

COVID-19 cases compound economic crisis in North Korea

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North Korea is currently facing a surge of COVID-19 cases amid a worsening economic crisis. The situation is compounded by the impoverished country's isolation from the rest of the world, a result of both US-led sanctions as well as Pyongyang's own self-imposed border closing for most of the pandemic. The spate of missile tests in recent months, including the launching of three ballistic missiles on May 25, must be seen within this context.

Pyongyang publicly admitted to COVID-19 cases within North Korea for the first time on May 12, though it is believed there have been other outbreaks. The government declared a "major national emergency," which included lockdowns in every city, in an attempt to curb virus transmission.

Daily infections reached as high as 392,920 on May 15, with these classified as "fever cases," since North Korea reportedly lacks adequate testing capabilities. This is an indication that many more cases may be unidentified, suggesting an even larger health crisis. On June 1, Pyongyang reported 93,180 daily cases. Officially, more than 3.74 million have been identified as likely cases since the end of April. Only 70 deaths have so far been reported.

China has pledged to assist North Korea with the outbreak, citing "a fine tradition of mutual assistance" between the two, according to Beijing's Foreign Ministry. On May 16, North Korea flew three cargo planes to China and back, a South Korean government source told CNN, though it is unknown what they carried. Radio Free Asia (RFA), a mouthpiece for US imperialism, reported on May 26 that North Korea had only recently begun its mass inoculation program with vaccines from China, though they are supposedly only available for soldiers involved in construction projects in the capital.

On May 29, Pyongyang's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un "made a positive evaluation of the pandemic situation being controlled and improved across the country" at a politburo meeting of the ruling Workers Party of Korea.

Pyongyang, therefore, appears to be lifting COVID control measures, possibly in response to the economic crisis. Reports also suggest that in many cases workers were kept on the job despite lockdowns. Hong Min of the South Korean government-affiliated Korea Institute of National Unification stated, "According to North Korean broadcasting, production activities were carried out on a daily basis with exceptions, despite quarantine and containment measures."

For most of the pandemic, North Korea has maintained self-imposed border closures with other countries, which primarily means closing its border with China. While some shipments of Chinese relief aid started to enter the country last year, they were forced to sit in quarantine for months. Pyongyang also opened its border with China for freight trains in January, however, it was closed again on May 1.

Even before the latest COVID-19 outbreak and the border closure, North Korea faced a deteriorating economy. The brief re-opening of trade, coupled with several ballistic missile tests this year, suggests Pyongyang is attempting to secure an easing of the crippling US-led sanctions that have been in place for years. North Korea has repeatedly utilized nuclear and missile tests as its only bargaining chip with Washington, short of complete capitulation.

In 2020, North Korea's economy declined sharply by 4.5 percent, which continued in 2021 and this year. During the brief period the North Korea-China border reopened, trade grew by 40.7 times in January and

February over the previous year, according to the Chinese General Administration of Customs. This mostly included foodstuffs as well as construction, agricultural, and pharmaceutical goods. However, trade only recovered to approximately 50 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

North Korea is also facing food shortages. Pyongyang's trade with China reportedly dropped by 80 percent in 2020 and by another two-thirds through the first nine months of 2021. The US Central Intelligence Agency claims that the North faces a shortage of 860,000 tonnes of food necessary to prevent widespread malnutrition.

This, of course, has not prevented Washington from attempting to enforce even stricter sanctions on North Korea following the latest missile tests on May 25, which is believed to have included an intercontinental ballistic missile and two short-range ballistic missiles.

On May 26, China and Russia, the two main targets of US imperialism, vetoed a US-drafted United Nations Security Council resolution to intensify sanctions on North Korea. Neither has vetoed a resolution since 2006.

China's UN ambassador Zhang Jun argued that additional sanctions would only worsen the situation in North Korea and lead to increased testing. He accused the US of causing the current situation by the "flip flop of its policies." These sentiments were echoed by Russia's ambassador Vasily Nebenzya.

During the Trump administration, the US president threatened at the UN to "totally destroy" North Korea, only to turn around and enter negotiations with vague promises of economic assistance that ultimately led nowhere. Under Biden, Washington has offered nothing of substance to Pyongyang while at the same time expressing support for South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's "audacious" economic plan to revive North Korea's economy.

The proposed sanctions included a ban on exports of tobacco products to North Korea, an extension of the ban on ballistic missile testing to include cruise missiles or any method of potentially delivering a nuclear weapon, cutting crude oil exports to the North from four million barrels to three million annually, and reducing refined petroleum exports from 500,000 barrels to 375,000. It would also have banned all North Korean exports of "mineral fuels, mineral oils, and

products of their distillation."

Despite this, the US has offered pandemic assistance to North Korea, though Pyongyang has not responded, understandably wary of US intentions. Last July, Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry criticized US offers of "humanitarian assistance," stating it was meant "to legitimize their pressure on sovereign states and achieve their sinister political scheme."

Pyongyang has also seen the fates of past targets of US imperialism who have tried to make deals with Washington, including Iraq and Libya, both of which were destroyed and their leaders killed. In a book on Kim Jong-un's decade in power published Tuesday in Pyongyang, the North stated, "The invasion tactic of the US is to force [a country] to surrender its self-defensive capabilities. The US has relentlessly laid out sugarcoated words, saying that it will help the country to prosper if it gives up its military buildup and takes a different path."

Given this history, Pyongyang undoubtedly feels there is no reason to trust the Biden administration today without significant assurances for North Korea's security.



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