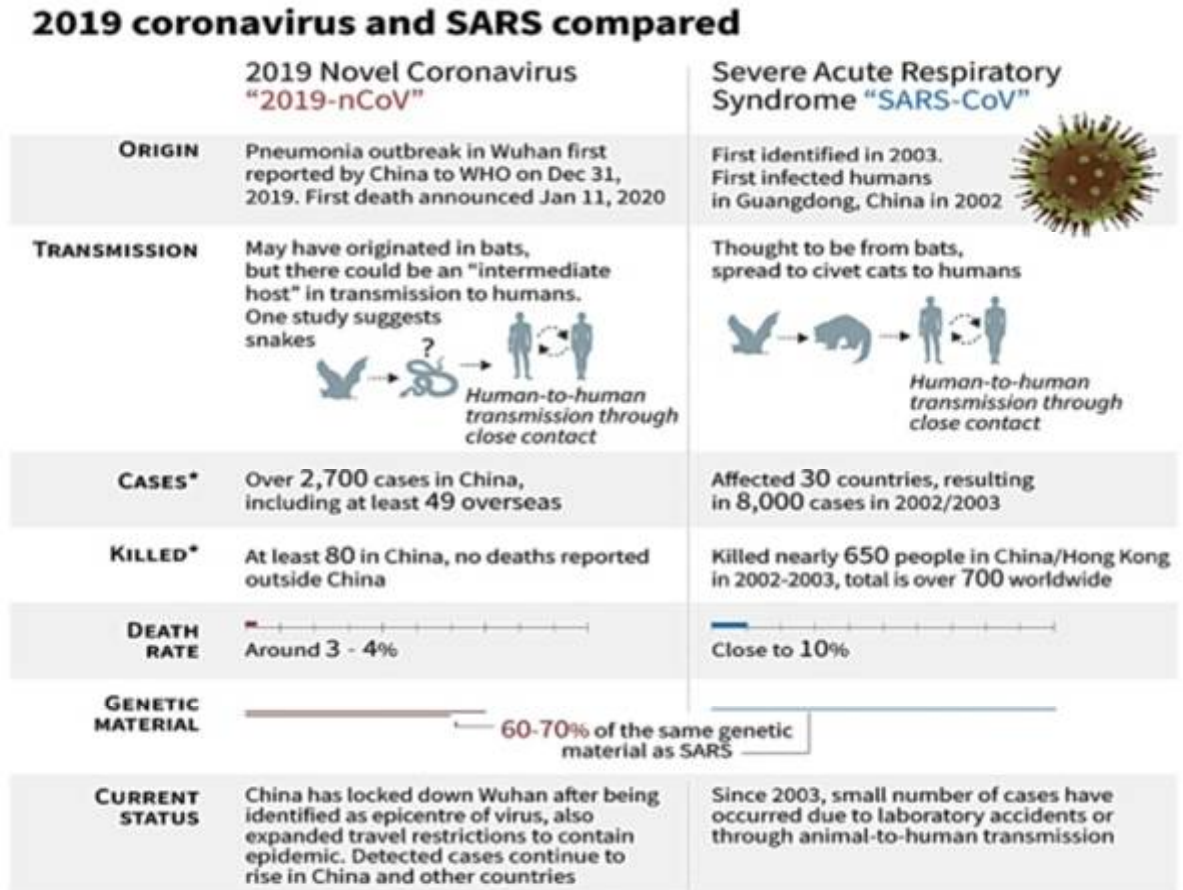


## Holiday extended, businesses shut as virus toll rises to 81 in China



Sources: WHO/CDC/Inserm/Journal of Medical Virology

\*Cases and deaths as of Jan 27, 2020, 0200 GMT © AFP

SHANGHAI: The death toll from a coronavirus outbreak in China rose to 81 on Monday, as the government extended the Lunar New Year holiday and more big businesses shut down or told staff to work from home in an effort to curb the spread.

Premier Li Keqiang visited the city of Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak, as the central government stepped up its response while city authorities faced growing accusations from the public of mismanagement and a failure to respond to the outbreak in time.

Asian shares tumbled, with Japan's Nikkei average sliding 2.0 percent, its biggest one-day fall in five months, as investors grew anxious. Demand spiked for safe-haven assets such as the Japanese yen and Treasury notes.

The total number of confirmed cases in China rose about 30pc from the previous day, to 2,744, with about half in the central province of Hubei, the capital of which is Wuhan. But some experts suspect the number of infected people is much higher.

As worry grew around the world, Chinese-ruled Hong Kong, which has had eight confirmed cases, ban-ned entry to people who had visited Hubei in the past 14 days. The ban did not cover Hong Kong residents.

People from Hubei have come under scrutiny within mainland China as well, with many people facing suspicion from officials about their recent travels.

“Hubei people are getting discriminated against,” a Wuhan resident complained on the Weibo social media platform.

The number of deaths from the virus in Hubei climbed to 76 from 56, health officials said, with five deaths elsewhere in China.

While a small number of cases linked to people who travelled from Wuhan have been confirmed in more than 10 countries, including Thailand, France, Japan and the United States, no deaths have been reported elsewhere.

Li is the most senior leader to visit Wuhan since the outbreak began. Clad in a blue protective suit and mask, he inspected efforts to contain the epidemic was shown on state television leading medical workers in chants of “Wuhan jiayou!” — an exhortation that translates literally as “add oil!”.

On China’s heavily censored social media, where dissent is typically suppressed, local officials have borne the brunt of mounting public anger.

Wuhan Mayor Zhou Xianwang told state broadcaster CCTV the city’s management of the crisis was “not good enough” — rare self-criticism for a Chinese official - and said he was willing to resign. The city of 11 million people is in virtual lockdown and much of Hubei province, home to nearly 60 million people, is under some kind of travel curb.

The government is extending the week-long Lunar New Year holiday by three days to Feb 2, in a bid to slow the spread of the virus. The Lunar New Year is usually a time for travel by millions, but many have had to cancel plans.

Investors are worried about the impact on travel, tourism and broader economic activity.

During the 2002-2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), a coronavirus that originated in China and killed nearly 800 people globally, air passenger demand in Asia plunged 45pc. The travel industry is more reliant on Chinese travellers now than it was then.

The newly identified coronavirus is believed to have originated late last year in a Wuhan market illegally selling wildlife.

Much is not known about it, including how easily it spreads and just how deadly it is.

National Health Commission Minister Ma Xiaowei said on Sunday the incubation period could range from one to 14 days, and the virus was infectious during incubation, unlike SARS.