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LDS Church Won't Send Missionaries to Hong Kong

By Greg Lavine
The Salt Lake Tribune

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As a mysterious respiratory disease continues to spread through Asia, the LDS Church announced Friday it will temporarily stop sending missionaries to Hong Kong.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued a written statement indicating the Asia Area Presidency and Area Medical Advisor in Hong Kong are meeting each day to receive updates on the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis. Missionaries are being asked to be careful about personal hygiene.

"The safety and well-being of missionaries is of highest priority and is being monitored carefully, particularly in those areas where incidents of SARS have been reported," according to the statement.

Church officials have not issued new policies for missionaries in Cambodia, Singapore and Taiwan, other areas affected by SARS. The Church has one mission each in Cambodia, Singapore and Hong Kong as well as three in Taiwan. Typically, a mission supports between 100 and 150 missionaries.

The World Health Organization reported 2,353 SARS cases and 84 deaths in 16 countries as of Friday. For the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 115 suspected SARS cases in 29 states, including four in Utah.

Most of the U.S. patients had visited Asian nations affected by SARS. A pair of health care workers and four people who had close contact with _____ patients were also infected.

Advertisement _____ CDC officials indicated Friday that there is mounting evidence that a previously unknown member of the coronavirus family is the culprit behind the deadly disease. Some types of coronavirus are known to cause the common cold.

"This really represents a wake-up call for the United States and other countries around the world," said James Hughes, director of the CDC's National Center for Infectious Diseases, during a media teleconference.

SARS may be an example of future emerging diseases that can rapidly spread far beyond their countries of origin, Hughes said.

Martin Cetron, deputy director of the CDC's quarantine division, said the speed and volume of international travel makes it a "daunting task" to catch all potentially sick passengers who are flying to the United States.

Investigators suspect that the disease first appeared in China's Guangdong Province in November. The latest outbreak, beginning several weeks ago, may have been triggered when someone traveled from the Guangdong Province to a Hong Kong hotel, where guests were infected before traveling

to other countries.

Most people who contract SARS eventually recover with supportive hospital care. Symptoms of the disease include fever and respiratory problems.

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Tribune reporter Peggy Fletcher Stack contributed to this report.



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