

North Korea hails recovery as WHO worries over missing data

May 18 2022, by Kim Tong-Hyung



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, a doctor visits a family during an activity to raise public awareness of the COVID-19 prevention measures, in Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday, May 17, 2022. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea

News Service via AP

North Korea said Wednesday more than a million people have already recovered from suspected COVID-19 just a week after disclosing an outbreak it appears to be trying to manage in isolation as global experts express deep concern about the [public health threat](#).

The country's anti-virus headquarters announced 232,880 new cases of fever and another six deaths in state media Wednesday. Those figures raise its totals to 62 deaths and more than 1.7 million fever cases since late April. It said at least 691,170 remain in quarantine.

Outside experts believe most of the fevers are COVID-19 but North Korea lacks tests to confirm so many. The outbreak is almost certainly larger than the fever tally, since some virus carriers may not develop fevers or other symptoms.

It's also unclear how more than a million people recovered so quickly when limited medicine, [medical equipment](#) and [health facilities](#) exist to treat the country's impoverished, unvaccinated population of 26 million. Some experts say the North could be simply releasing people from quarantine after their fevers subside.

Globally, COVID-19 has killed about 6.3 million people with the true toll believed to be much higher. Countries with outbreaks of a similar size to North Korea's official fever tally have confirmed thousands of deaths each.



An employee of Songyo Knitwear Factory in Songyo district disinfects the work floor in Pyongyang, North Korea, Wednesday, May 18, 2022, after Kim Jong Un said Tuesday his party would treat the country's outbreak under the state emergency. North Korea said Wednesday more than a million people have already recovered from suspected COVID-19 just a week after disclosing an outbreak it appears to be trying to manage in isolation as global experts express deep concern about the public health threat. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Chol Jin

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Tuesday that North Korea has not responded to its request for more data about its outbreak.

Before acknowledging COVID-19 infections for the first time last week, North Korea had held to a widely doubted claim of keeping out the

virus. It also shunned millions of vaccine shots offered by the U.N.-backed COVAX distribution program, likely because of international monitoring requirements attached to them.

North Korea and Eritrea are the only sovereign U.N.-member countries not to have rolled out vaccines, but Tedros said neither country has responded to WHO's offers of vaccines, medicines, tests and technical support.

"WHO is deeply concerned at the risk of further spread in (North Korea)," Tedros said, also noting the country has worrying numbers of people with underlying conditions that make them more likely to get severe COVID-19.



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, center, attends a ruling party Politburo meeting in Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday, May 17, 2022. North Korea said Wednesday, May 18, more than a million people have already recovered from suspected COVID-19 just a week after disclosing an outbreak it appears to be trying to manage in isolation as global experts express deep concern about the public health threat. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP

WHO emergencies chief Dr. Michael Ryan said unchecked transmission of the virus could lead to new variants but that WHO was powerless to act unless countries accepted its help.

The North has so far ignored rival South Korea's offer to provide vaccines, medicine and health personnel, but experts say the North may be more willing to accept help from its main ally China. South Korea's government said it couldn't confirm media reports that North Korea flew multiple planes to bring back [emergency supplies](#) from China on Tuesday.

North Korean officials during a ruling party Politburo meeting Tuesday continued to express confidence that the country could overcome the crisis on its own, with the Politburo members discussing ways for "continuously maintaining the good chance in the overall epidemic prevention front," the official Korean Central News Agency said Wednesday.



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, center, attends a meeting of ruling party Workers' Labor Party of Korea in Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday, May 17, 2022. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP

There's suspicion that North Korea is underreporting deaths to soften the blow for Kim, who already was navigating the toughest moment of his decade in power. The pandemic has further damaged an economy already broken by mismanagement and U.S.-led sanctions over Kim's

[nuclear weapons](#) and missiles development.

At the Politburo meeting, Kim criticized officials over their early pandemic response, which he said underscored "immaturity in the state capacity for coping with the crisis" and he blamed the country's vulnerability on their "non-positive attitude, slackness and non-activity," KCNA said.

He urged officials to strengthen virus controls at workplaces and redouble efforts to improve the supply of daily necessities and stabilize living conditions, the report said.

North Korea has also deployed nearly 3,000 military medical officers to help deliver medicine to pharmacies and deployed public health officials, teachers and students studying [health care](#) to identify people with fevers so they could be quarantined. The country has been relying on finding people with symptoms and isolating them at shelters since it lacks vaccines, high-tech medicine and equipment, and intensive care units that lowered hospitalizations and deaths in other nations.



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, center, attends a meeting of ruling party Workers' Labor Party of Korea in Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday, May 17, 2022. North Korea on Wednesday, May 18, reported 232,880 new cases of fever and another six deaths as leader Kim Jong Un accused officials of “immaturity” and “slackness” in handling the escalating COVID-19 outbreak ravaging across the unvaccinated nation. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP, File

While raising alarm over the outbreak, Kim has also stressed that his economic goals should be met. State media reports show large groups of

workers are continuing to gather at farms, mining facilities, power stations and [construction sites](#), being driven to ensure their works are "propelled as scheduled."

North Korea's COVID-19 outbreak came amid a provocative run in weapons demonstrations, including its first test of an intercontinental ballistic missile in nearly five years, in a brinkmanship aimed at forcing the United States to accept the idea of the North as a [nuclear power](#) and negotiate economic and security concessions from a position of strength.

U.S. and South Korean officials also believe North Korea could conduct its seventh nuclear test explosion this month.

The North Korean nuclear threat is expected to top agenda when U.S. President Joe Biden meets South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol during a visit to Seoul this week. Kim Tae-hyo, Yoon's deputy national security adviser, told reporters Wednesday that North Korea probably won't conduct a nuclear test this week but that its preparations for another ICBM test appeared imminent.



Employees of Songyo Knitwear Factory wearing face masks work to produce knitted goods in Songyo district in Pyongyang, North Korea, Wednesday, May 18, 2022. North Korea said Wednesday more than a million people have already recovered from suspected COVID-19 just a week after disclosing an outbreak it appears to be trying to manage in isolation as global experts express deep concern about the public health threat. Credit: AP Photo/Cha Song Ho



This photo provided by the North Korean government shows deserted street in Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday, May 17, 2022. North Korea on Wednesday, May 18, reported 232,880 new cases of fever and another six deaths as leader Kim Jong Un accused officials of “immaturity” and “slackness” in their early handling of the COVID-19 outbreak ravaging across the unvaccinated nation. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP



Employees of Songyo Knitwear Factory wearing face masks work to produce knitted goods in Songyo district in Pyongyang, North Korea, Wednesday, May 18, 2022. North Korea said Wednesday more than a million people have already recovered from suspected COVID-19 just a week after disclosing an outbreak it appears to be trying to manage in isolation as global experts express deep concern about the public health threat. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Chol Jin



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, a worker in protective gear stands on an empty sidewalk in Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday, May 17, 2022. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP



Employees of Songyo Knitwear Factory in Songyo district disinfect the work floor in Pyongyang, North Korea, Wednesday, May 18, 2022, after Kim Jong Un said Tuesday his party would treat the country's outbreak under the state emergency. North Korea said Wednesday more than a million people have already recovered from suspected COVID-19 just a week after disclosing an outbreak it appears to be trying to manage in isolation as global experts express deep concern about the public health threat. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Chol Jin



An employee of Songyo Knitwear Factory wearing a face mask works to produce knitted goods in Songyo district in Pyongyang, North Korea, Wednesday, May 18, 2022. North Korea said Wednesday more than a million people have already recovered from suspected COVID-19 just a week after disclosing an outbreak it appears to be trying to manage in isolation as global experts express deep concern about the public health threat. Credit: AP Photo/Cha Song Ho



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, a doctor checks a resident's temperature to curb the spread of coronavirus infection, in Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday, May 17, 2022. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP



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In this photo provided by the North Korean government, station staff disinfect the floor of Pyongyang station to curb the spread of coronavirus infection, in Pyongyang, North Korea Tuesday, May 17, 2022. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified. Korean language watermark on image as provided by source reads: "KCNA" which is the abbreviation for Korean Central News Agency. Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP

Kim Jong Un during Tuesday's Politburo meeting affirmed he would "arouse the whole party like (an) [active volcano](#) once again under the state emergency situation" to prove its leadership before history and time and "defend the wellbeing of the country and the people without fail and demonstrate to the whole world the strength and the spirit of heroic Korea once again," KCNA said. The report did not make a direct reference to a major weapons test.

Recent commercial satellite images of the nuclear testing ground in Punggye-ri indicate refurbishment work and preparations at a yet unused tunnel on the southern part of the site, which is presumably nearing completion to host a [nuclear test](#), according to an analysis released Tuesday by Beyond Parallel, a website run by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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