

Chinese politics & policy

China blames local officials for outbreaks as Beijing sticks to zero-Covid plan

Health authorities vow to boost vaccination of elderly after widespread protests against restrictions



Police pin down a demonstrator in Shanghai on Sunday. Chinese state media have not reported on the surge of protests across the country © AP

Edward White in Seoul, **Eleanor Olcott** and **Hudson Lockett** in Hong Kong and **Thomas Hale** in Shanghai 5 HOURS AGO

China's health authorities on Tuesday blamed local governments for their handling of coronavirus outbreaks as Beijing distanced itself from the crisis after unprecedented protests against President Xi Jinping and his zero-Covid policy.

The National Health Commission reaffirmed Beijing's commitment to the zero-Covid measures and pledged to boost vaccination rates among the elderly, a day after police and security forces appeared to have [stamped out demonstrations](#) across at least 18 cities.

Without acknowledging the protests directly, Chinese officials argued that public complaints centred on the implementation of [China](#)'s strict prevention and control measures — an area that is the responsibility of local governments — rather than Beijing's zero-Covid policy itself.

They added that local officials should focus on minimising inconveniences to the public caused by the outbreaks and pledged to increase central supervision.

“Some local governments take a one-size-fits-all approach, and take excessive policy steps that have neglected the demands of the public,” said commission spokesperson Mi Feng, adding that lockdown extensions had at times been “reckless” and enforced

far beyond the necessary timeframes.

Experts said China's huge numbers of unvaccinated elderly were holding back a change to the zero-Covid strategy, which includes lockdowns, mass testing, quarantines and electronic contact tracing. That is despite the relentless restrictions battering economic growth and stoking civil unrest.

"Some places are facing the most complicated and severe situation in the three years since the fight against the epidemic," Xia Gang, of the Bureau of Disease Prevention and Control, told reporters in Beijing.

Chinese state media have not reported on the recent protests, instead reiterating the benefits of Beijing's zero-Covid policy. The People's Daily, the main state-sponsored newspaper, ran a rallying editorial celebrating the Communist party.

Ernan Cui, an analyst with research group Gavekal, said that while the central government was "still rhetorically committed" to the zero-Covid policy "the reality is that local governments . . . are no longer able to make it work".

"The orderly reopening once envisaged by public-health officials, with an extensive vaccination campaign and new treatments prepared in advance is almost certainly out of reach now," she said.

However, the fact that Beijing refrained from even more drastic [coronavirus](#) controls, despite record case numbers, was seen as a positive signal by some analysts.

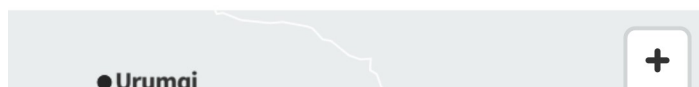
Zhiwei Zhang, Beijing-based chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management, said he felt "more optimistic", pointing to the elderly vaccination drive and state media efforts to downplay the severity of the Omicron variant.

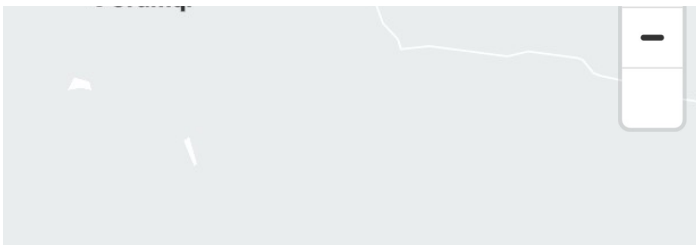
How protests spread across China

1/9



Cities across China have been rocked by a series of protests. The rare political dissent was sparked by outrage over 10 deaths in a fire in Urumqi that people blamed on coronavirus restrictions.





According to the latest official statistics, 32 per cent of China's 267mn people over the age of 60 have not received their third vaccine dose. That figure jumps to 60 per cent for the over-80s. The booster is required to attain high levels of protection against the Omicron variant.

The NHC vowed to ramp up pressure on elderly Chinese to complete their inoculations but stopped short of any vaccine mandates.

In markets, traders bid up shares on hopes that Beijing would ease some of its pandemic controls, following a sell-off at the start of the week that led global markets lower.

Online censors have also been scrubbing images and videos of the protests. Students at campuses across China held white sheets of paper during the weekend's demonstrations, a symbol of their inability to express dissatisfaction with government policies.

Chinese television channels limited close-ups of maskless football fans during broadcasts of the World Cup in Qatar. That followed an online backlash from domestic viewers questioning why China continued to implement lockdowns as the rest of the world dropped restrictions.

State broadcaster CCTV zoomed in on players and officials after a goal was scored instead of close-ups of fans celebrating.

One Beijing-based football fan, who goes by the nickname Menzhu, first spotted that CCTV was cutting broadcasts of fans during the France versus Denmark match on Sunday.

“The broadcast was very strange. There was no replay after the goals. At first, I thought the broadcast technicians made a mistake, but then I realised the live broadcast had avoided images of fans,” Menzhu said.

China’s zero-Covid policy, which has restricted movement, required daily monitoring and consigned 1.9mn people to quarantine facilities, has fuelled frustration.

Officials in several cities — including Wuhan, the scene of one of the biggest mass protests on Sunday — appeared to ease some local-level restrictions of movement on Monday.

However, Shanghai on Tuesday imposed a new round of closures on some businesses and quarantines of close coronavirus contacts.

China’s caseload remains low by almost all international comparisons, yet areas with at least partial lockdowns and travel restrictions account for more than 25 per cent of China’s gross domestic product, according to an analysis by Nomura, the Japanese bank. That exceeds the peak of about 21 per cent in April, when Shanghai was locked down.

While officials have resisted announcing citywide lockdowns in response to the record surge in cases, Ting Lu, Nomura’s chief China economist, argued that China’s “de facto lockdowns may be tougher than de jure lockdowns”. This is because local officials believe their performance is determined by avoiding sharp rises in case numbers.

“Although Shanghai-style full lockdowns may be avoided, partial lockdowns in a rising number of cities may be more costly than full lockdowns in just a couple of cities,” he said. “The rapid increase in public discontent over the lockdowns over the past weekend may further cloud the road to reopening.”

The severity of the economic damage is also reflected in intracity mobility data — a short-term metric of economic momentum — with metro passenger trips in 15 big Chinese cities down 41 per cent on the previous year, dropping from a 24 per cent year-on-year decline a week earlier.

The country of 1.4bn people reported 37,477 new locally transmitted cases of the virus on Tuesday, down slightly from the record 38,808 reported the day before.

Additional reporting by William Langley and Cheng Leng in Hong Kong, and Nian Liu and Ryan McMorrow in Beijing

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.
