

EDITORIAL

Is there anyone in the world today that has not heard of SARS, of the virus that causes Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome? In the space of a few months this deadly virus has managed to travel to more than 30 countries, kill more than 600 people including front line medical workers, and infect nearly 8000 persons. It has also sent panic into the hearts of millions of people throughout the globe, and sounded a doomsday alarm among the economies of Asia.

It's been hard going for countries affected with SARS with Hong Kong and Mainland China so far experiencing the worst impact of the disease and bearing the brunt of the criticism.

The Hong Kong government has been accused of being indecisive and incompetent and reacting at least two weeks too late to the emergency. Some have even accused Hong Kong authorities of following the lead of Mainland authorities, eager to keep this disaster under cover for fear of damaging the tourist trade and other facets of the economy.

The Mainland, where the disease allegedly originated, has been seriously faulted for its lack of transparency, its secrecy, its reluctance to let the world know what was going on and thereby endangering the lives of thousands around the globe. Public apologies for mishandling the SARS epidemic have been forthcoming from the highest government levels in both the Mainland and Hong Kong.

It is no secret that Chinese authorities carefully control the release of all information since they are always worried about maintaining stability in the country. When SARS broke out in the Mainland, perhaps as early as October of 2002, the press control mechanism went into high gear. According to reports, doctors were told not to speak to foreign or domestic reporters. All news releases were calculated to assure everyone inside and outside of China that everything was under control. Meanwhile the number of cases was rising dramatically not only in Mainland China, but also very soon after, in Vietnam, Singapore and Taiwan and even in Canada.

As the numbers of those infected increased, and the number of deaths rose, China's orders to keep the information under wraps became ever more stringent. It was only when a respected professional broke the code of silence about the extent of the disease, and when the epidemic was spinning out of control that China had to face the reality of what was clearly happening.

The epidemic had already been raging in China for at least five months, when on March 27th the China media finally admitted that there were SARS cases in Beijing. The report, however, was well hidden on the inside pages of the newspaper. Furthermore, the report blamed Hong Kong and Shanxi Province for having exported SARS to the capital! Prompted by the WHO, and now desperate for help, China on April 20th decided to give fairly credible numbers of SARS cases in Beijing. Numbers shot up from a total of 39 to more than 100 a day.

From South China's Guangdong Province, where it is thought to have originated, the disease has now penetrated into the capital and nearby areas. The epidemic has spread to the four municipalities: Beijing, Tianjiang, Shanghai, and Chongqing, to three of its five autonomous regions: Inner Mongolia, Ningxia and Guangxi, and to at least 18 of its 22 provinces, (Taiwan, which is seriously affected, is not included here as one of China's provinces.)

Will China's new leaders learned anything from this crisis, enough to be able and willing to manage it better the next time? Will they be more willing from now on to give out the information needed to protect its citizens and the people in the rest of the world? Will the media be given more freedom of expression? Will the government be more transparent? Will it be humble enough to seek help from the outside before it's too late? Some have asked, "Could a virus lead to political change in China? Is it at all possible that this deadly virus could spell the death of Communist China's one Party system?"

The new leadership in China is certainly confronted with a challenge of major proportions. Do these new Chinese officials realize that had the leaders of their government been forthcoming much sooner, the disease might have taken a completely different course, and many lives might have been saved? I am reminded of the words of an old song popular in Peter, Paul, and Mary days, "When will they ever learn?" Perhaps that time has now come.