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COVID-19 in North Korea

1 month ago, North Korea declared its first COVID-19 cases. Information is scarce, but the outbreak now appears to be huge, amid a food crisis and without mass vaccination. Talha Burki reports.

When COVID-19 first emerged, North Korea was quick to respond. It sealed its borders in early 2020. Since then, the country has had little contact with the outside world. Reports have occasionally emerged of North Koreans being isolated in public facilities, with symptoms suggestive of COVID-19, although verification of details has not been possible. On May 12, 2022, the country confirmed its first case of COVID-19. Premier Kim Jong-un has described the situation as the “greatest turmoil” North Korea has faced since it was founded in 1948.

The extremely limited testing capacity makes it difficult to track the extent of the ongoing outbreak in North Korea. However, in a highly unusual move, the authorities have been releasing detailed statistics on cases of “fever”. These cases peaked on May 15, with almost 400 000 new cases reported, followed by a steady decline to about 100 000 new cases per day by the end of the month. Not all cases of fever are caused by COVID-19, nor are all cases of COVID-19 characterised by fever. However, these data are the only available proxy. As of June 18, 4.6 million North Koreans (representing 18% of the population) had been diagnosed with fever since late April.

The situation has probably been exacerbated by low levels of vaccination. The exact proportion of North Koreans who have been vaccinated is unknown and it is unclear whether a specific vaccination policy is in place. The country has turned down millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses from COVAX. Shipments have arrived from China, but nowhere near enough to cover the entire population. “Controlling omicron in the absence of vaccination is a ghastly task”, pointed out William Hanage, Associate Professor of epidemiology at

the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health (Boston, MA, USA). “We can expect a very rapid surge. Omicron does appear to be somewhat less virulent than delta, even in naïve populations,

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but as Hong Kong has shown, it is more than capable of causing serious population level effects.” Moreover, there is a distinct possibility that North Korea is in the middle of a food emergency.

According to a 2019 assessment by the World Food Programme, 11 million North Koreans were undernourished and in need of humanitarian assistance. Hazel Smith, of the Centre for Korea Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (London, UK), traces the crisis to the imposition of comprehensive UN sanctions against North Korea in 2017, in response to its continuing nuclear weapons programme. The country is struggling to produce essential medicines or maintain clean water supplies. “The agriculture sector in North Korea cannot function; it does not have the spare parts and fertiliser it needs, and it cannot do things like repair irrigation systems”, said Smith. She reckons government and household food stocks are likely to have diminished to nothing.

“If COVID-19 is spreading in North Korea, it will be having deleterious effects; the population’s resilience is so low right now”, said Smith. She suggested that the regime might have refused offers of assistance from the international community to combat COVID-19 because it does not want to draw attention to the desperate

conditions within the country. “In the end, this is an authoritarian government that will prioritise regime security over the well-being of its citizens”, said Smith.

North Korea has reported only 73 fever-related deaths since May 12. This number is highly implausible, although not completely impossible, if it turns out that the majority of North Koreans have been recently exposed to SARS-CoV-2. Omicron, Hanage says, is about as virulent as the original SARS-CoV-2. Extrapolating from the experience of New York City early in the pandemic, Hanage posits that North Korea should see somewhere in the region of 50 000 deaths. Several times as many people would be expected to be admitted to hospital. “There is no way the North Korean health-care system could handle a sudden influx of cases of COVID-19”, said a medical expert on the country, speaking on condition of anonymity. “They do not have enough ventilators, oxygen, or basic medicines, let alone antivirals. Even in the best hospitals, doctors are reusing surgical gloves”.

Smith stressed that the issue is supplies rather than staff. “North Korea has a sophisticated medical workforce”, she said. In 2007, the country vaccinated 10 million people against measles over the course of 3 days. A similar performance against COVID-19, assuming the vaccines were made available, could see the entire population vaccinated within a couple of weeks. Smith urged the international community to suspend the UN sanctions until the current crisis is over. “The best thing we can do for the health of the people in North Korea is to ensure they can get hold of basic supplies”, she told *The Lancet*.

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