

# UPDATE: SARS IN CHINA

By Jeffrey A. Bader, Senior Vice President

Stonebridge International LLC

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*After inadvertently encouraging the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) through an inadequate response from November to April, the Chinese leadership has launched a high-visibility, aggressive public campaign to halt the epidemic. The leadership has no higher priority at the moment. It sees its own prestige and a broad range of national interests intimately tied to the success or failure of this effort.*

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The laxness of the pre-April 20 approach has been succeeded by a series of draconian measures that have radically altered everyday life in China. Among them:

- ✓ Severe isolation measures affecting visitors from SARS-infected areas. For example, any resident coming from a SARS-infected area, like Beijing, to Shanghai is subject to two weeks' isolation. This model is being copied and in some cases like Nanjing exceeded throughout the country.
- ✓ Quarantines are widespread – 18,000 in Beijing, 10,000 in Nanjing, for example.
- ✓ All primary and secondary schools in Beijing have been closed. In other cities, schools have been closed selectively.
- ✓ The stock exchanges have been closed.
- ✓ Government and company units have been told to cancel virtually all large meetings and travel.
- ✓ Public entertainment has been virtually shut down in SARS-affected areas.
- ✓ All visitors to major cities have their temperature taken upon arrival.
- ✓ Numerous units have instructed their staff to stay at home and work from there.

In addition, many cities and municipalities are taking informal measures. For example, unauthorized barricades restricting movement into cities and serving as venues for impromptu medical examinations are in place in many locations.

With the number of cases continuing to rise nationally at a rate of over 200 per day and in Beijing by over 100 per day, people by and large accept the necessity of such draconian measures. The riots and assaults on facilities near Beijing and Tianjin reported by Western media reflected not frustration over policy, but rather fear that facilities to hold SARS sufferers were being constructed nearby, proof that the “not in my backyard” phenomenon some Americans manifest when it comes to drug rehabilitation centers and nuclear power plants is alive and well in China with regard to SARS.

## THE MAN IN CHARGE AND COVER?

The point man of the public campaign to contain SARS has been *Premier Wen Jiabao*. He has been prominent in making the case abroad, most recently at an Asian leaders' meeting in Bangkok, and at home through public appearances such as at hospitals, that the Government is fully seized with the problem. He and other leaders, in particular President Hu Jintao, Vice Premier Wu Yi and Beijing Acting Mayor Wang Qishan, have been candid in referring to the situation as “grave” and “a crisis.” Having ignored the epidemic in its early stages, the nightly news now devotes the first 15-20 minutes to SARS and the efforts of the leadership to combat it. Other members of the Politburo have also been recruited into making SARS-related public appearances. Former President and Chairman of the Central Military Commission Jiang Zemin, however, has not. Nor has he appeared in Beijing of late. Whether this is

because of a conscious decision to have the new leadership be seen as the vanguard in combating this plague or because Jiang Zemin wants some distance from the efforts in case they fall short is not clear.

For most purposes, China is cut off from the outside world. Very few business executives and delegations are traveling in either direction. A handful of Chinese and visiting Government delegations continue to visit each other's capitals for essential business, but in general the Chinese are discouraging visits inbound and outbound. In addition to the health benefits of such a policy, the leadership understands that the traditional tourist sites, including Beijing, Xian, and Guangzhou, are not going to make a positive impression right now. The smell of disinfectant can be overwhelming, the shops are empty, and street life is minimal.

### **NEWFOUND SELF-CONFIDENCE**

While China has in effect isolated itself, it has taken the unusual step since April 20 of welcoming foreign, including American, assistance. This is in a sense a sign of China's newfound self-confidence. Chinese governments, including this new one until April 20, historically have tended to regard problems as signs of weakness and shame that should be hidden from foreign view. It is also a sign of the seriousness of the crisis that China is reaching out to foreign scientists, health organizations, and suppliers of medical equipment. And finally, the Chinese leadership seems to understand that its own credibility was damaged by its handling of the situation before, and its citizens are more likely to trust validation of its efforts by foreign experts than they are self-serving pronouncements by people who have not been candid.

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While the attitude of the leadership has shifted 180 degrees from the pre-April 20 period of denial, it is not clear that the system over which it presides has shifted quite so fully. There is a strong suspicion that local officials still are not providing accurate numbers on those infected. They see no advantage to providing honest public reports that may serve to damage their economies by discouraging visitors and interactions. The central leadership has put the localities on notice they will be judged on how they handle this crisis, but Beijing does not seem to believe it is getting the full story; witness the numerous inspection teams it has sent around the country. Deep concern continues over the ability of the rural areas, with their totally inadequate public health infrastructure, to resist the epidemic, and Premier Wen has acknowledged as much publicly.

It is too soon to project when China will turn the corner on SARS, but at least the leadership knows how much is at stake and is acting aggressively. They have seen the estimates of the potential damage to the economy if the crisis continues beyond a couple of months (indeed, while maintaining strict controls on travel and large meetings, in the last few days they have been urging people to go back to work). They have already heard the cries of pain from businesses, in particular airlines, hotels, and retail establishments that have suffered. Some export-oriented businesses have temporarily shut down, and some in areas such as electronics and information technology have experienced significant fall-offs in sales.

The Chinese leadership knows that other countries in Asia see Chinese negligence as the cause of the problem that has spread over their borders. And they see Chinese travelers and students abroad being shunned. They know that the stakes go to the heart of their national interest, and to their own personal futures.