

# COVID-19 cases explode again in Japan, South Korea

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Cases of COVID-19 are surging in Japan and South Korea, fueled by the more contagious and vaccine-evading BA.5 Omicron subvariant. Governments in Tokyo and Seoul, however, continue to refuse to implement any serious measures to stop the spread of the deadly virus. Instead, they have made clear that keeping the economy open and extracting profits from the working class trumps saving lives.

Japan, in particular, is experiencing its worst surge since the pandemic began. On July 28, the county recorded 233,066 daily cases, more than double the previous record-high set in February. Nearly half of Japan's 47 prefectures are reporting record-highs, indicating widespread infection throughout the country. In a one-week period from July 22 to 28, Japan recorded 1,283,378 cases, more than any other country in the world.

However, the government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has made clear that there will be no return to even the limited mitigation measures put in place during earlier stages in the pandemic. Shigeru Omi, the head of a government panel on COVID-19, reported to Prime Minister Kishida on July 11, that "if everyone does what they can do, there is no need at this point to impose movement restrictions."

In other words, Tokyo is shifting blame for not halting the deadly pandemic onto individuals, despite the fact that people must still go to work and school, all the while using crowded public transportation systems and being forced to sit in crowded offices and classrooms.

Workers required to interact with large numbers of people, such as those in public transportation, are being subjected to widespread infection, as well as exposing countless others who rely on buses and subways. Some bus companies have started restricting their operating

times, not to try to prevent COVID's spread, but because too many drivers are testing positive.

The government's refusal to put any health measures in place also exposes claims that Tokyo needs to amend the constitution to include a state-of-emergency clause to deal with situations like the pandemic. In reality, such a clause is not meant to address health crises or other serious threats to people's lives, but to pave the way for police state measures, with an amendment that would restrict democratic rights.

Predictably, the hospital system is already being overwhelmed by the sharp growth in new cases. Hospital beds are being filled around the country, forcing patients to remain at home. As of July 29, four prefectures had hospital bed occupancy rates at 70 percent or higher, with Okinawa Prefecture, the county's poorest, standing at 88 percent. In addition, 20 prefectures occupancy rates are over 50 percent, which is impacting normal medical care.

Another record-high for the one-week period through July 24 was that more than 2,600 people suspected of being infected with COVID-19 were unable to access the immediate ambulance transportation that they needed.

Health authorities in Seoul have similarly lifted nearly all mitigation measures with no intention of implementing new ones, even as daily cases climbed above 100,000 for the first time in three months on July 27, with a total of 100,285. The seven-day average through July 29 stood at 77,571 cases per day. In addition, several cases of the new BA.2.75 subvariant have also been discovered in addition to the surge in BA.5 cases.

Dozens of people continue to die each day, with the official total death toll passing 25,000 on Saturday. Most of those who have passed away did so this year,

following the lifting of mitigation measures by the previous administration of Democrat Moon Jae-in.

In an indication of what could be in store, during the last Omicron surge in March, excess deaths for the month stood at 18,818, of which 9,034 people officially passed away from COVID-19. Among the others included in the excess death total were undoubtedly many who were unable to be tested and receive treatment, or who did not receive the necessary medical care needed for other ailments.

The only requirement still in place is a mask mandate indoors. In a token move, the government of President Yoon Suk-yeol stated recently that it would send officials to indoor facilities to ensure people continued to wear masks.

The government also made the empty suggestion that facilities like after-school academies, known as *hagwon*, close and only offer classes online. However, without any support from the government, nearly every academy remains open, and students are regularly infected.

A teacher at a *hagwon* in the densely populated Seoul metropolitan area told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Nearly every day a student, or one of their family members, reports being infected. It’s impossible to ventilate classrooms properly in our building as most have no windows. We also can’t go to Zoom classes because the South Korean education system is so competitive that parents are afraid their children will fall behind. The government knows this.”

The real considerations for Tokyo and Seoul are ensuring enormous profits continue to flow into the pockets of big business. In May, Japan’s SMBC Nikko Securities reported that 1,323 major companies listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange had taken in 33.5 trillion yen (\$US249 billion) in net profits for the 2021 fiscal year, surpassing the 30 trillion yen (\$US223 billion) record posted in 2018.

In South Korea, the country’s four national banking groups—KB, Shinhan, Woori, and Hana—all enjoyed record profits during the April–June period, bringing in a total of 9 trillion won (\$US6.9 billion). This easily surpassed the previous record of 4.63 trillion won (\$US3.6 billion), set in the first quarter of the year.

Workers, however, are facing a fall in real wages as inflation soars. Japanese workers have suffered from stagnant wages for more than 20 years. Their real

wages fell 1.8 percent in May. South Korean workers similarly are experiencing a fall in real wages, as consumer prices rose 6 percent in June.



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