

The coronavirus

By GWYNNE DYER

In an emergency, the good thing about a dictatorship is that it can respond very quickly. The bad thing is that it won't respond at all until the dictator-in-chief says that it should. All the little dictators who flourish in this sort of system won't risk their positions by passing bad news up the line until the risk of being blamed for delay outweighs the risk of being blamed for the emergency in the first place.

You can see how this works if you consider China's response to the emergence of nCov-2019 (novel coronavirus 2019), a new viral threat potentially as serious as the SARS virus of 2003. Some things it has done well, but others it did very badly, and the odds that the virus will spread globally are now probably evens or worse.

The local health authorities in Wuhan, the 11-million-strong city in central China where the virus first appeared, spotted it on December 31, when only a few dozen cases had come to their attention. That's as fast as you could ask, and they promptly shut down the seafood and wild game market where the victims caught the disease. Score: 9 out of 10.

China's national health authorities also acted quickly. On January 9 they announced that they had a brand new coronavirus on their hands, and just one day later they released its full genetic sequence online so medical researchers worldwide could start working on it. Elapsed time: 11 days. Known deaths at that point: one. Score: 10 out of 10.

But these are medical professionals, doing their duty according to internationally agreed protocols. We don't know what they recommended to China's political authorities at that point, but they must have called for widespread testing, and probably also for travel restrictions to control the spread of the virus. But nobody dared to rock the boat: nothing was done.

A pause here to recall how you control the spread of a new infectious disease for which there is no vaccine, nor any effective cure. You isolate the victims as soon as they are identified, and give them what medical support you can: some will die, but most will usually survive. And if you do that soon enough and thoroughly enough, the global pandemic never gets going.

There are often complicating factors. The spread will be far faster if the virus can pass from one person to another in the air. It will be much harder to isolate the people carrying the virus if they become infectious before they develop visible symptoms. But the methods available to slow or stop the spread are still the same: identify the carriers and isolate them.

Now, back to what happened in China. The medical people did their job; the political people did not. It was two more weeks before the city of Wuhan was cut off from the rest of the country and the world. I live in London, 15 hours' flying time away, and during those two weeks 2,000 people arrived from Wuhan at London's airports.

Lunar New Year, the biggest holiday in China's calendar, was coming up fast, but nothing was done although half the population goes home for a visit at this time every year. Wuhan and a dozen other Hubei cities are now in lockdown, but it's too late: Wuhan's mayor, Zhou Xianwang, admits that 5 million people have already left the city for the New Year celebrations. Score: 2 out of 10.

We now have two pieces of bad news that would have made it even more urgent to seal Wuhan off had we known them at the time. The new virus does propagate through the air, and people carrying it do become infectious before they display any symptoms.

Zhou didn't dare advocate isolating the city, and neither did anybody else, until the Great Panjandrum Himself had spoken. President Xi Jinping finally spoke last Saturday (January 25), saying that China faces a 'grave situation', and now the system is racing to do what it should have been done two weeks ago.

Too bad, but this pandemic (if that is what it becomes) will probably be on the same scale as the SARS virus, and that is not really

horrific: deaths in the high hundreds or a few thousands worldwide. The mortality rate among those who catch it appears to be about 2%, compared to 1% for ordinary seasonal influenza. And ordinary 'flu kills about 400,000 (mostly elderly) people every year.

But one of these days something like the 1918 virus that caused the 'Spanish' influenza will emerge again. That killed around 50 million people worldwide, out of a global population only a quarter of what it is now.

Since Chinese food markets now seem to be a prime source of dangerous new 'flu-related viruses, the Chinese government has a particular responsibility to contain them early. The Chinese doctors will do their duty, as always, but it would be nice if China had its political act a bit more together before then.