



## BEIJING OUTBREAK: OPPORTUNITY, ASSURANCE AND UNCERTAINTY

BY XINTAO LU

*Xintao Lu Xintao Lu, MA (University of Hawaii Asian Studies; [xl4@hawaii.edu](mailto:xl4@hawaii.edu)) is a research intern at Pacific Forum.*

### *Introduction*

China managed 56 days without a locally acquired coronavirus case before a new case was discovered in Beijing's Xinfadi Market on June 11. It spread to a total of [137 locals](#) (as of June 17). Cases in other Chinese provinces began sporadically appearing in conjunction with this ongoing Beijing outbreak, with 3 in Liaoning, 7 in Hebei, 6 in Sichuan, 21 in Guangdong, and 1 in Inner Mongolia. Since the outbreak, authorities have moved swiftly to [raise the Chinese capital's emergency level](#) to near peak status: non-essential travel entering and leaving Beijing has been halted; sporting events have been suspended; every Beijing school has returned to online learning; residential compounds have reinstated strict screening processes with an emphasis on the protection of vulnerable groups; strict capacity restrictions are once again being enforced at restaurants, canteens, and marketplaces; and extensive sanitation procedures have been carried out throughout the city. The underlying concern most people have regarding this ongoing Beijing outbreak is that it will be a repeat of the Wuhan outbreak, or worse, an outbreak far more severe than Wuhan.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the outbreak has presented Beijing with the opportunity to address some previously neglected or unanswered questions regarding China's public health infrastructure, [underregulated wet markets](#), the validity of the Chinese model, and even China's reliability as a responsible global citizen. This article will examine and analyze the performance of Beijing authorities during this outbreak to gauge whether the aforementioned questions will receive satisfactory answers in the aftermath of this Beijing outbreak.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of this concern is legitimized by the fact that Xinfadi is one of the biggest wholesale markets in all of Northern China.

### *Opportunity to address criticism and long neglected issues*

The people of Beijing were forced back into lockdown just as they were getting acquainted with their post-quarantine lives. Tension, confusion, and uncertainty are high as a result. However, given the lack of effective medical countermeasures, COVID resurgences were always probable. We can expect that some corners will be cut during the reopening process as industries, businesses, and individuals frantically seek ways to compensate for the tremendous financial losses they suffered or have yet to suffer as a result of the COVID outbreak. So, while months of practice and policy sharing have resulted in widespread improvements to COVID-19 response measures across the globe, there is still clearly room for improvement. The ongoing Beijing outbreak can shed light on the areas that most desperately require the governments' attention. If governments are unable to contain outbreaks despite their best efforts, it may be time to reconsider their current approach and measures. Additionally, prolonging the lockdown may encourage policy and business innovation. Still, authorities should be mindful of the repercussions certain innovations, such as the "[Street Vendor Revival Initiative](#)," could have on China's overall pandemic response efforts and national image.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, given the amount of criticism the Chinese government received throughout the original COVID-19 outbreak, the current Beijing outbreak could serve as a timely test for China's reformed public health infrastructure and its capacity for dealing with future COVID outbreaks, and perhaps even dispel international concerns regarding the validity of the "Chinese model" through reformed action.

The Beijing outbreak may also constructively raise the issue of wet market management in China. Wet markets are often poorly managed and remain highly unsanitary and claustrophobic environments. Nevertheless, wet markets are deeply embedded within Chinese culture and livelihood and are likely here to stay. But stricter health and sanitation regulation is possible. In fact, the groundwork for this type of change was laid in the form of wet market modernization/revamping projects that first appeared a decade ago. The threat of a second, larger outbreak combined with global and domestic criticism concerning the regulation of wet markets may at long

<sup>2</sup> The issue with these street vendors is that they are difficult to regulate and pose serious challenges to disease prevention and control, as they often cause public congregations, which is especially concerning given the current situation.

last breathe much-needed life into the modernization projects.

The Chinese Communist Party's "pandemic diplomacy" has not been well received by much of the global community. To the U.S. and some of its allies, the Chinese government appeared more concerned about countering foreign criticism and preserving its own image than about being a responsible global citizen amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Many [nations questioned China](#) for its lack of transparency and perceived under-reporting of infection numbers, in addition to criticizing the country's early COVID-19 response measures. They also balked at the economic coercion utilized against nations who imposed travel bans on China and the [mutual admiration](#) China engaged in with Russia regarding their respective COVID-19 policy responses. The result of this pandemic diplomacy was that China that grew closer to its allies but lost ground with states who held wavering or oppositional attitudes toward the CCP and the "Chinese model" of governance. China's response to the current Beijing outbreak and future ones could dispel international concerns about China's administrative competency, transparency and overall reliability as a global partner. In other words, a display of administrative efficiency and the proper management of a crisis situation may be just what the CCP needs to successfully dispel oppositional voices against the "Chinese model" emboldened by this pandemic.

China could even take advantage of this Beijing outbreak to establish itself as a global leader in post-quarantine best practices. Bleak though it may be, continued COVID resurgences may become a regular occurrence as countries loosen their quarantine measures. For instance, 657 out of a total 983 people [tested positive](#) for COVID-19 at a Tönnies slaughterhouse in northwestern Germany on June 17 after resuming operations. And the U.S. is also experiencing [an upsurge of COVID-19 cases in 26 of 50 states](#), with Florida, Texas and Arizona emerging as the country's latest epicenters. The risk of infection and exposure will increase exponentially as countries move further into their respective reopening processes. Depending on the results of China's response to its current Beijing outbreak, it has the potential to distinguish itself as a model for other countries around the globe.

Ultimately, the ripple effects of the Beijing outbreak will be heavily dependent upon the effectiveness of China's ability to contain, manage, and minimize its damage.

#### *Official responses*

The first infected individual was discovered on Thursday, June 11. Two new cases were reported on June 12 and the issue was immediately brought to the attention of Fengtai District top officials, the district to which Xinfadi Market<sup>3</sup> belongs. Beijing Party Chief Cai Qi and Beijing Major Chen Jining urged the Fengtai officials to dispatch relevant personnel to Xinfadi to contain and minimize damage. On June 13, two days after the initial discovery, Xinfadi Market and five other wholesale food markets were shut down, disinfection teams were dispatched to each location, and nucleic acid testing was conducted on all relevant persons.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, emergency food vendor stalls were set up to compensate for the sudden loss of food providers.

Despite quickly locating the source of the outbreak, which turned out to be a cutting board used to cut salmon, authorities have yet to determine whether the virus originated from the first infected individual, the salmon, or the person(s) who used the cutting board.

The lack of conclusive evidence about the real source of the outbreak has resulted in the implementation of heavy restrictions, extensive testing procedures, and comprehensive sanitation operations. As of June 17, all [non-essential travel](#) to and from Beijing is heavily discouraged, and those who must travel must obtain clearance via negative testing results. This has left companies scrambling to reimburse hundreds of thousands of airplane, bus, and train tickets, which will only further damage the struggling travel industry. Furthermore, salmon has been removed from the menu and shelves of local restaurants and supermarkets as a precautionary measure. All sporting events have been cancelled, group dining has been banned, and many tourism sites have been temporary closed. [All schools](#), from kindergarten to vocational high, have ceased all onsite activities and returned to online learning. Additionally, [extensive screening procedures have been reinstated](#) at every local residential compound, with special emphasis on the screening and testing of high-risk areas<sup>5</sup> and individuals.

---

<sup>3</sup> Xinfadi is where the first infected individual supposedly contracted COVID or was discovered with COVID.

<sup>4</sup> Anyone who could have contracted the disease, e.g., market employees, nearby residents, and people who shopped at Xinfadi Market.

<sup>5</sup> Public locations closest to the source of this Beijing outbreak, e.g., nearby marketplaces, restaurants, hotels and residential compounds.

Authorities have also allowed for the [opening of six temporary trading venues](#) to compensate for the emergency shut down of a major food supplier, which, prior to the shutdown, was responsible for fulfilling 90 percent of the city's fruits and vegetable demands. On June 15, the temporary trading venues sold just over 1,800 tons of vegetables, which was [1.8 times the amount they had sold the day before](#). Demands at trading venues are expected to increase, along with the market volume of vegetables in other major wholesale markets across Beijing.

While experts had initially deemed it [unnecessary to screen and test every Beijing citizen](#)<sup>6</sup> because such a drastic measure was considered to be inefficient both financially and in terms of its impact on disease prevention and control, official actions since then seem to suggest that authorities may be willing to drastically increase testing capacities. As of June 20, authorities have [mobilized all 124 of the city's nucleic acid testing institutes](#), each capable of processing up to 230,000 samples per day, and increased Beijing's daily testing capacity to a total of 1 million. Additionally, the city [opened an inflatable mobile COVID-19 virus testing lab](#) on June 22. The lab is capable of processing more than 10,000 samples per day and will contribute to the city's overall testing capacity. As of June 22, Beijing had tested close to 2.3 million local citizens, or about 10 percent of its total population. These developments are reflective of China's improved COVID-19 response policies and healthcare infrastructure and the authorities' willingness to quickly adapt and mobilize all available resources.

### *Comparison to the Wuhan Outbreak*

The Chinese government's handling of the first outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan can only be described as reactive and incompetent. Chinese authorities not only initially denied and downplayed the severity of the disease, which resulted in an extremely delayed lockdown of the source city, but moreover, the doctor who first discovered the disease was accused of spreading false rumors and inciting public panic, and detained by the local police force.<sup>7</sup> That response stands in stark contrast to the authority's response to this ongoing Beijing outbreak.

---

<sup>6</sup> Chinese expert Wuzun You stated during an interview with CCTV that China's current approach to the Beijing situation and testing is 应检必检, which roughly translates to "so long as it should be done then it will be done," "it" here referring to COVID-19 tests.

<sup>7</sup> The discovery of a fast-spreading and deadly disease amid one of China's busiest domestic travel seasons was less than ideal timing. The sheer size of China's total population would

The actions taken by Beijing authorities following the discovery of an infected individual were immediate, comprehensive, thoughtful, and cautious. Their responses demonstrate that perhaps China, or at least Beijing's local officials, have learned from [criticism of China's initial blunders](#).

In addition to superior administrative competency, government officials' response to the Beijing outbreak is also substantially more transparent than during the initial COVID-19 outbreak. [Critics have questioned](#) the truthfulness of China's official COVID-19 case numbers, an accusation [denied](#) by Chinese officials. Such criticism stems from China's history of data manipulation, particularly of the country's quarterly GDP figures. Additionally, the poorly executed coverup that resulted in the arrest of Dr. Li Wenliang (who ultimately passed away) during the early months of the pandemic was for many another cause for concern.<sup>8</sup> And last but not least, China also garnered much-deserved suspicion for questionable testing methods that raised the bar on the qualification of an active COVID-19 case, resulting in artificially deflated case totals during the early months of the first outbreak. Improved transparency in the handling of the Beijing outbreak may indicate responsiveness to these criticisms. The Beijing Municipal Health Commission has set up a webpage called the [Beijing COVID-19 Control & Prevention Information Hub](#), which is updated daily.<sup>9</sup> The page provides data on the total number of new cases as well as the gender, age, origin, profession, general location of residence,<sup>10</sup> and occupation of each patient. Additionally, summaries of the patients' daily schedules from between 20 days to 1 day prior to their official diagnosis is also available. Furthermore, the authorities have made diagnostic procedures public to counteract suspicion about the calculation of case totals. Although the steady rise in total cases caused by more truthful metrics may unsettle the local community, this level of transparency should put to rest some of the criticism targeting China's COVID testing methodologies.

Ultimately, China's responses so far to the Beijing outbreak have been nothing profound; improved policies and procedures were implemented and carried out before the Beijing outbreak, so in a sense

have made it virtually impossible for authorities to restore order, at least through normal means, once they lost control of the situation due to public panic. Regardless, there aspects of China's initial response to the situation, as this article has and will address, that could have been better executed.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Li's death resulted in his international and domestic martyrdom.

<sup>9</sup> Author's unofficial English translation.

<sup>10</sup> Name of residential district and compound.

the responses we are seeing now are only part of a larger trend. Regardless, the plethora of effective countermeasures is indicative of a competent and efficient public health infrastructure. While government responses to the Beijing outbreak were not particularly innovative, they nevertheless present a welcome change in response to legitimate criticism China received for its early COVID-19 responses.

### *What's next for wet markets?*

Wet markets<sup>11</sup> are not likely to be completely eliminated. Wet markets are as Chinese as pot stickers, which is to say very Chinese. A variety of [consumer demands](#) factors into this cultural attachment, such as the general preference for fresh products from traditional retail formats, e.g. wet markets, due to a perceived or real superiority in freshness, the markets' accessibility and convenience, and the ability to bargain. Nonetheless, authorities could achieve a compromise by "revamping," rather than completely removing, existing wet markets. In fact, the groundwork for this type of change has been laid by the "[Wet Market Transforming into Food Supermarket](#)" (WMTFS)<sup>12</sup> project in 2002. Many wet markets in their current states are unsanitary, socially irresponsible, and an overall cultural embarrassment. Operating under such hazardous conditions has proven consequences, and wet market revamping projects should garner sizable public support as a result. Furthermore, wet market revamping projects could inject some much-needed stimulus into the stagnating Chinese economy. Given their considerable number<sup>13</sup> and consumer dependence,<sup>14</sup> a nationwide wet market revamping project would generate many employment opportunities through the creation of various construction and sanitation staffing positions. Overall, a comprehensive approach that accounts for consumer preferences for traditional retail formats and cultural perceptions towards wildlife trade and consumption while also incorporating scientific evidences, would produce the most appropriate policies and regulations that Chinese wet markets so desperately need right now.

There are a few specific directions or ideas that wet markets could adopt or improve upon in the future. Many wet markets have already begun taking steps to

present themselves as modern and sanitized over the past five to six years. Ten years ago, food vendors would have employed simple bamboo fans or rolls of newspaper to swat at flies and mosquitos and use their bare hands to pluck chicken feathers or slaughter fish. Now, many stalls have implemented technology such as bug lamps, electronic fans and glass panels. Some even use machinery to pluck chickens, which, from a health and safety standpoint, is a major improvement upon the traditional method. Larger wet markets have also begun implementing features such as sewer and gutter systems, air circulation systems, and strategically placed vendor stalls.<sup>15</sup> While these changes may simply be a matter of convenience or necessity for the vendors, they nevertheless suggest a willingness to adapt to contemporary circumstances, including the financial and health incentives created by the ongoing pandemic.

In addition to revamping projects, establishing a staggered vendor schedule; in which only the meat and fish sections are open to public on some days, while only the vegetables, spices, and dried products sections are open on other days; is another workable solution. This strategy would lower daily waste production, thereby lightening the workload of cleaning staffs and ensuring their efficacy. A staggered schedule would also reduce population density in wet markets by forcing locals to utilize supermarkets to get certain products on days when they are unavailable in the wet market.

### *Optimism, uncertainty and insights*

The Chinese people, as well as the global community, grew increasingly frustrated with the Chinese government and their responses to the COVID-19 outbreak as the months passed. Public vexation with China's administrative failures and deficiencies never truly disappeared despite [official acknowledgement](#) of government shortcomings following Dr. Li's death in February. During the current Beijing outbreak, administrative responses to the crisis have been anything but incompetent. Owing to the diligence and responsiveness of [Beijing's COVID-19 Nucleic Acid Detection Team](#), local officials were notified of the initial case on the same day of its discovery and were able to respond with appropriate investigative and

---

<sup>11</sup> Wet markets could be synonymous with agricultural markets, traditional produce markets, or any other terms denoting a more traditional retail format.

<sup>12</sup> Or 农改超 in Chinese.

<sup>13</sup> [Data](#) suggest that Wuhan alone has over 400 agricultural markets, Shanghai has over 800. Nationally, agricultural

markets with revenue exceeding the billions totaled at 1,664, with an associated vendor total of 469,951.

<sup>14</sup> A [2019 Chinese Fresh Product Market Report](#) indicates that agricultural markets still fulfilled about 73 percent of consumer demand for fresh products.

<sup>15</sup> Currently, vegetable and meat sections are separated from one and another, and dried products and spices also have their own sections.

containment measures less than 12 hours after being notified: potentially contaminated locations were immediately sealed off and extensively sanitized; schools, restaurants, and sporting events were quickly shut down; and heavy travel restrictions were promptly reinstated. Local governments even implemented measures such as emergency market stalls in order to compensate for Xinfadi's temporary closure. Meanwhile, local medical agencies have also attempted to address the issue of transparency by creating a daily updated webpage that provides detailed descriptions of every infected individual. Administrative responses to this outbreak seem to have greatly curbed its spread. [Daily new case totals](#) have significantly decreased since June 21, from an average of 22.6 cases between June 11 to June 20<sup>16</sup> to an average of 10.5 between June 21 to June 24, with the lowest daily case discovery of 7 on June 23. A look at the daily case totals per district (Figure 1) also reveal matching [expert statements](#) regarding the relative stability of the Beijing situation, and that the city seems to be trending towards a virtual halt to daily case discoveries 7 to 14 days in.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, data suggest the disease has not spread much beyond Fengtai, the source city of this outbreak.

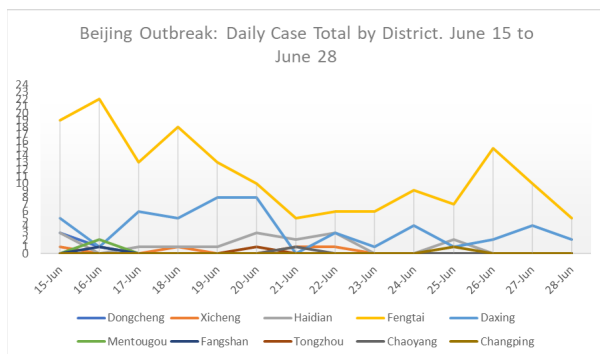


Figure 1 Source: [Beijing Municipal Health Commission](#).

Nevertheless, a few questions remain unanswered as of now. First, investigations have found more traces of COVID-19 at the seafood, beef, and lamb sections of Xinfadi. How much further damage will this do to the relevant global supply chains? China [imports around 80 tons of salmon](#) annually from Norway, Chile, Australia, and Canada. If imported salmon was indeed the source of this Beijing outbreak, how will the Chinese government respond? China does not shy away from the use of economic sanctions, as evidenced by the [THAAD missile controversy](#), when seeking to protect its national interests. As such,

<sup>16</sup> The average increases to 24.4 cases if we discount the first day of discovery, which only saw 6 new cases.

<sup>17</sup> Experts also noted that sporadic new case discoveries are likely to continue even after the 7-14-day period, and the city should remain on high alert even if numbers suggest that the outbreak has ended.

countries responsible for the inadvertent exporting of COVID-19 into China may suffer a similar fate. Second, current events suggest a global increase in COVID-19 cases and future outbreaks are likely. With this in mind, what has the recent Beijing outbreak taught us? [Chinese experts](#) have stated that the outbreak is currently under control and the statistics support claims of an improving situation, but would other countries be capable of emulating such comprehensive and proactive methods employed by the Beijing government in this outbreak? Third, the Xinfadi Market is responsible for meeting [up to 90 percent of local fruit and vegetable demands](#) in a city with a population of over [21 million](#). The 1,120,000 square meters establishment is also [operated by roughly 10,000 employees](#), 4,000 of which live on-site. In other words, there is a chance that the situation is much worse than the numbers suggest—which means the experts' initial reluctance to expand the scope of current testing procedures may later prove to be another administrative failure. Fourth, the virus causing this Beijing outbreak is an [older strand of COVID-19](#) and infected individuals tend to show normal or light symptoms, with 8.7 percent showing no symptoms at all. This decreases the likelihood of detection and elevates the difficulties of prevention and control. The best available countermeasure against this older strand of COVID-19 is to normalize strict disease prevention and control practices, but can, or will, China maintain its efforts as its economy continues to suffer? Fifth, the proximity of a few of the infected districts to bordering provinces may be a reason for concern despite the implementation of heavy travel restrictions since June 12.<sup>18</sup> As shown in Figure 2, Changping, Mentougou, Fangshan, Daxing and Tongzhou all border the neighboring province of Hebei, with Tongzhou sharing a border with Tianjin in addition to Hebei. Difficult times may force people, especially Chinese migrant workers, to cross province borders despite restrictions out of financial concerns, and the proximity of the districts to Hebei or Tianjin may further encourage this behavior. As such, it would be advisable for Beijing to remain open to the possibility of out-of-province transmission.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, a confirmed COVID-19 patient was [visited by a relative from Heilongjiang](#) on June 10, showed symptoms on June 13, but did not test positive. The patient was subsequently hospitalized until June 25. So there is a chance this individual's relative from Heilongjiang was infected as well.

## June 2020 Beijing Outbreak Case Spread

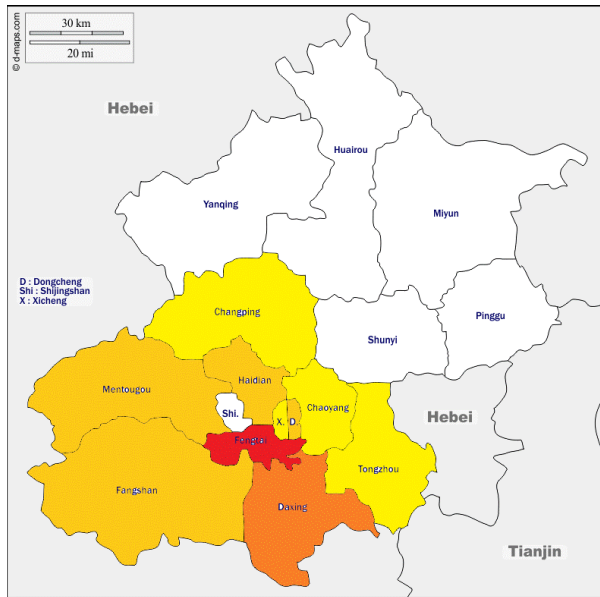


Figure 2 original taken from [d-maps](#), edited by author.

Even still, this Beijing outbreak has provided us with insight into how best to deal with COVID-19 outbreaks during the reopening process. For instance, the accommodations local governments allowed to compensate for the temporary loss of local food markets, and the overall decisiveness with which local authorities acted during this Beijing outbreak is worth noting. The fact that this outbreak occurred at a major marketplace provides some useful insight as well. First, to avoid a repeat of this situation elsewhere, governments could seek to diversify business reopenings and avoid overreliance on single large suppliers, which may be achieved through government subsidies or regulations. Second, the outbreak also demonstrates the underlying dangers the retail industry poses to any given community if even one accidental infection or oversight were to occur, given the frequent close contact with consumers. And as such, businesses and authorities alike should be aware of the necessity for extensive employee education and training programs under current circumstances.

Ultimately, the Beijing outbreak remains an evolving situation. But China's administrative responses to the

outbreak have so far been timely, transparent, adequate and most importantly, proactive. Some aspects of China's response may even be worthy of duplication during future outbreaks. Additionally, with regard to the source of this Beijing outbreak, experts have [eliminated the possibility](#)<sup>19</sup> of transmission through wildlife sales or consumption, which is reassuring as wildlife consumption was the source of the original COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. A repeat of the same situation would have resulted in irreversible damages to the reputation of China's administrative competency, especially given its recent efforts to [amend and reform wildlife consumption policies](#) to prevent it from being the cause of future disease outbreaks.<sup>20</sup> The recent and [first discharge of a hospitalized Beijing outbreak COVID patient](#)<sup>21</sup> is also a welcoming development. Moreover, an opportunity exists for this outbreak to breathe some much-needed life into wet market revamp projects. However, while [experts remain adamant that the situation is under control](#) and are expecting a significant drop-off in new cases in 7 to 14 days, due to the uncertainty surrounding the source of this infection, Beijing and its trading partners should remain both diligent in their defenses and wary of the potential for the situation rapidly escalate both in scale and stakes in the coming days.

<sup>19</sup> The article states that it is likely that the virus was transported to Xinfadi via frozen foods, which makes sense because lower temperatures allow for the virus to survive longer, or someone had the disease before visiting Xinfadi. Xinfadi is primarily known for its vegetable and fruit trade. Its [official website](#) also states that the market provides meat products such as swine, sheep, cattle and a variety of seafood. However, nothing suggests Xinfadi engages in trade involving wild or live animals (besides some seafood products).

<sup>20</sup> In fact, Beijing passed its own version of [a wildlife consumption ban](#) on June 1 based on the CCP's grand directive to comprehensively ban wildlife consumption in China. The Beijing government would have been bombarded with criticism had this recent outbreak been due to wildlife consumption or sales.

<sup>21</sup> 280 people remain hospitalized in their respective district hospitals.