

South Korean government lifts indoor mask mandate while COVID-19 continues to run rampant

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The South Korean government of President Yoon Suk-yeol has announced that it will lift the indoor mask mandate to limit the spread of COVID-19 on Monday, January 30. This is despite the fact that the virus continues to run rampant throughout the country, with the official number of cases in the tens of thousands daily.

Prime Minister Han Deok-su made the announcement on January 20, a day before the beginning of the Lunar New Year holiday. The announcement was calculated to encourage people to travel, eat out, and otherwise drop precautions while visiting family, and to promote the lie that the pandemic is all but over. People will only be required to wear masks on public transportation and in hospitals and pharmacies.

The government claims without a shred of scientific evidence that it is safe to end mask-wearing if two of four criteria are met. Those four criteria are a downward trend in new cases, a decline in critically ill patients and deaths, the supposed existence of strong medical response capabilities, and high vaccination rates among high-risk groups. The government claims that all but the fourth criterion have been met.

At the same time, over the past week, the average number of official new cases each day has been approximately 27,000, with a recent slight fall in identified cases due to the holiday and less testing. On average, 35 people have died each day over the same period.

Yet, as experience has shown, a relative fall in cases does not mean that a wave is over or that another wave, with a potentially even more contagious and deadly variant, will not occur. The new, highly infectious and immune evading XBB.1.5 variant is already spreading

in South Korea after it was detected in December.

Prime Minister Han's own words contradicted the claim that it is now safe to remove masks. He said: "The importance of vaccination has grown with the easing of the mask mandate. I strongly advise high-risk people aged 60 or older and the elderly residing in high-risk facilities to get vaccinated as soon as possible." The question must be asked that if high-risk groups—to say nothing of the very real health threat to other segments of the population—are still at risk, why is the mask mandate being lifted?

The answer lies in the fact that mask-wearing is widely supported in South Korea with the vast majority continuing to wear masks both indoors and outdoors, even with little or no enforcement measures in place. The lifting of the indoor mask mandate, which has been in place for almost the entire pandemic, is meant to sow confusion about the dangers of COVID-19 and encourage the complete resumption of economic activities for the benefit of big business.

The real concern of the government therefore is the economy. The Hyundai Research Institute, a South Korean think tank, released a report on January 19 that the country's economy would grow only 1.8 percent in 2023, down from the 2.2 percent predicted last year. With fears of a global recession, the population is being put at risk to offset the economic downturn, an agenda embraced by both the ruling People Power Party and the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea.

As of Monday, there have been more than 30 million official cases of COVID-19, in a country with a population of 52 million. Most of these have come since the end of 2021 when the previous administration of Democrat Moon Jae-in initiated the "with COVID"

era, declaring that the population would have to live with the deadly and debilitating disease.

These numbers are certainly an undercounting of the true situation. Many people do not seek medical attention after testing positive through at-home testing kits and PCR testing and contact tracing have been largely dismantled, which means that the government has no real idea how many positive cases there currently are.

Since coming to office in May, the Yoon administration continued to promote the lie that the pandemic is over, even as deaths skyrocketed throughout 2022. On October 31, 2021, there were only 2,849 deaths during nearly two years of the pandemic. Since then, 30,386 people have died while “living with COVID,” accounting for 91 percent of all official deaths during the pandemic.

In September, the Ministry of Health and Welfare also stated, “Over the BA.5 wave the highest one-day death count was 122, recorded Sept. 1, which is less than a quarter of the highest one-day death count of 469 recorded March 24 over the BA.1-BA.2 wave.” In other words, dozens or hundreds of deaths a day from a preventable disease is perfectly acceptable to the government.

The number of excess deaths paints an even grimmer picture. According to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, between January 2 and October 29 last year, there were 304,931 deaths or approximately 47,000 more deaths than for each of the previous three years. Officially during the same ten months in 2022, there were 23,464 COVID-19 deaths, indicating that the true toll is double the official numbers.

The number of excess deaths includes uncounted COVID deaths as well as those who died from other causes, many of whom were unable to access treatment due to hospitals being overwhelmed with COVID patients.

Addressing a forum last September, Professor Kim Yeong-sam of the Department of Pulmonology at Severance Hospital in Seoul stated that the hospitals have not been allocated additional resources but that existing resources were being shifted, including healthcare staff, to COVID dedicated wards.

“Although hospitals have secured beds, they have made no changes in the treatment system of critical patients. The most crucial point is how to secure a

workforce,” Kim stated. “As the large hospitals have no workforce, they have no choice but to reduce the number of general ICUs.” This, Kim pointed out, has led to a rise in excess deaths. “The number of excess deaths is more important than fatality rate, and the number of critical cases is more crucial than sickbed occupancy rate,” he added.

All of this makes clear that the COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea, as in other countries, is far from over.



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