

Scientists are concerned about a [new virus that has infected tens of thousands of people](#) and killed thousands. The virus, which emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December, is a coronavirus and belongs to the same family as the pathogen that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS. It causes a respiratory illness called COVID-19, which can spread from person to person.

Here's the latest news on the outbreak.

## **2 March 21:00 GMT — Infections worldwide top 90,000**

The number of people worldwide who have been infected with the coronavirus [has passed 90,000](#). More than 3,000 people have died since the outbreak began in December. The vast majority of cases — more than 80,000 — have occurred in China, but around 60 other countries are now also dealing with outbreaks. Many nations are preparing for a global pandemic, as reports of cases caused by community spread — rather than importation from China — rise.

South Korea, Italy and Iran are fighting the largest outbreaks outside of China.

At a press briefing on 29 February, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that it had raised the global alert for COVID-19 to the highest possible level, short of calling it a pandemic. The virus has now spread to some 60 locations outside China, with new cases detected in Ireland, Monaco, Azerbaijan, Qatar and Ecuador.

Epidemiologists at the WHO have increased the global risk of spread and impact of the coronavirus outbreak from 'high' to 'very high'. The risk remains 'very high' in China.

The epidemiologists' global assessment was based on the continued increase in cases and affected locations, and the difficulties that some regions such as Iran and Italy are facing in containing the spread of the coronavirus.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the WHO, said at the briefing that most cases were linked and could still be traced to known contacts or clusters, with no evidence of the virus spreading freely in communities. "As long as that is the case, we still have a chance of containing this virus, if robust action is taken to detect cases early, isolate and care for patients and trace contacts," said Tedros.

The organization therefore resisted, once again, declaring the outbreak a pandemic. Mike Ryan, director of the WHO's emergencies programme, said that such a decision would mean that efforts to contain and slow down the spread of the virus have failed, which China, Singapore and other regions have proven otherwise.

The WHO is still holding out hope that the virus can be contained, but we have probably crossed that threshold, says Adam Kamradt-Scott, a global health security researcher at The University of Sydney.

Some countries have already begun to prepare their pandemic plans, which is an important precautionary measure, Nigel McMillan, an infectious disease researcher at Griffith University in Brisbane. Australia, for example, initiated its coronavirus emergency response on 27 February. The WHO is being overly cautious in not declaring a pandemic, says McMillan.