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# China's Covid-19 Infections Hit Peak in Populous Regions, Officials Say

Henan province reports that a majority of its 100 million people have had the virus



Patients received infusion therapy last week in Hangzhou, where the prevention of severe cases has become a priority.

PHOTO: CFOTO/ZUMA PRESS

By *Wenxin Fan* [Follow](#)

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**HONG KONG**—Some of China's most populous provinces have passed the peak in the current wave of Covid-19 infections sweeping across the country, officials said Monday.

In central China's Henan province, 89% of the 100 million residents had already been infected by the Omicron variants by Friday, said Kan Quancheng, director of the provincial health commission.

Other regions in China sent similar updates, illustrating how fast the virus was spreading since Beijing in early December lifted many restrictions aimed at containing infections. The abrupt shift ended a gradual approach to ease controls, a tactic that many observers said was clouded by conflicting messages from the top leadership.

On Monday, Guangdong and Jiangsu, two provinces with a combined population of over 200 million, and the capital city Beijing all said infections had slowed. Zhejiang, an affluent

province in eastern China, said it was focusing on preventing severe cases from piling up now that it had passed the peak of infections.

Over the weekend, China's National Health Commission said infections in several major cities were either peaking or had peaked. The health agency's Jiao Yahui told flagship state broadcaster China Central Television that there were signs emergency-room visits were declining nationwide, though intensive-care units were still under stress.

Those updates sought to follow the message sent by Communist Party leadership last month in the Central Economic Work Conference attended by President Xi Jinping. The economic conference, which pledged to focus on growth in 2023, directed local officials to pivot away from preventing Covid infections and toward ensuring a smooth transition that would give priority to the treatment of severe cases and the elderly.



The Communist Party's leadership has directed local officials to emphasize the treatment of severe cases and the elderly.

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

That message was echoed in the wording of Monday's statements by local governments. In Henan, the number of outpatients at its fever clinics reached its highest point on Dec. 19, one of the factors that the health authorities used to conclude that the wave had "smoothly peaked" and the province had made an orderly transition to focus on saving lives.

Henan's announcement prompted some residents to ask what the number of "deaths with Covid" was, as this hadn't been mentioned in the release. It couldn't be determined how many Covid-related deaths occurred in China during this wave, as the country's classification excludes deaths involving causes other than pneumonia or respiratory failure linked directly

to the coronavirus, an unusually narrow definition by global standards. The World Health Organization has been pressuring China to share more reliable data, saying it was undercounting Covid deaths.

With 82% of its ICU beds occupied, Henan said the rise in cases hadn't caused its hospitals to collapse, a big concern about China's tactics, in contrast to the approaches of other countries to flatten the curve of infections by slowing them down.

Within the past few weeks, the province had increased the number of its ICU beds by 80% to almost 22,000, it said. It also trained and moved 7,000 medical workers to respiratory wards from other parts of the health system. Henan also had one of the highest vaccination rates for its elderly population, it said.

China hasn't revealed its national infection rate so far. Earlier notes of an NHC meeting cited nearly 250 million infections between Dec. 1 and Dec. 20.

On Monday, a lengthy article in the state Xinhua News Agency picked some publicized health data to illustrate the challenges China had faced at the time of the policy adjustment in early December. The Sunday immediately after, the number of outpatients in Beijing seeking treatment for fever jumped 16 times from a week earlier, one of the numbers showed.

The article also doubled down on the affirmation of China's Covid policy, praising it for winning time and space to allow a smooth transition by adopting a "stable strategy" together with "flexible measures."

The article also hinted that China collected series of data, including ones on medical resources, rural infections and elderly homes, and used them to fix shortcomings in its health defenses during this wave.

As Lunar New Year approaches, China's vast rural area is facing a severe test as huge numbers of people crisscross the country to visit family, it said.

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