

COVID-19 cases surge in South Korea

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COVID-19 is continuing to run rampant throughout South Korea amid false, official declarations paralleling governments around the world that the pandemic is over. Confirmed cases have grown by the tens of thousands daily in recent weeks while the government offers nothing to stop the spread of the dangerous yet preventable disease.

Health officials confirmed 64,155 new COVID cases on August 2, the highest daily total in seven months, while the daily average between August 1 and 7 reached 50,388. An average of 14 people died each day over the same period. Cases are expected to rise to 76,000 by mid-August. Before this latest surge in July, daily cases had been fluctuating between 15,000 and 20,000 for much of May and June.

The responsibility for the surge lies with the right-wing Yoon Suk-yeol government, which has pushed the lie that pandemic is over, removed nearly all mask requirements and encouraged people to resume normal activities without regard for public health. Currently, the dominant COVID strain in South Korea is the XBB 1.5 variant, which has a higher capability to evade any immunity that people have built up from vaccines or previous infections.

Amid this latest surge, the government intended to downgrade the status of COVID-19 from a Class 2 to a Class 4 disease, the country's lowest category. This would have meant the lifting of the few remaining mask requirements in high-risk areas such as hospitals while the recording of total COVID daily case figures would have been largely eliminated. In addition, the government would have withdrawn financial support from all those receiving inpatient care, limiting it only to those critically ill.

On August 7, however, the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) announced that the reclassification of COVID would be put on hold. "We need to strengthen monitoring as the number of new

daily infections has risen for six straight weeks," an agency official stated. "We will come up with new schedules after reviewing the epidemic and disease control situations and collecting advice from experts."

This does not represent a reconsideration, let alone a reversal, of the government's abandonment of basic health measures. KDCA Commissioner Ji Yeong-mi stated on August 2, "Now that the number of patients who have tested positive for Covid-19 is increasing, we ask that people voluntarily wear masks again in crowded places such as public facilities and mass transportation." This is both a confirmation that masks are needed to halt COVID-19 and the refusal of the government to reimplement even basic safety measures by requiring masks in public.

From the beginning of the pandemic, mitigation measures to halt the spread of COVID had widespread support among the population. Nearly the entire population wore masks, refrained from travel and stayed home more often. However, unending propaganda claiming the pandemic is over, plus the government's refusal to address the pandemic, has generated fatalism among many who feel there is no solution in sight.

The tearing up of mitigation measures began under previous President Moon Jae-in, a Democrat, who initiated the "with COVID" era in November 2021, claiming it was possible to live with the deadly virus. When President Yoon of the People Power Party came to office, he continued eliminating measures to halt the spread of COVID-19.

Embraced by the entire political establishment, this was done to promote big business. This included encouraging people to resume pre-pandemic activities like eating out and travelling, while also encouraging tourism from overseas as companies attempt to boost profits and reverse a travel deficit. In the first quarter of this year, the deficit for the South Korean travel

industry, which comprises a large share of the service sector, reached \$3.24 billion.

Similarly, in spite of the pandemic and with complete disregard for safety, South Korea also recently hosted the 25th World Scout Jamboree, beginning August 1 and ending early on Tuesday. The organization of the event was a disaster. Attended by more than 43,000 teenagers from around the globe, participants faced a COVID outbreak, a heat wave, poor facilities and a lack of medical care.

The jamboree was seen as a chance for Seoul to showcase its ability to put on a large event, hoping to have Busan selected as the host for the 2030 World Expo. According to the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the World Expo could generate up to 61 trillion won (\$US46.4 billion) for businesses.

These are the real considerations of all the COVID minimizers and deniers in South Korea and around the world. However, COVID is not simply another type of flu or common cold. Throughout all of 2022, excess deaths in South Korea rose 16.4 percent over the maximum from the previous three years, according to Statistics Korea. While Statistics Korea attempted to downplay this figure, the spike in deaths last year corresponded directly with the surge that took place in winter and spring when daily cases surpassed 620,000. Subsequent rises in deaths also correspond to new waves of COVID.

In addition, Long COVID is having a serious impact on the quality of life of those who develop it. A recent study in the *Lancet* medical journal found that many of those with Long COVID still suffered the effects two years after being infected with COVID-19.

For the moment, hospitals are required to report all positive COVID-19 cases, with figures released on a weekly basis. The current approach, even with the delay in reporting, provides a more realistic picture of the ongoing pandemic compared to countries like the United States where counting and tracing has stopped. After the disease is downgraded, this will no longer be the case, with samples taken from designated facilities rather than tracking all positive infections.

The real figure of positive cases is almost certainly much higher, with as many as one-third of people with COVID symptoms not getting tested, according to a Seoul National University survey published in July. In addition, as there is no required quarantine for those

infected aside from a “recommended” five-day isolation period, as COVID spreads, the lack of tracking and mitigation measures means not only can the virus spread uncontrolled but health officials and the public will be blind to the true state of affairs.



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