



FIGHTING COVID-19 IN STEPPES: MONGOLIAN COMMUNITY-BASED MITIGATION

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While many nations' Covid-19 responses have received mixed praise or criticism from the international community, Mongolia has quietly demonstrated competence and selflessness in the face of adversity. The nation responded quickly and effectively, preventing domestic transmission of the disease and establishing a public health stance that has kept deaths attributed to Covid-19 at zero, all while aiding other countries including [China](#), [Russia](#), and the [United States](#).

By observing precautions implemented by the Mongolian government, Mongolians have enabled the government to better protect its people from the disease while continuing to enact policies that foster and strengthen international ties. The early activation of the State Emergency Committee, integration with the World Health Organization, and unified communication efforts are lessons that can be applied across the globe.

But first, one must resist the temptation to dismiss Mongolia as an outlier. Mongolia is, after all, the most sparsely populated country in the world, with a population density of only two people per square kilometer. However, this hardly gave Mongolia a free pass in the fight against Covid-19. Ulaanbaatar, the capital, accounts for about one-third of the nation's citizens, with approximately 337 people per square kilometer, compatible to Bergamo, Italy's 400 people

per square kilometer. Bergamo was devastated by Covid-19, it is generally believed, after the virus was introduced by a traveler from the PRC; Ulaanbaatar's risk should have been equal or greater due to its proximity and economic integration with China. However, the Mongolian leadership took early and unified actions to preserve the lives of their people, who embraced these approaches.

First, Mongolia recognized the threat of this pandemic at an early stage and wasted no time making tough decisions. While other countries argued over the seriousness of Covid-19, Mongolia was planning and actively preparing for the inevitable. On January 22, the Mongolian Health Ministry hosted a press briefing with the World Health Organization (WHO), explaining the seriousness of the disease. Mongolia's trend of informing the population in advance of announcing closures received great praise, as it enabled the population to proactively prepare. For example, on January 24, the government announced that schools would be closing on the 27th.

Then, on January 26, the Mongolian cabinet met and agreed to close universities, close the borders (except for trains and planes), provide funds for the health care industry, and prohibit public events. The next day, Mongolia negotiated with countries to receive their own potentially infected citizens back into Mongolia. On February 1, the 31 Mongolian students studying in Wuhan returned to Ulaanbaatar and were quarantined (along with the flight crew) for 21 days.

Throughout February Mongolia took active steps to prevent the spread of the disease, including suspending the Lunar New Year celebration scheduled for February 24. As disappointing as this move may have been to the Mongolian masses, an online survey of more than 70,000 Facebook users in [Mongolia showed an 86% approval rating for this suspension](#).

February also saw the implementation of a campaign titled "[Emotional Support to Eternal Neighbor](#)," designed to provide monetary and livestock support for China. Naturally, a sparsely populated and landlocked country with only two neighbors does not have the same GDP or capacity to donate as much as

other countries, but they do have livestock; in 2018 there were 21 livestock animals for every person in Mongolia. Taking advantage of this national resource, Mongolia gifted over 30,000 sheep to their southern neighbors and “extended condolences to the people of China over their loss and hardships caused by the [novel coronavirus outbreak](#) (Covid-19).”

Mongolia did not record its first positive Covid-19 case until March 10, but when it did the response was overwhelming. The infected French national flew in from Moscow on March 2, ignored the required quarantine restrictions, and conducted his travel. After quarantining the entire district, Mongolia froze all transportation, to include trains, cars, and public transport, instituted a partial lockdown, and shut down a range of shops. During the partial lockdown, they decontaminated 6,000 locations and approximately 9.2 million square meters. They even returned to [decontaminate some places twice](#). Again, this response was for one positive case.

This comprehensive approach continued throughout the spring. Mongolia brought home their citizens from across the globe and treated those with Covid-19 accordingly. While many other countries contended over public health vs the economic risk, Mongolians unified behind their government’s decisions and accepted economic repercussions for the safety of their communities. On May 7 “[Mongolia conducted an unprecedented drill](#) to fight the Covid-19 epidemic by closing off a whole district of Ulaanbaatar,” *The Diplomat* reported. “Chingeltei district, home to 150,000 people, was cordoned off from the rest of the capital city from 8 am to 6 pm ... More than 3,500 government officials, doctors, and law enforcement officials participated in the drill—not to mention the cooperation of all district residents in the simulated lockdown area.”

The drill, meant to demonstrate how the country would respond to an outbreak, clearly shows Mongolia recognizes the need to be ready for this fight to be a long haul.

By June, by which time Mongolia had demonstrated its successes, it even announced a decision to [provide \\$1 million to the United States](#), “directed to the

safeguarding doctors and staff working at the frontline of the outbreak.” This aid demonstrates the genuine goodwill of the Mongolian people. With a severely diminished economy, and no end in sight for many poverty-stricken Mongolians, their kindness to others cannot be measured in money alone, but in relative gestures.

Their response and aid to others demonstrates their capacity for global leadership and should be looked to for advice in the future. The trust Mongolians place in their leadership is indicative of a vibrant and successful democracy, with morally sound and ethical officials. This has not always been the case for Mongolia, but it’s clearly making great strides in providing excellent leadership and support in tough times, displaying goodwill to neighbors in the community and afar.

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