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Navigation

- [Home](#)
- [Search Archives](#)
- [Announcements](#)
- [Recalls/Alerts](#)
- [Calendar of Events](#)
- [Maps of Outbreaks](#)
- [Submit Info](#)
- [Subscribe/Unsubscribe](#)
- [FAQs](#)
- [About ProMED-mail](#)
- [Who's Who](#)
- [Awards](#)
- [Citing ProMED-mail](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Donations](#)

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SARS - WORLDWIDE (165): CASES, CHINA

A ProMED-mail post

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From: Luz Alba Fornells <luzalba@bioqmed.ufrj.br>

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<<http://www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=healthNews&storyID=3177054>>

Last China SARS Cases Declared Free of Virus

Beijing's last 12 SARS patients have recovered from the disease, official media said Tuesday, marking an apparent end to the scourge in China, where the virus emerged 8 months ago before spreading across the world. The World Health Organization said the reported recoveries were expected, but it was still on alert, given the possibility the disease could rebound in China or elsewhere.

The 12 patients were still in hospital receiving treatment for other illnesses but no longer showed symptoms of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome and were not infectious, the Communist Party newspaper People's Daily quoted Beijing's deputy health chief Liang Wannian as saying. "Beijing has no more SARS patients," he said.

As of Monday, the Ministry of Health said on its Web site China had 12 remaining SARS patients in hospital, all in Beijing. At the height of the epidemic, the capital had the world's highest number of SARS cases.

Liang's declaration that Beijing was SARS-free was reported a day after a national anti-SARS conference, at which President Hu Jintao attributed China's successful SARS battle to Communist Party leadership.

Asked about the timing of the announcement clearing Beijing of SARS cases, a WHO spokesman said the U.N. body had no reason to suspect China, which drew widespread condemnation for initially concealing the extent of the outbreak, was not telling the truth. "No alarm bells went off here," said WHO Beijing spokesman Bob Dietz. "This would be the way this thing would tail off in the end."

But he added: "Our greater problem, and not just in China, is when and if this stuff comes back. And we're very much on the alert for that," he said. Some medical experts say SARS may only be dormant and could return once the hot summer weather cools off. Others say it is possible there are milder, mutated versions of the disease that are virtually impossible to detect and may be circulating among the wider population.

SARS first surfaced in southern China in November 2002 and was spread around the world by travelers, infecting more than 8000 people and killing more than 800. Air travel was badly hit by the scare, as were the leisure and tourism industries.

The virus killed more than 340 people in China -- 190 in Beijing alone -- and infected more than 5300 people nationwide. After failing to divulge the scale of contagion for months, the government sacked the health minister and Beijing's mayor and mobilized the masses to fight the deadly flu-like illness.

[Byline: Jonathan Ansfield]

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[see also:

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SARS - worldwide (161): cases [20030703.1636](#)
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SARS worldwide (164): etiology [20030723.1800](#)
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