

SARS lesson: How to address crises

While medical experts are busy trying to find a cure for SARS, scholars in public management are searching for the best solutions to improve the government management system when crises or disasters strike, reports Yu Nan

An old Chinese saying goes that "a loss may turn out to be a gain". And grievous though SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) was last year with a big loss of life, one of the major gains was that the central and local governments in China, for the first time, have been working hard to set up comprehensive emergency-response systems to better cope with crises or disasters.

So says Ma Qingyu, a professor at the China National School of Administration (CNSA) based in Beijing and one of the experts in government management from 21 countries and regions who attended an international conference "Crisis Management - Worldwide Experiences and Lessons" in Kunming, capital of Southwest China's Yunnan Province, from January 11 to 13.

Co-sponsored by CNSA, International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the forum offered a platform for about 30 scholars, mainly from Asia-Pacific countries, "to share experiences they have had in establishing emergency networks in their own countries," says Allan Rosenbaum, president of IASIA.

SARS was the hottest topic among the participating scholars of all the subjects which also involved economic crises and natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes.

The flu-like disease first surfaced in southern China in November 2002 before it spread to almost 30 countries and regions, infecting more than 8,000 people (5,327 on the Chinese mainland) and killing nearly 774, 349 of them on the mainland.

When the battle against SARS' first onslaught was over at the end of last June, the research group Ma works with in CNSA was designated

to assess government actions during the battle. They were also asked to offer suggestions to establish a national emergency scheme, according to Ma.

Although several confirmed and suspected cases of SARS have been reported in Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Taiwan this winter, Chinese

scholars from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan are showing great confidence in tackling any major outbreak. Don't worry. We can do much better this time, they say.

Crisis management

"Crisis management, although important, was a field that scholars or governments paid less attention to before," says Chen Fujin, executive vice-president of CNSA. "SARS was the best and the most timely reminder that an effective system is desperately needed in China to reduce loss caused by disasters to the greatest extent.

"The system will enable us to be prepared not only for crises like SARS, but for other natural disasters, such as floods or earthquakes."

It's not just government response to the crisis that has attracted attention; the role of the community is also under the spotlight.

Dong Ruihua, professor from the Shanghai Administration Institute, says the reason he initiated the study of the role of the community in the battle against SARS was because he was one of the beneficiaries of community action.



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CHEN FUJIN
Executive vice-president of China National School of Administration

"I didn't realize that SARS would be a problem in our daily life until an elderly woman, who is the head of the neighbourhood committee, knocked on my door last April," Dong recalls.

Dong says the woman was bustling around offering useful tips on the prevention of SARS to residents. She and her co-workers on the neighbourhood committee knocked on the door of every household on Caohejing Street in Xuhui District of Shanghai, where Dong lives.

And the neighbourhood committee, with fewer than 10 staff members looking after 2,000 residents, took upon themselves the tasks of SARS prevention such as distributing masks, disinfectants and leaflets about prevention, buying daily supplies for those in quarantine and keeping a sharp eye out for those coming from high-risk areas such as

Beijing and Guangzhou.

"The old woman and her colleagues started earlier than the local district and municipal government required," Dong says.

"That was one of the major reasons that there was no large outbreak of SARS in Shanghai when a few of the big cities in China were hit."

The first case in Shanghai was discovered on April 4 last year. Altogether eight cases had been reported by June 24, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the whole country safe outside travellers.

Role of communities

"It's amazing to think that there were so few SARS cases among Shanghai's 13 million residents and 3 million migrant population," says Dong.

"However, the contribution made by neighbourhood committees are almost forgotten since the media focused on medical work and hospitals.

"I heard some complaints and realized it was a topic deserving research," he says.

Started on July 15 last year, Dong investigated over 10 communities in Xuhui, Changning and Yangpu districts of Shanghai and discovered that the role they played in crisis management was so vital that the work should not be forgotten.

One of the "sensational" things that the neighbourhood committee did was to track down three persons who possibly had come in contact with a SARS patient and who even the local police had no way of tracing, he recalls.

An attendant on the train from Guangzhou to Shanghai was found to have been infected with the SARS virus when the train arrived in Shanghai last June. The man was immediately sent to the hospital while hundreds of the passengers of that train who were in contact with the patient had to be quarantined for further observations.

However, three passengers seemed impossible to locate because their addresses were fake and their mobile phones were always off.

It was two staff members working with Dongan Xincun neighbourhood committee in Xuhui District who found the three "mysterious" travellers.

The neighbourhood committee workers were so familiar with the community that they were on full vigilance and able to detect any changes, said Dong.

They found a house which had been empty for a long time recently rented by four people, who seldom stepped out. So they reported it to the



Health workers at Beijing Western Railway Station use an infrared thermometer to check the temperature of passengers as part of the efforts to prevent the spread of SARS. Experts have called for a better governmental management system to cope with crises or disasters.

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local police and after investigation, two of them admitted that they were on that train; and the third person had gone back to his hometown.

More support needed

"The chance of finding the three persons was the same as looking for a needle in a haystack in such a huge metropolis like Shanghai. It was a mission impossible without the assistance of neighbourhood community workers," says Dong.

However, Dong adds, there are still many things that the government can do to improve the effectiveness of neighbourhood committees in crises

in public management, empowering the neighbourhood committees with more authority.

The story in Beijing is relatively more complicated than in Shanghai, says Dong Wu, professor at the Beijing Administration Institute.

"But one thing is for sure, Beijing should not make the same error again," he stresses.

According to Donghe Beijing municipal government has taken stock of lessons learnt from last year. It has also worked out a comprehensive emergency response, which guarantees an effective response and management, if, by any

chance, SARS makes a comeback.

Beijing released on September 12 the city's meticulous emergency scheme that involves plans down to minor details in battling the deadly disease, says Dong.

Hospitals in Beijing belong to different institutions; for example, some are managed by the local government, some under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and some managed by the military. So medical supplies are gathered and distributed through different channels.

"When there is an emergency, such a diversified management system will greatly reduce the effectiveness of

scheme, Ditan Hospital, You'an Hospital, Xiongke Hospital and Xiaotangshan Hospital - with 1,540 beds - are the four designated hospitals to treat SARS patients.

SARS prevention

And 16 other hospitals and medical research centres, including Union Hospital, Chaoyang Hospital, Anzhen Hospital and Youyi Hospital, are designed to be back-ups both in treatment, medical workers and supplies.

The scheme also stipulates detailed standards in SARS prevention for people in different walks of life.

For example, the living space per person cannot be less than 3 square metres for construction workers. No bedroom should house more than 10 workers and the apartments should be disinfected regularly.

Although three confirmed SARS cases have been reported in Guangzhou, Beijingers have remained calm, says Dong.

He said he would not cancel his travel plan to southern China during the Spring Festival because of the SARS news in Guangzhou. "I know similar emergency schemes are now available in Shanghai and Guangzhou as well as in other major

peak travel season during the Spring Festival will bring some challenges.

"But I believe the government can handle the challenges easily with the help of past experience and the emergency systems in big cities."

Ma Qingyu says he is glad to see that the local government of Guangzhou doing a good job since the first suspected case of SARS was reported on December 27.

The emergency system has been on full alert ever since the local disease control department reported the case to the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization.

Those with contact with the in-

fectured patient were put under quarantine. Any the new developments about the case were reported to the public in a timely fashion.

"This kind of action can reinforce public faith and trust in the government," says Ma.

Public information

When SARS appeared early last year, Chinese people in hard-hit cities started panic buying, emptying shop shelves of food and medicine. Some were holed up at home, others fled to the countryside.

But when the government showed both courage and effectiveness in

incidence via TV, newspaper and radio, the panic subsided quickly.

"We could not have overcome the threat of SARS without an open public information system last year," says Ma. Transparency is the most powerful "weapon" to curb public panic and the spread of rumours, which could have stirred more panic," Ma stresses.

To date, almost all central government ministries and more than a dozen provincial and municipal governments, including Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong, have established a news-release mechanism, according to Ma.

A nation in motion as annual ritual begins

By Raymond Zhou

Spring Festival falls on a different date every year on the Gregorian calendar, this year on January 22. But one thing doesn't change: it is bracketed by the largest number of humans in transit during the year, more than the Moses-led Exodus and Bush's deployment of troops combined, many times over.

The phenomenon is called *chunyun* or, literally, Spring Transportation. Over 40 days and 40 nights, 1.89 billion trips are made by Chinese travelling from places they live and work to spend time with their families and friends.

Almost everyone who has stood in line at a railway ticket booth or spent time with scalpers has adventure or horror stories about horrific services or elaborate scams.

So, what is it exactly that turns a family reunion trip and a golden business opportunity into a collective nightmare?

Price leverage?

It is almost meaningless to say China's transportation network does not have the capacity to handle the volume of travellers at this time of year. No system can comfortably ac-

commodate such a surge in human traffic. Therefore, some economists suggested pricing as a way of alleviating the problem.

The reasoning was: If people are willing to pay scalpers, they must be willing to pay a premium for tickets during the *chunyun* season. Year 2004's premium ticket increase ranges from 15 to 20 per cent for the "hottest" travel days.

But the scheme has not worked since the demand is basically what economists call "price inelastic." People have to be with their families regardless of such surcharges. As a result, it becomes an effective tax on the poor, as a significant portion of the traffic comprised migrant workers.

"Some migrant workers have to shell out two months' salary to pay for travel expenses. That strikes me as unreasonable," says Qiao Zhanxiang, a lawyer who caught national attention when he filed a lawsuit some years ago over the seasonal price rise.

The hike has been proven a failure in achieving its stated goal, says Qiao, but it has surely brought a lot of wealth to certain organizations. However, the degree of the increase is now restrained by public hearings, which are the direct result of Qiao's lawsuit.

Sheng Dalin, a media commentator, questions why there has been no public hearings since 2002. "That is, assuming there has been no change in supply and demand since then," he writes.

In national surveys, price inflation is the least favoured of all possible solutions.

Safety is priority

Good service may not be uppermost in travellers' minds when they are eager to get home for the holiday.



Thousands of passengers are buying tickets at Ningbo Railway Station in East China's Zhejiang Province.

But when lack of service turns into flagrant abuse, more than just eyebrows are raised.

In the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Railways, there is a four-point edict: safety, priority, smoothness and service. It is admirable that officials still emphasize good service; but in reality, safety is indeed the No. 1 priority. When hundreds of thousands of people converge in one place and so many vehicles are operating above capacity, it is of paramount importance that safety hazards be kept to the minimum.

The ministry forbids special and double-deck trains to run over capacity; express trains can have no more than 20 per cent over-capacity from the point of departure, and no more than 40 per cent in running; and regular trains no more than 50 per cent.

But if service is a luxury, elimination of fraud is a necessity. When so many people have trouble buying tickets yet can easily get them from a

scalper, it does not take a sociologist to ascertain that something is rotten inside the system.

The abundance of tickets in scalpers' hands means that insiders are profiting from selling them in bulk. Management knows this and, in some cities, they are taking action. The Guangzhou Railway Station screens ticket clerks, forbidding them to carry beepers, cash into their offices or act as scalpers. The Beijing Bureau imposes severe penalties, if clerks are found to be engaging in illegal activities.

"Every day on TV, we see scalpers just the tip of the iceberg. Those people are the source of the problem. They make off with it. It is the people who are making a fortune," says Lian Hongxiang, a commentator. Lian argues that, since strengthened police force can't root out scalpers, why not set

up a second-ary market for tickets and "drag the shady business into the legitimate realm"?

Year 2004's Spring Transportation started on January 7 and will end on February 15. But railway authorities reveal that the actual rush will be packed into 20 days instead of the usual 40 days because this year's Lunar New Year's Day is closer to January 1.

Since the supply to meet the needs of this gigantic human wave is relatively strained, one way out is to reduce demand.

Re-examine schedules

"The vacation schedule should be re-examined. So many colleges and universities start their winter vacation around the same time. And most employers start the holiday season one day before the Spring Festival. If we had a mechanism by which to stagger the starting and ending dates, that would help in some way," says Shu Shengxiang, a commentator.

Pessimists argue that this approach is akin to putting a band-aid on a bullet wound. The railway moves 3.5 million people a day and students make up just one of four major components of this passenger wave. The other groups - migrant workers, regular travellers and tourists - are already adjusting their travel dates according to factors over which the government has no control.

Students are always given preferential treatment. They enjoy unflinching, even discounted prices, are sold tickets in bulk and sometimes get to ride on special "student trains" with guaranteed seats. Some people ask whether this is not equivalent to a discrimination against other customer groups.

"Schools should shorten their summer vacations and lengthen their winter ones to avoid the national

rush," suggests Shu Shengxiang. In a Netease online poll, almost 80 per cent of respondents favour the idea.

Some cities, such as Guangzhou, are openly encouraging migrant workers to "stay for the holidays." Given the combination of local hospitality and unbearable travel conditions, more and more "non-natives" are opting to stay put. Some who are better off invite their retired parents to leave their hometowns and spend the holidays in the big cities, which helps ameliorate traffic congestion nationwide.

"In terms of the number of trips, the railway accounts for less than 10 per cent of the nation's total," says Yue Yang, an executive at Beijing Railway Station. But the railway system shoulders much of the burden of long-distance travel, and inadequate capacity is a major headache. Most of the traffic originates from economically-developed metropolises, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, or transportation hubs, such as Nanchang and Wuhan, but railway capacity at these places can barely satisfy half the traffic needs. "China has 72,000 kilometres of railway, but we need 150,000 kilometres to reach an ideal balance," states Yue.

Statistics show that China's railway length accounts for 6 per cent of the world's total, but its workload adds up to 24 per cent of the world's total.

Some experts believe it is unfair to blame railway regulators and management for everything as the design of China's railway system, which is out of sync with the increased number of travellers, is a product of central planning from the old days.

"The railway has raised the speed limit. They have reserved hundreds of trains at crucial hubs, and they

have multiple contingency plans for dealing with various situations," says Wei Hua, a transportation analyst.

But it may not be enough to catch up with growing demand. It is estimated that 2004's traffic during the 40-day transportation peak will rise by 3 per cent over 2003, to 1.89 billion trips, according to National Development and Reform Commission.

"Shortage of capacity will not be solved in five to 10 years, and the pressure of *chunyun* will most probably last longer," warns Ma Liqiang, director of the commission's economics bureau.

Catering for peak demand

However, it may not be practical to build up capacity to suit peak demand, says Liang Xiaomin, an economist.

"As millions of people have left their hometowns to seek a better life in the coastal urban areas, it is foreseeable that more and more people will have the need to return home for this big holiday, which is a deep-rooted Chinese tradition.

Unless China's western region is fully developed so that it can absorb much of its own surplus labour force, this trend will persist.

And our rigid residency system certainly does not help because these people cannot make their homes in the cities where they work and therefore they have more incentive to go back to their roots once a year," says Lu Jie, a scholar studying the phenomenon.

Most experts agree that creating greater capacity, not only by building high-speed railways but also by constructing alternatives such as motorways, is the ultimate solution.

But before that happens, the scarcity of resources in the country's transportation system must be dealt with.

MODES OF TRAVEL AND ANNUAL GROWTH FOR 2004 CHUNYUN

Expected total number of trips:	1.89 billion
In trains:	137 million (2%)
In buses:	1.717 billion (3%)
In boats:	26 million (marginal)
In planes:	10.5 million (9.6%)