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THE PENIN

Few Options to Help with North Korea's COVID Outbreak

Published June 15, 2022

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Category: [North Korea](#)



After more than two years since the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 has finally been detected in North Korea. Despite strict border controls limiting the movement of people and goods to prevent entry of the novel coronavirus, [state media reported](#) on 12 May that the Omicron BA.2 variant had been found in a sample taken from a feverish person in Pyongyang earlier that month. While it is always difficult to confirm information from North Korean state media, experts don't doubt COVID has entered the country, and recommend the U.S. and South Korea should stand ready to assist the North, despite its difficult

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Since mid-May, state media has been reporting daily on the number of people who are sick, recovered, and dead. According to the state emergency epidemic prevention headquarters on 12 June, the Korean Central News Agency reported there were 36,710

cases, with 42,650 recoveries across the country. The report added that there had been a total of 4,469,520 “fevered persons,” 98.5% of which had recovered. The report added that the total number of people that had died in the outbreak was 72.

Despite these regular reports in North Korean state media, there has been little independent confirmation of such numbers. The World Health Organization said that while it acknowledges the public reporting, they have not received any official communications from Pyongyang. “We have real issues in getting access to raw data and the actual situation on the ground,” said Dr. Michael Ryan, the head of the WHO’s health emergencies section, at a press briefing on 01 June. “We’re triangulating like everybody else.” Other experts say it is telling that state media has only referred to “fevered persons.” The reliance on overt symptoms of COVID-19, particularly since the disease is known to occur asymptotically, underlines the limited testing capacity of Pyongyang. “Fever as an indicator of contracting the virus is a pretty crude indicator,” said Daniel Sneider, a lecturer at Stanford University. “So we don’t even know the scale of infection at all.”

It is not clear why Pyongyang has broken its silence over the domestic COVID situation. One reason could simply be because the outbreak has become too large to ignore. According to the COVID-19 tracker published by 38 North, the outbreak is nationwide, with Rason, Nampo, and Kaesong as particular hotspots. “When we’ve heard rumors in the past of potential COVID outbreaks, they were generally localized,” said Jenny Town, a senior fellow at the Stimson Center and Director of 38 North. For example, the entire city of Kaesong was locked down after a suspected COVID-19 case was detected back in July 2020. “It’s clear now from what they’re reporting that it is nationwide, it’s not just in one area,” said Ms. Town. “You can’t isolate every city, every province, and be effective.”

Controlling the domestic narrative is another reason why experts believe the COVID response situation in North Korea is serious. Rachel Minyoung Lee, a nonresident fellow for 38 North, notes that Pyongyang usually tailors the information it releases based on the target. She points out that in 2016, there was a ten day lag in reporting between external
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and internal media regarding the extent of flood damage in North Hamgyong Province. But there has been no such lag in North Korea's reporting on its response to COVID-19. "Announcing the news to the domestic public as well as external audiences only underscores the severity of the situation and the leadership's alarm," she writes regarding the current situation.

Despite their critical role in containing the spread of COVID-19, North Korea has so far not accepted foreign vaccines. In April, ABC News reported that the North had turned down shipments of vaccines manufactured by AstraZeneca and Novavax, making it one of only two states in the world that have not begun widespread vaccinations of its population. The current outbreak may have changed that calculus, with media reports suggesting that Pyongyang has already started reaching out to its friends in Moscow and Beijing. Dr. Choi Jung-hoon, a former North Korean doctor, said he expect vaccines manufactured in Russia will be widely deployed. "One thing I can say is that the North will never receive vaccines from countries it considers enemies," he told The Korea Times.

For this reason, it is unsurprising that the North has not answered offers for help from the U.S. and South Korea. Newly inaugurated President Yoon Seok-youl has said he is willing to provide vaccines to the North, as has President Joe Biden. "We've gotten no response," said the American leader at a joint press conference last month with President Yoon in Seoul. "Overcoming 'the great upheaval' with help from what North Korea calls American imperialists and from South Korea won't be tolerated because that goes against the dignity of its supreme leader," Professor Nam Sung-wook from Korea University told the Associated Press in May.

A longstanding obstacle to getting humanitarian aid to the North Koreans remains external oversight. It is tempting to waive such requirements in order to expedite the delivery of needed aid to the people, but Pyongyang's past behavior make this unwise. "North Korea has a long history of diverting some of these resources to specific populations, and not providing them to the most needy, vulnerable populations," said Jean Lee, a fellow at the Wilson Center. Donors may be less inclined to support humanitarian efforts without accountability that their supplies are not being used to prop up the regime. "The reality is that North Korea has turned what should be a simple offer of help into a political football," said Ms. Lee. "And so that complicates even the most well-meaning offers of help."

experts say the alliance should support international organizations as they respond to the outbreak. Although bodies like UNICEF and the WHO maintain offices in Pyongyang, they have been maintained by local staff after most foreigners departed with the border closures at the start of the pandemic. “This could be an opportunity for them to get back into Pyongyang and reestablish a presence,” said Ms. Lee. Because Pyongyang will likely interpret any aid from Washington and Seoul to come with concessions, going through international organizations may dispel these notions. “That buffer helps to reduce the political stigma of it,” said Ms. Town, “but I think also demonstrates that there isn’t an expectation of some kind of reciprocal measure from the North Koreans.”

While it is natural to be skeptical of North Korean state media, policymakers should understand that it likely reflects some level of truth. And knowing the tenuous state of human security in North Korean means that we should have compassion in looking for ways to address the current COVID-19 outbreak. While the U.S. and South Korea cannot force the North to accept vaccines or oversight of other humanitarian support, the international community should not stand by as the coronavirus spread among an exceptionally vulnerable population. “This is not good for the people of DPRK, this is not good for the region, [and] this is not good for the world,” said Dr. Ryan of the WHO.

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Return to the Peninsula