

Beat: News

At Least 27 Die as 'Explosive' Fever Spreads in North Korea

Global Security News

New York City, 14.05.2022, 16:52 Time

AFSData Research & Analytics International - By Eunice Kim May 14, 2022

Curated by GlobalSecurity

"North Korea reported 21 additional deaths Friday among people experiencing fevers, the official KCNA news agency said Saturday, amid the nation's first outbreak of COVID-19.

A Reuters report, quoting KCNA, said nearly 281,000 people had received treatment and 27 in all had died since the fever, the origin of which has not been identified, was noticed in the country in late April.

State media did not say whether COVID-19 caused the additional deaths, Reuters said.

KCNA said earlier Friday that the omicron variant of the coronavirus had been confirmed as the cause of one death.

Speaking at an emergency Workers' Party meeting Saturday, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said this could be the largest crisis to fall on the state, given how seriously the COVID-19 transmission has affected the world. Nonetheless, he said the virus was not unstoppable as the infections are occurring within containable areas, calling on the people to have confidence to overcome the difficulty as soon as possible.

He also called for lessons to be drawn from the experience of advanced countries, in particular China, and its "abundant" quarantine achievements.

The public acknowledgment of the COVID cases over the past three days has been unprecedented from a state that until recently had insisted it was maintaining a status of "zero" COVID-19 cases. Before, it had broadcast stories about disinfection efforts on state TV for months, alongside news briefs about how the "malicious virus" was crippling other parts of the globe.

Visiting the state-run emergency epidemic-prevention headquarters Thursday, Kim criticized its system as having a "vulnerable point," noting the capital was emerging as the center of transmission.

April held two significant anniversaries — the 110th anniversary of North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung's birth on April 15, followed 10 days later by the 90th Military Foundation Day. The events drew massive, unmasked crowds to tight spaces in Pyongyang, now the center of the wave of infections.

The latest KCNA virus situation report indicated that fewer than half of an estimated 524,440 people sickened by the fever's "explosive" spread had recovered.

Damage control

As the news carried by KCNA sank in Friday, a spokesperson for South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said the administration stood ready to assist North Korea with vaccines and other medical supplies.

"It's worse than it appears," a second presidential official told reporters, without providing details. "It is not a simple problem."

Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the Seoul-based University of North Korean Studies, told VOA that Pyongyang's voluntary disclosure of a severe COVID-19 situation appears to have two objectives.

"North Korea publicized its COVID-19 situation likely because, one, it requires the engagement of its people in order to overcome the virus," he said. "And two, it was indirectly sending a message to the international community, that if it came to it, it would need help."

Answering reporters' questions on whether working-level talks would be initiated, President Yoon on Friday said, "Of course. We'll start with channels at our Unification Ministry."

Yoon's pledge came after Kwon Young-se, his nominee for unification minister in Yoon's new cabinet, said during a confirmation hearing that he would push for humanitarian assistance for the North, including COVID treatment, syringes and other medical supplies.

North Korea remained unresponsive to overtures from the previous Moon Jae-in government after the highly trumpeted U.S.-North Korea Singapore Summit of 2018 fell apart. Now some in Seoul are cautiously optimistic that South Korea's successful strategies for battling omicron could, given the circumstances, be shared as part of broader efforts to facilitate a peninsular thaw.

"The Yoon Suk Yeol government has said it would practice a 'principles-based' North Korea policy with the South Korea-U.S. alliance as its foundation," said professor Yang.

While many of Seoul's top officials maintain a worldview of "denuclearization first, inter-Korean exchange second," Yang added, they've also expressed a willingness to separate humanitarian assistance from political and military issues.

"Thus, I view a potential cooperation effort on COVID-19 as a starting point for bringing inter-Korean dialogue back to life," he said.

North Korea has yet to take practical steps toward seeking outside help. The World Health Organization's DPRK representative Edwin Salvador told VOA Korean this week the office has yet to receive an official report from Pyongyang's health ministry on the state's COVID-19 cases or related deaths. Although there are currently no vaccines earmarked for North Korea, he said the WHO was committed to working with state authorities.

North Korea so far appears to be sticking to its long-established cultural ideology of self-reliance. Addressing officials at the epidemic-prevention headquarters in Pyongyang, KCNA reported, Kim Jong Un expressed his conviction that North Korea would "perfectly block and terminate" sources of the virus and lead a "breakthrough victory in the great epidemic-prevention campaign."

Source: VOA, curated by GlobalSecurity (ARAC-International media partner)

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-20751/at-least-27-die-as-explosive-fever-spreads-in-north-korea.html>

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