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## Benta Schedules Hearing for Coronavirus Update on March 13; Blyden Calls for 'Immediate' Committee of the Whole Gathering

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**People wearing masks in Tapei, Taiwan in effort to protect themselves from the coronavirus. By. AP**

While the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services, which is chaired by Senator Oakland Benta, has scheduled a March 13 hearing to receive updates from local health officials on the coronavirus — more than two weeks away — Senator Marvin Blyden has written a letter to Senate President Novelle Francis calling for an immediate Committee of the Whole hearing, a realization by the senator that the public needs to hear from leaders on preparations being made to combat a possible outbreak, and also to learn of precautionary steps health officials have been taking.

"The tourism industry puts us at greater risk than many jurisdictions due to the high volume of daily visitor traffic from around the world. At the same time, our tourism industry is vulnerable to fears raised by the coronavirus, since travel is one of the first things to be curtailed in the face of a global pandemic", Mr. Blyden said.

The coronavirus has now affected at least 44 countries, with Australia's prime minister warning of a "global pandemic."

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, health officials say they are "closely monitoring" the situation, with the Dept. of Health stating in a release that it has been following the virus since 2019.

"While there are no reported cases in the Caribbean region, including the United States Virgin Islands, Health Department officials remain vigilant by actively monitoring the situation and encourage residents and visitors to do the same and to follow its guidelines," the department said.

U.S. cities have begun preparing for possible outbreaks. In San Francisco, officials are working with hospitals and clinics to identify rooms for isolating coronavirus patients and to screen patients for travel history and symptoms, according to the Wall Street Journal. City officials told schools to start planning to manage potential closures.

According to the New York Times:

From the Austrian Alps to an island off the coast of Africa. From an evangelical church in South Korea to a holy Shiite city in Iran. Governments and health workers around the world scrambled to contain the rapidly spreading new coronavirus, as the number of new cases outside China for the first time exceeded those inside the country at the heart of the epidemic.

More than 81,000 people have been infected with the virus that causes the respiratory disease Covid-19, and new cases have been documented in at least 44 countries and on every continent but Antarctica. So far, nearly 3,000 people have died, the vast majority of them in a single Chinese province, Hubei.

In Europe, France, Spain and Germany reported increases in cases, likely tied to an outbreak in Italy's Lombardy region, where more than 400 people have been infected. Cases were reported for the first time on Thursday in Estonia and Denmark.

In the Middle East, a dangerous cluster in Iran, where more than 140 people had been infected, spread across the region to Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia halted visits to the holiest sites in Islam, in the cities of Mecca and Medina.

In Asia, as the authorities in China were slowly lifting citywide lockdowns that had ensnared more than 700 million people, and a major outbreak tied to a megachurch in South Korea ballooned to more than 1,500 cases.

South America recorded its first case, a 61-year-old man in Brazil. And a person in California who had not been exposed to anyone known to be infected tested positive for the virus.

As fears spread to the United States, President Trump named Vice President Mike Pence his point person to coordinate the government's response, expressing confidence that the United States would prevent a widespread domestic outbreak.

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