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China: towards “xiaokang”, but still living dangerously

Celebrations surrounding last month’s Chinese New Year (of the Monkey) will have been twinged with unusual anxiety. True, China’s economy is booming. Growth was 9·1% in 2003, helping the world’s sixth biggest economy to be on target to overtake the UK by 2006. This rapid development enables China’s leaders to claim, fairly, that they are moving towards their goal of “xiaokang”—a well-off society.

China is changing in other ways too. Two examples of recent headlines in the international press: “Third nation joins race to reach the stars” (China launches a man into space in October, 2003); and “China in third place on R and D spending” (the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development reports that China spent US\$60 billion on research in 2001, behind only the USA [\$282 billion] and Japan [\$104 billion]). China is not only exerting its considerable economic muscle, but also is becoming a global political and social force to be reckoned with. But then severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) returned, and avian influenza now threatens.

The coronavirus that causes SARS was more than bad publicity for a nation wanting to be seen as a partner to the western world. China’s slow response to the initial outbreak and its subsequent secrecy in dealing with international agencies, such as WHO, cast the Chinese leadership in the sort of light that seemed to come from an era long past.

This characterisation of China’s role is only partly true. Rapid efforts to train health-care staff in the use of protective equipment, the creation of fever clinics, and the scaling up of patient management all played important parts in containing the epidemic. Over 30 000 people were quarantined and 14 million people were screened at airports, railway stations, and roadside checkpoints. 11 million surgical masks, gowns, and gloves were supplied and 300 tonnes of disinfectant were quickly made available. A 1000-bed hospital was constructed in a week and the government launched a massive media effort to alert its population to the risks of SARS.

China has since moved quickly in its long-term response, learning the lessons of a global epidemic that affected 8000 people and killed 774, 349 of whom were Chinese citizens. The first new case of SARS since the end of the last epidemic in July, 2003, was reported in the southern province of

Guangdong in December. The government immediately clamped down on animal markets, ordering the elimination of thousands of civet cats, raccoon dogs, badgers, rats, and cockroaches. Hong Kong and Taiwan instituted fever-screening procedures at international airports. WHO officials have been working closely with Chinese authorities, and it is WHO, not the Chinese government, that is making final decisions concerning confirmation of cases of SARS.

Nevertheless, the fact is that for all these justifiably commendable actions, China simply does not have a sufficiently robust public-health surveillance system to detect the emergence of a fast-moving epidemic. The SARS coronavirus mutated during the course of several months last year to achieve an infection rate of 70%, compared with only 3% at the start of the epidemic. The fragile and in many places non-existent Chinese public-health system is incapable of dealing with such rapid genetic transformation.

It is not just China that is seriously threatened by the country’s weak disease-surveillance infrastructure. Nowhere is this wider risk more clearly true than for avian H5N1 influenza. China’s principal public-health instrument so far has been the killing of thousands of birds. Meanwhile, the H5N1 virus has spread across several provinces and into Shanghai. But the country’s animal-disease surveillance is as good as absent, a vacuum into which global health might hopelessly and terrifyingly fall.

Although there is growing confidence among economists about China’s future, health workers have good reason to be alarmed by the perilous state of the country’s public-health surveillance capacity. These concerns are compounded by China’s weak commitments to international human-rights agreements, political liberalisation, and support for Taiwan’s status within WHO. A recent Amnesty International report detailing the imprisonment of 54 individuals for posting opinions on the internet—China has one of the most severe internet censorship regimes of any country in the world—only adds to evidence suggesting that free information flow remains a pipedream. On this pipedream rests the security of world health.

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