

China denies cover-up of new disease

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BEIJING — Faced with mounting criticism of China's sluggish response to a deadly new respiratory virus, a government spokesman on Tuesday denied a cover-up and lashed out at critics.

"We have nothing to hide," Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jiancho said at a press conference where he was peppered with questions about the epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, which began in southern China in November and has spread to more than a dozen countries, including the United States.

"We have made tremendous efforts to control the disease," Liu said.

Liu's comments came a day after the Asian Wall Street Journal published an editorial calling for other countries to cut all travel links to China until it more aggressively combats the epidemic, which has severely sickened 1,804 people worldwide, killing 62.

"Given Beijing's refusal to take even elementary public health measures, a difficult decision must be made," the editorial said. "The most effective way to halt the spread of the disease would be for other countries to suspend all travel links with China until Beijing has implemented a public health campaign."

It's unlikely that countries will cut off travel to China. But several countries, including the United States, have issued warnings about travel to China and other Asian destinations hard hit by the epidemic.

On Tuesday, an American Airlines flight from Tokyo was quarantined at San Jose, California's Mineta airport after five people complained of SARS-like symptoms.

Japan has no confirmed SARS cases.

Liu, the Chinese government spokesman, said travel warnings were unnecessary. He said foreign tourists and business travelers

were "safe in China" because "the disease is well under control."

As Liu defended China's response to the new disease, the first documented cases of which appeared in China's southern Guangdong Province, a team of World Health Organization experts that had been dispatched to Beijing twiddled their thumbs awaiting crucial data and clearances from the Chinese government.

"I can't explain the slowness right now for more up-to-date surveillance numbers," team-member Dr. Robert Breiman, an infectious disease specialist, said in an interview.

Breiman and four other WHO experts arrived in Beijing more than a week ago.

Yet he said Tuesday evening that Chinese officials had still not provided them any data on cases that have occurred in Guangdong during the past month.

Equally frustrating to Breiman and his colleagues, Chinese officials still had not approved an ur-

gent request made Friday to allow team members to travel to Guangdong to conduct what they describe as essential on-site research into the origin and transmission of the virus.

Experts believe the virus belongs to the coronavirus family, which typically attacks animals but not humans. But much more must be known about the new strain, they say, before it can be effectively contained.

China's official silence prevailed until last Wednesday, when the government disclosed that there had been nearly 800 cases in Guangdong, including 31 deaths, as of "late February." The government also disclosed 10 cases, including three deaths, in Beijing.

Since the arrival of the WHO team in Beijing early last week, the number of SARS cases in Hong Kong, a so-called special administrative region of China, has exploded to more than 600, causing 15 deaths and near panic.

All Hong Kong schools have

closed, and more than 2,000 people are in quarantine. Tourists have fled, flights have been canceled and hotel occupancies have plunged — raising fears of dire economic consequences.


Many suspect that China hoped to avoid such economic consequences by imposing a virtual news blackout on the epidemic and withholding data from the global coalition of health groups combating the outbreak.

No data on the epidemic in China was released until Feb. 10, when Guangdong officials disclosed 305 cases of SARS, including five deaths.

On Friday, the WHO team called a press conference to announce that their negotiations had produced a breakthrough and that Chinese officials had agreed to provide timely data on all cases in China.

Late Tuesday, the team was still waiting.

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continued from page 4

"Do you doubt that it's an issue?" asked Justice Stevens.

Kolbo said he could not comment because the matter had not been an issue in the actual Michigan case.

"Are you serious, that you think we can't take that seriously (in this case)?" asked Justice David Souter.

"We have no problem if they cast a wider net for recruiting or for outreach," said Kilbo, "as long as they apply an equal standard at the point of competition."

Of particular concern to several justices was the role of "critical mass" in the university's process. Mahoney described critical mass as a percentage of minorities that is high enough to allow them comfort among themselves.

Several, including Justices Stephen Breyer and Scalia, struggled with the term "critical mass." Both asked Mahoney and Payton what percentage of underrepresented minorities would fit that definition. Neither would say.

Both said the university is most comfortable with a minority student population ranging from 8 percent to 12 percent. Justice Scalia said the figure suggests a 10 percent threshold.

"You use that term 'critical mass' and you're in quota land," Justice Scalia said.

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