

90% of people in China province infected with Covid

January 9, 2023

The Daily Morning Voice Online Desk: Almost 90 per cent of people in China's third most populous province have now been infected with Covid-19, a top local official has said, as the country battles an unprecedented surge in cases. Kan Quancheng, director of the health commission for central Henan province, told a press conference that "as of January 6, 2023, the province's Covid infection rate is 89 per cent". With a population of 99.4 million, the figures suggest about 88.5 million people in Henan may now have been infected. Visits to fever clinics peaked on 19 December, Kan said, "after which it showed a continuous downward trend".

The opening of China's borders on Sunday was one of the last steps in the dismantling of the country's zero-Covid regime, which began last month after historic protests and has led to a huge wave of infections. Covid cases are expected to soar further as the country celebrates lunar new year later this month, with millions set to travel from big cities to visit vulnerable older relatives in the countryside. In the first wave of pre-holiday travel, official data showed 34.7 million people travelled domestically on Saturday – up by more than a third compared with last year, according to state media.

While Beijing's move to drop quarantine requirements is expected to boost outbound travel, many nations are demanding negative tests from visitors from China, seeking to contain an outbreak that is overwhelming many of China's hospitals and crematoriums. Officially, China reported just 5,272 Covid-related deaths as of 8 January, one of the lowest rates of death from the infection in the world. But the World Health Organization has said China is under-reporting the scale of the outbreak and international health experts estimate more than 1 million people in the country could die from the disease this year.

China's top health officials and state media have repeatedly said Covid infections are peaking across the country and they are playing down the threat now posed by the disease. "Life is moving forward again!", the official newspaper of the Communist party, the People's Daily, wrote in an editorial on Sunday praising the government's virus policies, which it said had moved from "preventing infection" to "preventing severe disease". "Today, the virus is weak, we are stronger." China's state Xinhua news agency said the country had entered a "new phase" in its Covid response. Asian shares lifted to a five-month high on Monday as investors bet that China's reopening would help revive the \$17tn economy and bolster the outlook for global growth. "It's a huge relief just to be able to go back to normal ... just come back to China, get off the plane, get myself a taxi and just go home," Michael Harrold, 61, a copy editor in Beijing, told Reuters at Beijing Capital International Airport on Sunday after he arrived on a flight from Warsaw.

Harrold said he had been anticipating having to quarantine and do several rounds of testing on his return when he left for Europe for a Christmas break in early December. State broadcaster CCTV reported on Sunday that direct flights from South Korea to China were close to sold out. However, a spike in demand will be hampered by the limited number of flights to and from China, which are currently at a small fraction of pre-Covid levels. Korean Air said earlier this month that it was halting a plan to increase flights to China due to Seoul's cautious stance towards Chinese travellers. South Korea, like many other countries, now requires travellers from China, Macau and Hong Kong to provide negative Covid test results before departure.

Flight Master data showed that on Sunday, China had a total of 245 international flights, combining inbound and outbound, compared with 2,546 flights on the same day in 2019, representing a fall of 91 per cent. China's domestic tourism revenue in 2023 is expected to recover to 70 to 75 per cent of pre-Covid levels, but the number of inbound and outbound trips is forecast to hit just 30 to 40 per cent of pre-Covid levels this year, China News reported on Sunday.