

Beat: News

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

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"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.

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