Covid-19: North Korean leader blames his party’s incompetence after 393 000 cases of fever reported in a day

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North Korea’s dictator Kim Jong-un has blamed the institutions of his own ruling Workers’ Party for “incompetence and a lack of responsibility” in tackling a covid-19 outbreak that he characterised as “the biggest upheaval since the nation’s founding.”

Only three days after the country acknowledged its first case, it reported 393 920 new “fever” cases in a 24 hour period ending on 15 May, indicating that more than 1.5% of the population had developed symptomatic disease in a single day. North Korea reported 18 000 new cases of fever over the previous 24 hours on 13 May, and 17 812 on 14 May. So far, 50 deaths have been reported.

The country is reporting cases of fever instead of positive tests because it lacks any substantial number of test kits. Over the course of the entire pandemic, North Korea has reported just 64 200 coronavirus tests, compared with 172 million in South Korea.

North Korea is also thought to be largely without covid medicines, and its population is almost entirely unvaccinated. The country was ranked 193 out of 195 nations for pandemic preparedness by one expert international assessment last year. The government turned down proposed donations of AstraZeneca’s coronavirus vaccine and of Sinovac offered through the World Health Organization’s Covax facility, baulking at the programme’s monitoring requirements.

Instead, North Korea responded to the pandemic by sealing its borders more hermetically than ever, refusing even to send a team to the Olympics. Until this month, the regime maintained that the virus had been kept at bay. Outside observers have often doubted these claims, but North Korea’s recent announcements—and the speed of current transmission among an immunologically naive population—seem to suggest that they were largely true.

How the virus has now entered is a mystery. North Korea even suspended trade with China in an effort to repel the disease but reopened it earlier this year amid a desperate shortage of consumer goods, only to close it again weeks later. On 25 April, hundreds of thousands of people gathered for Army Day parades in the capital Pyongyang, which is now reportedly the epicentre of the outbreak.

State media first admitted that the virus was in the country on 12 May, but the next day Korean Central TV was already acknowledging that “a fever whose cause couldn’t be identified has spread explosively” since late April. The outbreak was “the state’s most serious emergency,” North Koreans were told on their nightly news. Only one case has been sequenced, the news indicated, leading to identification of the omicron BA.2 variant.

By the morning of 16 May, the Korean Central News Agency reported that “the total number of persons with fever is over 1 213 350, of whom more than 648 630 have recovered and at least 564 860 are under medical treatment.”

For most people, that treatment will consist of international help or are simply an attempt to steel the population for the punishing weeks ahead.

In South Korea, where every cryptic remark from North Korea is parsed for hidden meaning, opinion is divided on whether the regime’s suddenly urgent public pronouncements signal a new openness to international help or are simply an attempt to steel the population for the punishing weeks ahead.

South Korea’s new president, Yoon Suk-yeol, told the National Assembly on 16 May that he had offered Pyongyang support, adding that “if North Korea responds, we will spare no medicines including covid-19 vaccines, medical equipment, and health personnel.” China has also offered assistance.

The North Korean regime’s unusually self-critical tone could also hint at its fears of public unrest. Kim Jong-unn toured Pyongyang pharmacies this weekend, where he was reportedly bemoaning the inadequate protective equipment of staff and criticised officials who he said had failed to implement his plan to keep pharmacies fully stocked and open 24 hours a day.

“Officials of the cabinet and public health sector in charge of [medicine] supplies have not rolled up their sleeves, not properly recognising the present crisis but only talking about the spirit of devotedly serving the people,” Kim told a meeting of the Politburo, according to the Party newspaper Rodong Sinmun. He urged officials to study China’s “advanced and rich quarantine results and experience they have already achieved in their fight against the malicious infectious disease.”