sun.  
  
Pro-democracy lawmaker Eddie Chu Hoi-dick questioned how the government can find all Hubei visitors in Hong Kong as there are more than 280 hotels and a few thousand licensed guesthouses.  
  
Meanwhile, local media reported that Empire hotels have refused admission to Hubei visitors. The hotels are also screening the temperature of visitors before they check-in. Employees must also have their temperatures taken before work.  
  
Hospital Authority chief executive Tony Ko Pat-sing said in his blog on Wednesday that if patients hide their medical history or risk factors, their cases will be handed to law enforcement agencies, to protect medical staff from unnecessary risk and avoid the chance of community infection.

Captive market in masks

Captive market in masks  
Cindy Wan  
  
Some 32 million face masks should soon be arriving in Hong Kong, including eight million within days, to ease the current cases of panic about a shortage.  
  
And prisoners are about to be put to work to increase mask production.  
  
Word about progress came as citizens queued overnight outside shops in hope of buying masks, but many were left disappointed due to limited stocks.  
  
Chief Secretary for Administration Matthew Cheung Kin-chung said officials are aware of the severe shortage of masks and were pushing suppliers worldwide.  
  
"Tens of millions of masks are arriving," he said. "There is no need to worry."  
  
Cheung was referring to about eight million masks about to arrive from suppliers in the mainland, and 24 million from 140 foreign suppliers should be in the SAR in the near future.  
  
Overseas branches of the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office are helping source masks, he added.  
  
"The government is very concerned about mask supply," Cheung said. "In the past, masks were mainly supplied from the mainland to medics. But because of the spread of the virus there is a worldwide shortage of masks."  
  
As for the supply for health workers, Cheung said public hospitals usually carry stocks for three months, but mask use has surged five to six times in two weeks.  
  
On the convict work, Cheung said a workshop in the Lo Wu Correctional Institution will work around the clock to boost productivity from 1.1 million masks a month to 1.8 million.   
  
That should mean about 70,000 masks turned out in a day - 20,000 more than the normal production level.   
  
The Lo Wu facility for female inmates is the only custody center with facilities to produce masks and protective gowns.   
  
The operation started following the outbreak of SARS in 2003 to supply protective equipment to the Government Logistics Department, which then distributes stock to workers in the Department of Health, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Fire Services Department among others.  
  
A spokeswoman for the Correctional Services Department said: "The final production figure of masks depends on how many inmates volunteer to work overnight."   
  
Another mask workshop will be established at the Lo Wu institution as soon as possible, she added.   
  
But authorities do not plan to restrict foreign visitors from buying masks in the SAR, Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development Edward Yau Tang-wah said.   
  
"Currently it is mostly Hongkongers purchasing masks," Yau said. "It would be difficult to restrict foreigners to buy masks -- and Hong Kong people are buying masks from abroad too. It would be better to improve the overall supply to meet demands."  
  
Secretary for Food and Health Sophia Chan Siu-chee said the government only has 10 million masks in hand.  
  
But "according to my understanding the first few batches of masks will arrive in Hong Kong to supply the market," Chan also said at a special meeting of the health services panel in the Legislative Council yesterday.  
  
Leung Chi-chiu, chairman of the Hong Kong Medical Association's advisory committee on communicable diseases, said 6,000 private clinics have reported they are running out of stock.   
  
He estimated those clinics need 20,000 boxes of masks for the coming two weeks, and he suggested the government sell some stock to them at cost.  
  
Some clinics have in fact extended their Lunar New Year holiday until the arrival of stocks.   
  
Civic Party lawmaker Tanya Chan said she is worried the actual supply arriving at Hong Kong will be less than Cheung was claiming.  
  
"I hope the stock is as much as he said," she said, "but the government should strive to provide a stable supply of masks in the long term as Gabriel Leung from the University of Hong Kong said the disease may linger until April and May."  
  
And once there was a stable supply, Chan added, officials should consider giving out free masks to people in need, particularly those with chronic diseases.  
  
Meanwhile, desperate citizens continued searching for masks.  
  
Pharmacy chain Watsons saw hundreds of people queuing early yesterday at outlets, with some having braved the overnight cold.  
  
But most customers left disappointed as each outlet only had around 20 boxes of masks.   
  
A housewife named Yuen said she was in a line at a Watsons outlet at 4am as she only had a few masks at home.   
  
Then there were online-generated rumors -- quickly denied -- that Home Affairs Department staff and police were distributing free masks to the public.  
  
Some people also reported ripoffs, saying supposed sellers disappeared after they had collected payment.  
  
cindymt.wan@singtaonewscorp.com

Doc falls ill after treating Wuhan pair in full protective gear

Doc falls ill after treating Wuhan pair in full protective gear  
Jane Cheung  
  
An accident and emergency doctor at Queen Mary Hospital is being tested for the Wuhan virus after falling ill despite wearing full protective gear while checking an elderly couple from the Hubei capital, later confirmed to have the virus.  
  
He is among 14 medical staff, including two other doctors from Prince of Wales Hospital in Sha Tin, who had fever and respiratory infection symptoms after taking care of confirmed patients or returning from the mainland.  
  
Test results for the Queen Mary doctor are pending while the rest of the 13 were cleared of the Wuhan virus, said the head of the communicable disease branch of the Centre for Health Protection, Chuang Shuk-kwan.  
  
Sources said the doctor already had symptoms before checking the two patients.   
  
He had a fever and cough yesterday and was sent to Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Jordan for isolation.  
  
He was said to have worn protective gear covering his whole body, N95 mask and a face shield when treating the Wuhan couple.  
  
The Wuhan husband and wife, 72 and 73, were confirmed to have caught the virus on Wednesday night after they were sent to the hospital the night before. Upon arrival in Hong Kong by Cathay Dragon flight KA853 on January 22, the couple stayed at W Hong Kong hotel on top of Kowloon MTR Station until Tuesday.  
  
"They wanted to switch to a nearby Ritz Carlton Hotel but could not get a room and finally went to the Four Seasons Hotel (in Central) but were sent to the hospital hours after checking in," Chuang said.  
  
She said her team was still trying to gather information about the couple's movements in the city but "had not obtained much detail so far as the patients were not very cooperative."  
  
Four workers at W hotel and one from the Four Seasons were sent to isolation camps as they had been in close contact with the couple, such as chatting with them or helping them clean their room.  
  
She said her team has also reached out to a driver who had driven the couple but refused to give more details.  
  
Sources said staffers at W found out the couple had a fever and reported to the Department of Health.  
  
Asked why the government did not send officers to the hotel to escort the couple for isolation, Chuang said the department provided health advice to the hotel but it "cannot force anyone to see a doctor." Only those reported by doctors will be considered suspected cases that need to be put under quarantine. The hotel said it has cordoned off the room the couple had stayed in and disinfected the floor. Swimming pool and sauna facilities have been closed and cleaners will sanitize public areas and kitchens more frequently.  
  
Starting from last Monday, the hotel has asked customers to fill in declaration forms to check whether they had been to Wuhan in the past two weeks. It has also checked the body temperatures of all customers.  
  
Hong Kong has seen 11 confirmed cases, all of whom are being treated in Princess Margaret Hospital's infectious disease center.   
  
A 56-year-old man is in serious condition, connected to oxygen in the intensive care unit.  
  
Sources last night said the SAR saw two more "preliminary positive" cases, including the daughter of the Wuhan couple, who came to Hong Kong to visit her.  
  
Responding to rumors about two other "preliminary positive" cases at Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital in Tai Po, Chuang said they tested negative in two separate tests. The two patients remain in isolation for further monitoring.   
  
Nationwide, the number of confirmed cases rose to 7,828, with an additional 38 deaths, bringing the death toll to 170.  
  
A total of 95 suspected cases were recorded in Hong Kong yesterday. So far, 139 suspected cases have been kept in isolation.  
  
Meanwhile, Hospital Authority chairman Henry Fan Hung-ling yesterday called for the government to further clamp down on the flow of people at Hong Kong-mainland borders to reduce chances of citizens catching the virus.  
  
"Although the government has earlier launched multiple policies to cut the exchange of people, they seem unable to ease worries in the community," he wrote in a blog.   
  
"Therefore, the government should considering deploying more effective measures to calm citizens down."  
  
His call came before the Employees Alliance meets tomorrow to discuss strike arrangements starting on Monday in a bid to pressure the government to suspend all Hong Kong-mainland border points.  
  
More than 4,600 members - 70 percent nurses, 10 percent allied health workers and less than 10 percent doctors - have signed a declaration to join the strike, the alliance said.