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North Korea's Difficulties Coping with COVID-19

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The government of North Korea continues to report that it has no cases of COVID-19. In its most recent submission to the World Health Organization on April 1, Pyongyang reported that it had tested a total of 23,121 people for the coronavirus as of April 1. It said that all results were negative.

For a number of reasons, these official statements seem clearly questionable. North Korea has done very limited COVID testing. The total number of North Koreans tested is less

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than 1 in 1,000 people—less than 0.1% of the country’s population. Furthermore, those tested are almost certainly only the super elite in Pyongyang, and this gives little information about other areas of the country or the health situation of less politically prominent people.

Also, for its own political purposes, the government tightly controls information. In the clearest terms, the North Korean government lies when that is in its interest. North Korea is in the absolutely last place of the 180 countries ranked in the “World Press Freedom Index” produced by Reporters Without Borders (*Reporters Sans Frontières*). It intentionally limits access to the internet and other digital media, strictly controls information made public, and tightly controls foreign journalists. In this era of the COVID pandemic, no foreign journalists are even being allowed to enter the country. The bottom line is that officially released information is far from reliable.

North Korea’s healthcare system is so fragile and receives such a limited portion of national resources that it is a rational policy to take draconian action to seek to prevent entry and spread of the coronavirus. In a recent study of the ability of national healthcare systems to deal with an epidemic, which was conducted by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security, North Korea ranked 193 of 195 countries in its capability to cope with a health care crisis. (In contrast, South Korea ranked 9th in the world.) As humanitarian assistance specialist on North Korea, Katharina Zellweger, said “the North Korean government is very well aware of how weak their health care system is. . . They’re afraid they can’t cope with an outbreak.”

Despite official denials of any COVID cases, confidential sources have reported the presence of the virus in the North. A confidential North Korean government report is said to show that in North Hamgyong province some 100 deaths and over 13,000 suspected cases of coronavirus have been found. The cases are officially diagnosed as “acute pneumonia,” but the cases exhibit coronavirus symptoms. While North Hamgyong purportedly has the largest number of such cases, other provinces are apparently also facing the same problem.

Another report from the North indicates a significant number of deaths in the military from COVID-19 as well as identifying some 3,700 troops quarantined with the disease. This is from an internal report to military leadership detailing the impact of the pandemic on the armed forces. Disposal of the bodies of those who have died has apparently been an
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issue. The number is too large to burn the bodies, so instructions were given for careful disinfection of the corpses.

It strains credulity to believe that North Korea has no COVID cases. Despite the draconian measures to prevent contact with China and other outside populations, there are contacts with outsiders. The limitations on internal travel and tough enforcement of quarantines can help limit the spread, but it is very difficult to believe North Korea has seen no COVID cases. While confidential reports cannot be confirmed, the number and detail of such reports do suggest that there are problems of disease spread in the North.

Staying Home from the Tokyo Olympics and Tightening Border Security

The most recent and dramatic anti-COVID action of Pyongyang, which indicates the high level of concern for the pandemic, was the government's decision not to participate in the Tokyo Olympic Games in July-August of this year. On April 6, the DPRK national Olympic committee announced that it "decided not to join the 32nd Olympics Games to protect athletes from the global health crisis caused by the coronavirus." North Korea has participated in every Olympics since 1988, when it refused to attend the games that were held in Seoul that year.

While COVID was the sole reason cited for not participating in the Olympics, other factors may have been involved. South Korea was seeking to use the presence of senior delegations in Tokyo from both North and South to reopen dialogue on improved inter-Korean relations. Pyongyang has shown little interest lately in bettering ties with Seoul, despite the Moon Jae-in government's persistence. The decision to skip the Tokyo Olympics helps Pyongyang also avoid issues of North-South relations that it clearly wants to dodge.

In addition to skipping the Olympics, the North has taken strict actions to prevent the possible COVID contagion from entering the North. A small but visible example was the strict quarantine that was imposed upon the city of Kaesong and the surrounding area when a re-defector surreptitiously crossed the border from the South in order to return to Kaesong. Another indication of the level of concern was the difficulty faced by eight Russian diplomats stationed in Pyongyang who were returning to Russia. Because of the North Korean prohibition on international travel in or out of the country, the diplomats and their families had to walk across the railroad bridge crossing the Tumen River that separates North Korea from Russia. Furthermore, they had to push their luggage on a rail
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The North Korean regime has always maintained tight border controls—both for those seeking to leave the country, as well as those seeking to enter. It is illegal for North Korean citizens to enter or leave without explicit written authorization, and border guards were given shoot-to-kill orders against illegal border crossers going in either direction. Since the pandemic, however, conditions on the border have been further tightened. The shoot-to-kill orders were expanded to include a border zone one kilometer from the border, and border guards have been aggressive in enforcing these rules. North Koreans have reportedly been shot for simply entering the buffer zone near the border. Shortly after the tighter border controls were imposed, a South Korean official was shot and his body burned after his boat entered North Korean territorial waters.

One of the consequences of tighter border controls and more energetic enforcement to prevent border crossing is that the number of North Korean refugees or defectors leaving the country to go to the South has reached a new low, largely as a result of these stricter border controls and stricter internal travel controls. The number of North Korean refugees reaching South Korea in 2020 dropped sharply, reaching the smallest number since defectors began fleeing to the South in the late 1990s during North Korea's famine. The South Korean Unification Ministry reported that during the entire year 2020, only 229 North Koreans were resettled in South Korea. That figure is down from 1,047 who arrived in 2019 and 1,137 who arrived in 2018. The number of refugees in 2020 was significantly lower than any time in the previous two decades.

The Economic Impacts of the Pandemic

The COVID pandemic has significantly heightened the economic problems facing the North Korean economy. Since 2016, the North has been subjected to a series of increasingly tighter UN Security Council economic sanctions because of its nuclear and missile programs. After its fourth nuclear test in March 2016, export of aviation fuel to the North was prohibited. Nine months later after a fifth nuclear test, exports of copper and nickel, and exports of statues and helicopters were all banned. In 2017 after significant missile tests, exports of coal and iron were sanctioned. One month later after the sixth nuclear test, petroleum products were prohibited, North Korea's export of certain metals and agricultural products were banned, and use of North Korean labor abroad was also stopped. These were the toughest sanctions yet imposed.

Enforcement of these sanctions has not been easy. But despite North Korea's good relationship with China and Russia, these two closest allies have supported the UN sanctions regime, both in the UN Security Council and in enforcing the sanctions in their territory. The sanctions have negatively impacted North Korea's official economy. The sanctions were not perfect, but the North Korean economy has definitely felt the pinch.

When the impacts of the COVID pandemic are coupled with the impact of UN sanctions, however, conditions significantly worsened. China is the source of roughly 90 percent of North Korea's foreign trade, and in 2020 trade with China plummeted by more than 75 percent due to the dual impact of COVID and sanctions. The Bank of Korea estimates that in 2020 the North's economy dropped by some 10 percent—a decline that was larger than any of the annual declines in economic output during the “Arduous March” period of severe famine in the mid-1990s.

At the Party Congress in January 2021 Kim Jong-un admitted that the economy “tremendously fell short of goals on almost every sector.” This frank admission of failure was certainly in stark contrast to the usual obfuscation. Some have suggested that it may have been part of an effort to develop a “man of the people” image for Kim Jong-un—a leader who calls it like it is. On the other hand, economic conditions are so bad that simply attempting to put a happy face on the state of the economy would not be credible.

The Impact of the COVID Measures

In his report to the UN Human Rights Council in March, Tomás Ojea Quintana, UN Special Rapporteur on DPRK human rights, suggested that COVID prevention measures have “resulted in a drastic decline in trade and commercial activities” as well as “severe economic hardship to the general population, causing increased food insecurity.” He also reported cases of “deaths by starvation” as well as “an increase in the number of children and elderly people who have resorted to begging as families are unable to support them.”

An indication of the seriousness with which the North is dealing with the pandemic are reports of severe punishments of those who violate the COVID restrictions which were discussed by the UN Special Rapporteur. Last December a man involved in illegal trade with China was reported to have been publicly executed, and in November it was reported that two soldiers and two border guards were executed for smuggling. According to the UN report, a special detention facility has also been built in North Hwanghae province to hold those found in violation of quarantine regulations.

Pyongyang authorities are also making it clear that local officials must strictly enforce the COVID requirements. A local government official in Pyongan Province in the northwest of the country was purged for allowing a quarantine facility to operate at reduced capacity contrary to the order to maximize defenses against the coronavirus from the “Supreme Dignity” (an honorific for Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un). Reports that the local official was executed, were not confirmed, but it is clear that such reports makes local officials very attentive in following directives from Pyongyang on fighting the pandemic.

Pyongyang is clearly caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the COVID pandemic is a serious threat to North Korea with its fragile healthcare system and in the face of a virus that has shown its ability to spread despite stringent health counter-measures. On the other hand, the tough measures taken by the regime to minimize the impact of the disease are threatening the wellbeing of the North Korean people.

Pyongyang has attempted other extreme measures. Using the North's cyber strengths, hackers apparently attempted to steal information from Pfizer and other companies regarding coronavirus vaccines and treatment technologies, according to reports from South Korean intelligence agencies to the country's National Assembly. It is not clear if this was to gain access to the vaccines and therapeutics for the benefit of North Koreans or if it was to sell the information to the highest bidder elsewhere to earn additional income.

North Korea has also requested and is expected to receive vaccines through the World Health Organization-endorsed Covax program, although there are no reports that the vaccine has yet been delivered. The number of vaccine doses is expected to be enough for just less than a million people, although North Korea has a population of over 25 million. The vaccine would be part of an allocation for low income countries.

The current COVID crisis is clearly a serious challenge to Kim Jong-un and his regime. The authoritarian government has the advantage of being able to keep its population under fairly strict control, but the pandemic, the increasing difficulties created by UN economic sanctions, and severe flooding last year have all combined to put the Kim regime in one of the most difficult positions it has faced during its three-quarters of a century existence. The regime, however, has shown remarkable resilience and tenacity, and it certainly is much too early to predict the outcome of the present time of troubles.

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Return to the Peninsula