

Pandemic surges in South Korea as government pushes to end social distancing

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The number of daily new COVID-19 cases is rising again in South Korea, reaching their highest levels in months, including 1,275 infections on July 7. The number of new cases in Seoul the previous day reached 583, the most in the city since the pandemic began. The numbers continue to climb as the more dangerous and contagious delta variant begins to take hold.

However, central and local governments are pushing to remove even the limited measures in place to control the virus. Since the end of January, new cases of COVID-19 in South Korea have ranged between 300 and 700 per day, but plans remain to relax social distancing measures. On June 24, when the government announced it would proceed, despite an uptick in cases, the seven-day national average for new infections stood at 489. As of July 6, the number had shot up to 768. In total, more than 2,000 people have died from the virus.

The central government enacted a new 4-tier social distancing scheme on July 1, which ends most of the measures throughout the country, with the exception of the Seoul metropolitan area, where approximately 80 percent of the new infections have been discovered. This region, which includes the capital city, Gyeonggi Province, and Incheon, is densely populated and home to approximately half of South Korea's 51 million residents.

The "Level 1" restrictions in place for the rest of the country are basically non-existent. The new rules lift curfews on businesses, such as restaurants and bars, so long as they maintain the inadequate 1 meter of space between customers, and allow an unlimited number of people to gather. While provincial and city governments have stated they will maintain a cap of eight people on groups in public, they also plan to remove this restriction by July 14.

Given the surge in cases in the Seoul area, the

government postponed the relaxation of social distancing until July 7, and has extended restrictions again for another week. This means public gatherings of five or more people are banned and most businesses must close by 10pm.

The government has also lifted an outdoor mask mandate for those who have been vaccinated, despite the possibility that they can still pass on the virus. This decision was reversed in the Seoul area, but the constant vacillation between what measures are in force or not, has caused confusion among the population.

Even these limited restrictions have been entirely inadequate in bringing down the number of daily cases. Furthermore, the Moon Jae-in administration is essentially sending the message that the pandemic is largely over, and people can disregard safety measures. This has been done specifically to benefit big business, regardless of the consequences for working people.

In daily life, people are expressing concern over the lack of protection. A 35-year-old office worker told the *Korea Times*, "Fears are growing over the highly transmissible Delta variant of the coronavirus, especially in the Seoul metropolitan area, but many workers are still on packed subways and buses, in order to get to work. I don't think the situation will improve this way."

In fact, workers throughout South Korea have been kept on the job throughout the pandemic, in large measure thanks to the unions, including the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which has refused to address workplace safety outside of token protests. Early in the pandemic, the KCTU made clear it would not take action against the government. In recent weeks, it has also moved quickly to shut down strikes, over conditions in industries such as package delivery, construction, and manufacturing.

Schools have also been kept open, contributing to the spread of the virus. Currently, students attend classes on a rotational basis, with some students studying in person and others online. This is clearly insufficient for keeping students and teachers safe. Demonstrating the danger, as of Tuesday, 23 elementary students at a school in Incheon have tested positive for COVID-19. Similar outbreaks have occurred in recent weeks at other schools and private after-school academies, infecting students, teachers and their families.

The central government, however, is still pushing ahead with plans to re-open schools to full in-person learning in late August, during the second half of the school year. Parents have raised concerns with these plans. One mother of a middle school student wrote in an online forum, “Students have yet to be vaccinated, as they come almost last in the list [of those eligible to receive vaccines], and younger ones are not on the list at all. I don’t understand why the government is planning to let all students attend in-person classes in this situation.”

The government’s action on behalf of the capitalist class conflicts with the advice of medical professionals. Son Yeong-rae, a senior health official, warned recently that the delta variant was “rapidly increasing,” now accounting for 7 percent of new cases, compared to less than 1 percent two months ago. Health experts are urging the government to adopt stricter anti-virus measures, not ease them.

In an interview with the *Korea Herald* published on June 27, Dr. Paik Soon-young, professor emeritus at the Catholic University of Korea, College of Medicine, warned of the growing danger.

He said that the public messaging had to pivot from ‘all is normal’ and ‘enjoy this summer’ to ‘don’t let your guard down until more of us are vaccinated.’ He continued, “Unless the right interventions are undertaken, Korea is too under-vaccinated to withstand the inevitable new variant... The more we don’t know, the more careful we want to be. But we seem to be doing the opposite.”

While South Korea’s vaccination program began in February, little more than 30 percent of the population has received a single dose, and only around 10 percent is fully vaccinated. Most of those who have received the vaccine are over 60 years of age, leaving workers, who must work, and young people going to school

vulnerable.



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