

Risk of wider outbreak of COVID-19 remains high in South Korea

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South Korea's response to the global COVID-19 pandemic is being hailed as a success story when compared to the United States and Europe, which have both seen skyrocketing numbers of cases. As of Monday, there were 8,961 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in South Korea, with 64 new cases from the previous day. At least 111 people have passed away from the disease.

As the number of cases falls from a daily peak of 909 on February 29, health officials are turning their attention to preventing new outbreak centers. On Sunday, Seoul began testing travelers arriving from Europe and requiring all, even those who test negative, to quarantine themselves for 14 days. Forty-seven confirmed cases have come from travelers arriving from overseas.

Despite the seeming successes, the public health risk has not yet receded. Yun Tae-ho, a senior official in the Health Ministry, warned on Saturday against complacency. He said: "COVID-19 is spreading at an alarming rate around the world, and we are seeing sporadic mass infections. Considering COVID-19's nature of high infection rate and fast spread, it is highly possible for the coronavirus epidemic to continue for a substantial period of time."

A major reason for concern is that much of the government's attention has been focused on Daegu and neighboring North Gyeongsang Province, the epicenter of the outbreak in the country. Last week, Dr. Kim U-ju, an expert on infectious disease at Korea University Guro Hospital, warned: "Serial group infections are occurring from confirmed patients linked to [a] call center in Guro. We've been looking into Shincheonji cases [in Daegu] only because the issue was so big. But I think other local communities are already having group infections, just as the call center showed."

Kim was quoted on Monday, saying: "While it appears we have reached the boiling point, we must now be concerned about community transmission because we don't know if there will be an explosive growth even from a small-scale group infection."

The number of cases of COVID-19 initially remained low through mid-February, until a member of the Shincheonji cult in Daegu was confirmed to be infected. The secretive nature of the cult and its religious superstitions led to rapid community transmission. Widespread testing was then carried out, with 338,036 people receiving a test as of Monday.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Jeong Se-gyun announced that businesses in the entertainment industry, indoor gyms, and religious facilities should close for two weeks to stem the spread of COVID-19. The government also advised people not to go outdoors during this period unless it is an emergency. On Monday, Jeong announced the government would take legal action against the churches who continued to violate the quarantine measures the previous day.

The seriousness with which the government appears to be taking "social distancing" measures and their violations is at odds with the fact that workers are still being kept on the job, told only to stand two meters apart from other people, wear masks, and to head directly home after work. The inadequacy of these measures is already apparent from an outbreak of COVID-19 at a call center in Seoul's Guro district.

After the first employee from the call center tested positive for the virus on March 8, there have been 152 cases linked to that workplace. With many workers using often packed public transportation, there is a risk that numerous people in Seoul could now be infected without their knowledge and spreading the disease. As of Sunday, the capital, nearby Incheon, and the

surrounding Gyeonggi Province, with combined population of nearly 25 million people, have seen a combined 721 cases.

While public schools have been closed until April 5, many for-profit after-school academies, called hagwons, remain open, exposing students, teachers, and staff to greater risk. There are 86,435 hagwons in South Korea, providing tutoring services in math, English, and other subjects. The majority are operating, despite officials like Seoul Superintendent of Education Jo Hui-yeon saying, that closures were “not a choice but a must in order to protect public health.”

An investigation into the conditions in these schools has not even been conducted. Yonhap News Agency wrote Sunday: “The Education Ministry plans to conduct an investigation into the conditions surrounding hagwons attending by children and students while also looking into the activities of public facilities students often visit.”

Workers are being forced into dangerous situations amid fears of the pandemic’s impact on the economy. “We cannot rule out the possibility of negative growth (during the first quarter), given the impact of the virus on private spending, investment and exports,” said Finance Minister Hong Nam-gi on Friday. Last year, the economy grew at only 2 percent, the lowest in ten years. JPMorgan is now predicting annual growth of only 0.8 percent.

Last Thursday, Seoul and Washington agreed to a currency swap deal worth \$US60 billion dollars after the country’s main stock index, the KOSPI, fell by 11 percent. It rebounded 7 percent following the deal. Seoul also announced a supplementary budget last week worth 11.7 trillion won (\$US9.2 billion) and an addition 50 trillion (\$US39.2 billion) that President Moon Jae-in claimed would support small businesses, though the money will be funneled into the pockets of banks and the wealthy.

Workers must also be warned that part of the reason for the seeming success of South Korea’s response to COVID-19 is due to police state measures in place, the framework of which was erected by the United States and Syngman Rhee following the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 and strengthened by thirty years of military dictatorship following Park Chung-hee’s coup in 1961. This scaffolding has never been torn down.

South Korea has relied on CCTV cameras, while tracking people’s bank cards and cell phones in order to determine who to test. In the hands of the capitalist state, this type of technology can and will be abused to muzzle social discontent, particularly as the economy declines. The deprivation of democratic rights makes it all the more clear that the tools used to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and future crises must be in the hands of the working class.



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