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# THE DPRK's COVID-19 OUTBREAK & IMPLICATIONS FOR A POSSIBLE NEXT NUCLEAR TEST

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# THE DPRK'S COVID-19 OUTBREAK & IMPLICATIONS FOR A POSSIBLE NEXT NUCLEAR TEST

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## Executive Summary

On 12 May 2022, the DPRK confirmed an outbreak of COVID-19. This pandemic is highly likely to bring about significant impacts to the DPRK's domestic policies and operations in a wide variety of areas, including agriculture, public health and national defence. It is also likely to have a significant impact on the DPRK's foreign policy, should the DPRK engage international society in its pandemic response. The impact on a potential next nuclear test is not immediately clear. Depending on the severity of the public health emergency, the DPRK may decide to delay nuclear testing while it works to stabilize the situation. However, a nuclear test could also be utilized to divert the people's attention from domestic difficulties in order to solidify public support for the regime.

## New developments

On 12 May 2022, the DPRK confirmed an outbreak of COVID-19. According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the first confirmed cases were tested in Pyongyang on 8 May, carrying the Omicron BA.2 variant.<sup>1</sup> The number of cases has increased at a rapid pace. On 13 May, it was reported that since late April 2022 more than 350,000 people had been identified as having suffered from "a fever whose cause couldn't be identified".<sup>2</sup> Of these, 162,200 had reportedly recovered, while over 187,800 had been isolated and treated.<sup>3</sup> By 16 May, the number had risen to 1,213,550 "fever" cases out of which 648,630 had recovered and at least 564,860 were undergoing medical treatment.<sup>4</sup> According to KCNA, one death due to Omicron BA.2 had been confirmed as of 13 May.<sup>5</sup> The death toll due to "fever" had risen to 50 people by 16 May. However, the number of confirmed Omicron fatalities remained at one. Several of these 50 deaths were

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<sup>1</sup> "8th Political Bureau Meeting of 8th Central Committee of WPK Held," KCNA, 12 May 2022, available at: <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/b7723ea5ed8035777f255b0a75143b56.kcmsf>.

<sup>2</sup> "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Visits State Emergency Epidemic Prevention Headquarters," KCNA, 13 May 2022, available at: <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/8b0b3b2eb5e99dd2a58672fe8594f043.kcmsf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Spread of Epidemic and Result of Treatment Informed", KCNA, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1652654051-561274924/spread-of-epidemic-and-result-of-treatment-informed>

<sup>5</sup> "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Visits State Emergency Epidemic Prevention Headquarters," KCNA, 13 May 2022, available at: <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/8b0b3b2eb5e99dd2a58672fe8594f043.kcmsf>.

reportedly due to drug misuse.<sup>6</sup> According to an announcement by the United Nations, as of 12 May, the World Health Organization (WHO) had been communicating with the DPRK authorities but had not received any reports about the confirmed cases from the DPRK's Ministry of Health.<sup>7</sup> There have been no further updates as of 16 May.<sup>8</sup>

Yonhap News reported on 16 May that South Korean intelligence had estimated that the total death toll was likely five to six times the official number.<sup>9</sup> A joint seminar held on May 16 by the Institute for Peace and Unification at Seoul National University and the Center for Unification Medicine at Seoul National University College of Medicine announced prediction models estimating that roughly 34,000 deaths could take place due to Omicron in the DPRK. They further estimated that the start of the outbreak had likely been around 15 April.

On 12 May 2022, Kim Jong Un convened a Political Bureau Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), a key decision-making body of the WPK. At this meeting, the Political Bureau announced a transition to the "maximum emergency epidemic prevention system."<sup>10</sup> Kim Jong Un called on all cities and counties to thoroughly lock down their areas, but urged all major economic sectors to continue to maximize production despite the lockdowns. He particularly emphasized reinforcing "guard duties ... on the fronts, borders, seas and air" and ordered that measures be taken to prevent any "security vacuum ... in the national defense".<sup>11</sup> On the same day, Kim Jong Un visited the State Emergency Epidemic Prevention Headquarters, where he criticized the vulnerabilities in the existing epidemic prevention system as evidenced by "the simultaneous spread of fever" in the capital area which had been identified as the "center" of the current pandemic.<sup>12</sup> He reiterated the need for lockdowns to prevent the continued spread of COVID.<sup>13</sup>

On 14 May, the Political Bureau convened a consultative meeting, focusing on the timely supply of reserve medicines. Kim Jong Un stated in the meeting that the current situation did not entail an uncontrollable spread of the virus across regions, but that it was confined within locked areas. He called for a broad information campaign to be launched to disseminate knowledge about

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<sup>6</sup> "Consultative Meeting of Political Bureau of C.C., WPK Held", KCNA, 14 May 2022, available at: <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1652515672-601939427/consultative-meeting-of-political-bureau-of-c-c-wpk-held/>

<sup>7</sup> "WHO ready to support DPR Korea battle COVID-19 infections," *UN News*, 12 May 2022, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1118092>

<sup>8</sup> "COVID-19 may spread rapidly in North Korea, WHO warns", *Reuters*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-northkorea-who/covid-19-may-spread-rapidly-in-north-korea-who-warns-idUSL5N2X83LR>

<sup>9</sup> "북한 '코로나 사망 50명' 축소 관측...5~6배일 듯", *Yonhap News*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.yonhapnewstv.co.kr/news/MYH20220516016100038?input=1825m>.

<sup>10</sup> "8th Political Bureau Meeting of 8th Central Committee of WPK Held," KCNA, 12 May 2022, available at: <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/b7723ea5ed8035777f255b0a75143b56.kcmsf>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Visits State Emergency Epidemic Prevention Headquarters," KCNA, 13 May 2022, available at: <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/8b0b3b2eb5e99dd2a58672fe8594f043.kcmsf>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

prevention and treatment of the disease among the general population.<sup>14</sup> On 15 May, the Political Bureau convened another emergency consultative meeting during which Kim Jong Un strongly criticized officials of the DPRK Cabinet and public health sector in charge of the medical supply for the failure to deliver medicines. He ordered the Korean People's Army to utilize its strength in the medical field to stabilize the supply of medicine to the Pyongyang municipality immediately.<sup>15</sup> That same day, Kim Jong Un also made personal visits to several pharmacies in Pyongyang, where he criticized the lack of medicines and unhygienic standards. On 16 May, Rodong Sinmun released an extensive guide on COVID-19 home-treatment based on data introduced by Chinese health experts.<sup>16</sup> The guide described general symptoms and contained advice on quarantine measures, nutrition and drug treatments, and stated that suspected cases must undergo a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test. In addition, Rodong Sinmun released a guide on the specific treatment of children.<sup>17</sup>

On 16 May, the South Korean government attempted to send a message offering working-level quarantine cooperation and extensive medical assistance through the inter-Korean communications channel, but reportedly received no reply.<sup>18</sup> Unnamed South Korean sources reported on 16 May that the DPRK had recently requested that China provide anti-disease assistance in the form of PCR test kits and medicines to treat Covid-19.<sup>19</sup> During a regular briefing that took place on 16 May, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian, neither confirmed nor denied that a request had been made. He reiterated China's offer of assistance to fight the epidemic, should the DPRK authorities request it.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Consultative Meeting of Political Bureau of C.C., WPK Held", *KCNA*, May 14 2022, available at: <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1652515672-601939427/consultative-meeting-of-political-bureau-of-c-c-wpk-held/>.

<sup>15</sup> "WPK Central Committee holds Politburo consultative meeting again", *KCNA*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1652688507-114487450/wpk-central-committee-holds-politburo-consultative-meeting-again/>.

<sup>16</sup> "자택에서의 신형코로나비루스감염증치료방법과 자택격리시 지켜야 할 섭생", *KCNA*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1652652533-4112245/%ec%9e%90%ed%83%9d%ec%97%90%ec%84%9c%ec%9d%98-%ec%8b%a0%ed%98%95%ec%bd%94%eb%a1%9c%eb%82%98%eb%b9%84%eb%a3%a8%ec%8a%a4%ea%b0%90%ec%97%bc%ec%a6%9d%ec%b9%98%eb%a3%8c%eb%b0%a9%eb%b2%95%ea%b3%bc-%ec%9e%90/>

<sup>17</sup> "오(오미크론)변이비루스에 감염된 어린이들속에서 나타나는 증상과 그 치료방법", *KCNA*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1652652528-92478363/%ce%bf%ec%98%a4%eb%af%b8%ed%81%ac%eb%a1%a0%eb%b3%80%ec%9d%b4%eb%b9%84%eb%a3%a8%ec%8a%a4%ec%97%90-%ea%b0%90%ec%97%bc%eb%90%9c-%ec%96%b4%eb%a6%b0%ec%9d%b4%eb%93%a4%ec%86%8d%ec%97%90%ec%84%9c-%eb%82%98/>.

<sup>18</sup> "방역협력 실무접촉 제안에도 북한 '무응답'...상황 통제 자신감?", *Yonhap News*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.yonhapnewstv.co.kr/news/MYH20220516018100038?input=1825m>.

<sup>19</sup> "Pyongyang turns to Beijing for Covid help: sources", *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/05/16/national/northKorea/North-Korea-Covid19-Unification-Ministry/20220516181714495.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "中, 대북 방역지원 여부 질문에 "북중, 위기시 상호 전통", *Yonhap News*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220516141300083?input=1195m>.

The DPRK's first admission of a COVID outbreak seems to reflect the severity of the situation: multiple sources have alleged that the DPRK had experienced COVID outbreaks in the past, but that this was the first time Pyongyang had publicly acknowledged one. The DPRK's official acknowledgement of a COVID outbreak could be intended to lay the groundwork for mobilizing international assistance for its counter-pandemic efforts.

## Potential impacts

The pandemic is highly likely to have a significant impact on the DPRK's domestic policies and operations in a wide variety of areas, ranging from agriculture and public health to national defence. It is also likely to have a significant impact on the DPRK's foreign policy, should the DPRK engage international society in its pandemic response. It could also have an impact on a possible next nuclear weapon test.

### Agricultural activities and food security

By 9 May 2022, the DPRK had entered the most important and labor-intensive time of its annual agricultural cycle.<sup>21</sup> Every year, rice transplantation and corn and potato sowing take place between May and June to ensure the success of its annual harvest in the following autumn.<sup>22</sup> The winter crops, roughly 8% of the country's annual crop output, will be harvested starting in June.<sup>23</sup> Reportedly, the country is currently combating a major drought with severely limited water irrigation capabilities.<sup>24</sup> A large number of people across the country, including those who are not farmers, have reportedly been mobilized to carry out farming work and to combat the drought.<sup>25</sup> It is possible that such mass mobilization may have accelerated the spread of COVID. As of 16 May, agricultural work still seems to be underway in border areas. However, the mobilization for

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<sup>21</sup> "Rice-Transplantation Begins in Chongsan-ri of DPRK," KCNA, 10 May 2022, available at: <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1652177228-489056568/rice-transplantation-begins-in-chongsan-ri-of-dprk>.

<sup>22</sup> The Democratic People's Republic of Korea Food Supply and Demand Outlook in 2020/21 (November/October), *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*, 14 June 2021, available at: [https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CB5146EN/#:~:text=Food%20Supply%20and%20Demand%20Outlook,%2F21%20\(November%2FOctober\)&text=The%202020%2F21%20aggregate%20food.to%20the%20five%2Dyear%20average](https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CB5146EN/#:~:text=Food%20Supply%20and%20Demand%20Outlook,%2F21%20(November%2FOctober)&text=The%202020%2F21%20aggregate%20food.to%20the%20five%2Dyear%20average).

<sup>23</sup> "Joint Rapid Food Security Assessment," *FAO & World Food Programme*, 3 May 2019, available at: [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104948/download/?\\_ga=2.130148105.720544746.1652440213-1256308166.1650616979](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104948/download/?_ga=2.130148105.720544746.1652440213-1256308166.1650616979).

<sup>24</sup> Hyonhee Shin and Soo-Hyang Choi, "Analysis: COVID crisis could deepen N.Korea food shortages amid drought warnings," *Reuters*, 13 May 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/covid-crisis-could-deepen-nkorea-food-shortages-amid-drought-warnings-2022-05-12/>. Seulkee Jang, "N. Koreans face their worst spring famine since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic," *Daily NK*, 6 May 2022, available at: <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-face-worst-spring-famine-since-start-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>25</sup> Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea mobilises office workers to fight drought amid food shortages," *Reuters*, 4 May 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nkorea-mobilises-office-workers-fight-drought-amid-food-shortages-2022-05-04/?rpc=401&>.

drought and farm work had reportedly stopped.<sup>26</sup> Failure to execute agricultural plans in May and June could affect nearly all aspects of the annual domestic crop production, as crops are either sowed or harvested during these two months.<sup>27</sup> Food shortages and malnutrition-related diseases following a disruption in the present farm work is likely to produce more deaths than the COVID-19 epidemic.<sup>28</sup>

### National public health

The DPRK's fragile health infrastructure, its lack of antiviral treatments and its limited medical testing capabilities make the country ill-equipped to respond to severe illnesses and contagions.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the general health of the population is poor: roughly 40% suffer from malnutrition, and diseases such as tuberculosis are prevalent.<sup>30</sup> An outbreak of Omicron BA.2, which is known to be highly contagious,<sup>31</sup> could therefore have serious consequences for the DPRK, whose entire population reportedly remains unvaccinated.<sup>32</sup> Professor Oh Myeong-don at Seoul National University Hospital stated on 16 May that, due to the time needed to import, distribute and await the full effect of vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines would not improve the current situation even if the DPRK were to accept shipments immediately.<sup>33</sup>

### Possible next nuclear weapon test

While deciding to switch “the state epidemic prevention system” to “the maximum emergency epidemic prevention system,” Kim Jong Un also ordered that “the best measures be taken to make

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<sup>26</sup> “<Breaking News from Inside N. Korea> A report about the COVID-19 situation from a party member in North Hamgyong Province: Those with fevers are placed in isolation and their apartment buildings are put under lockdown, People continue to go to work and the markets remain open, People are more scared of lockdowns than the disease”, *Asiapress*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2022/05/society-economy/covid/2/>.

<sup>27</sup> The Democratic People's Republic of Korea Food Supply and Demand Outlook in 2020/21 (November/October), *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*, 14 June 2021, Figure 15, available at: [https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CB5146EN/#:~:text=Food%20Supply%20and%20Demand%20Outlook.%2F21%20\(November%2FOctober\)&text=The%202020%2F21%20aggregate%20food.to%20the%20five%2Dyear%20average.](https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CB5146EN/#:~:text=Food%20Supply%20and%20Demand%20Outlook.%2F21%20(November%2FOctober)&text=The%202020%2F21%20aggregate%20food.to%20the%20five%2Dyear%20average.)

<sup>28</sup> “North Korean rural areas active as ‘fever’ rips through country”, *NK News*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/north-korean-rural-areas-active-as-fever-rips-through-country/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Explainer: How N.Korea's COVID-19 outbreak could ignite a major health crisis,” *Reuters*, 13 May 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-nkoreas-covid-19-outbreak-could-ignite-major-health-crisis-2022-05-13/?rpc=401&>.

<sup>30</sup> “DPR Korea Needs and Priorities Plan 2020,” *The Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020*, 24 April 2020. [https://dprkorea.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/2020\\_DPRK\\_Needs\\_and-Priorities\\_Plan.pdf](https://dprkorea.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/2020_DPRK_Needs_and-Priorities_Plan.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> “Here's what we know about the BA.2 Omicron subvariant driving a new COVID-19 wave,” *National Geographic*, 25 April 2022, available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/heres-what-we-know-about-the-ba2-omicron-subvariant-now-driving-a-new-wave>.

<sup>32</sup> “COVID-19 may spread rapidly in North Korea, WHO warns,” *Reuters*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-northkorea-who/covid-19-may-spread-rapidly-in-north-korea-who-warns-idUSL5N2X83LR>.

<sup>33</sup> “북한, 오미크론으로 최소 3만4천명 사망할 듯”...서울대 세미나”, *Yonhap News*, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220516129400504?input=1195m>.



security vacuum not be revealed in the national defence.”<sup>34</sup> This statement indicates that the DPRK will attempt to proceed with the country’s national defence development plans, which include the development of new nuclear weapons.<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that the DPRK launched three short-range ballistic missiles on 12 May 2022,<sup>36</sup> the same day that it publicly acknowledged the COVID outbreak. This seems to run counter to speculation by some observers that the COVID outbreak might impact Pyongyang’s weapons testing.<sup>37</sup>

It is possible that the DPRK may decide to delay the timing of its next nuclear test in light of the country’s ongoing efforts to contain and manage the COVID situation, combat the drought and step up farming efforts during this crucial point in the agricultural cycle. The leadership may feel that a nuclear test during the pandemic would be viewed unfavorably by the domestic public.

Alternatively, the COVID outbreak could prompt the DPRK leadership to opt for a hard line and carry out a nuclear test. External observers have noted that the DPRK has frequently used intense anti-ROK campaigns and major weapons tests in the past to divert the population’s attention from domestic difficulties and solidify public support for the regime, while countering the views at home and abroad that the Kim regime is weak.<sup>38</sup>

ONN will continue to monitor developments in connection with the COVID outbreak in the DPRK.

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<sup>34</sup> “8th Political Bureau Meeting of 8th Central Committee of WPK Held,” KCNA, 12 May 2022, available at: <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/b7723ea5ed8035777f255b0a75143b56.kcmsf>.

<sup>35</sup> “Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory: On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Congress of WPK,” KCNA, 9 January 2021, available at: <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/4bd89fa5293bdf0a82d3f4323d1636e2.kcmsf>.

<sup>36</sup> “North Korea launches short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea,” NK News, 12 May 2022, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/north-korea-launches-unidentified-ballistic-missile-towards-east-sea-seoul-says/>.

<sup>37</sup> “Omicron has stopped normal life in Pyongyang. But will it stop a nuclear test?” NK News, May 12 2022, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/omicron-has-stopped-normal-life-in-pyongyang-but-will-it-stop-a-nuclear-test/>.

<sup>38</sup> “North Korea’s Anti-South Korea Campaign”, 38North, 23 June 2020, available at: <https://www.38north.org/2020/06/nkantiskcampaign062320/>. “North Korea launches short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea”, NK News, 12 May 2022, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/north-korea-launches-unidentified-ballistic-missile-towards-east-sea-seoul-says/>.

## ONE EARTH FUTURE

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One Earth Future Foundation (OEF) is an incubator of innovative peacebuilding programs that designs, tests, and partners to scale programs that work hand-in-hand with those most affected by conflict to eliminate the root causes of war. We believe in a world beyond war, where sustainable peace is truly possible.


## OPEN NUCLEAR NETWORK


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One Earth Future's Open Nuclear Network programme is a non-aligned, non-governmental entity that seeks to increase security for all States by ensuring that nuclear decision makers have access to high quality, shareable open source information which enables them to make the best decisions in the face of escalating conflict.

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