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

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In a previous publication dated 16 May 2022, ONN reported on the outbreak of COVID-19 in the DPRK. As noted in that brief, it was not clear whether the outbreak would have an impact on any decision by the DPRK to carry out a seventh nuclear weapon test. While the regime could decide to delay the test to attend to the public health situation, the current drought and vital agricultural work, it could choose instead to conduct a test to divert attention from the outbreak and solidify domestic support for the regime. Subsequent developments indicate that the regime may be prioritizing actions to return to normalcy, or the appearance of normalcy, in the country. This could indicate that the regime is preparing for a nuclear weapon test despite other domestic challenges.

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, and carried the Omicron BA.2 variant.¹ The number of cases has increased rapidly. As of 7 June, the total number of countrywide "fever" cases had reached 4,253,510.² However, only 168 of these had been reported as confirmed COVID-19 cases.³ Out of these, 4,150,140 were reported as having fully recovered while 103,300 remained under treatment. The total number of reported deaths stood at 71. However, the number of confirmed Omicron fatalities remained at one. Several of these deaths were reportedly due to COVID medication misuse.⁴ The reported daily fever cases began to decrease by 21 May.⁵ 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 confirmed cases from the DPRK's Ministry of Health.⁶ There have been no further updates as of 8 June.

¹ "8th Political Bureau Meeting of 8th Central Committee of WPK Held," KCNA, 12 May 2022.

² "Epidemic Spread and Treatment Results in DPRK," KCNA, 8 June 2022.

³ "Coronavirus in North Korea: COVID-19 Tracker," NK Pro, accessed: 8 June 2022, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/pro/coronavirus-in-north-korea-tracker/>.

⁴ "Consultative Meeting of Political Bureau of C.C., WPK Held," KCNA, 14 May 2022

⁵ "North Korea's fever cases under 200,000 for second day amid silence on aid offer," Reuters, 23 May 2022, available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nkoreas-fever-cases-under-200000-2nd-day-amid-silence-aid-offer-2022-05-22/>.

⁶ "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>.

The National Intelligence Service (NIS) of the Republic of Korea (ROK) stated on 19 May that a considerable number of the fever cases could include people suffering from waterborne diseases, such as typhoid and measles, in light of the DPRK's inability to conduct large scale PCR tests.⁷ The NIS also stated that the current outbreak may have been exacerbated by the military parade on 25 April, and estimated that it would reach its peak around late May to early June. A joint seminar held on 16 May by the Institute for Peace and Unification at Seoul National University and the Center for Unification Medicine at Seoul National University's College of Medicine announced prediction models estimating that roughly 34,000 deaths could occur due to Omicron in the DPRK.⁸ William Hanage, co-director of the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics at Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health, suggested that the death toll in the DPRK might reach 125,000 if it followed the global standard case fatality rate, but also cautioned that the vulnerable health situation in the DPRK could cause excess deaths.⁹

Kim Jong Un has convened a total of seven publicly-known meetings of top officials since the announcement of the outbreak on 12 May. Three of these have taken place since ONN's previous report on 16 May. On 17 May, Kim Jong Un convened a meeting of the Presidium of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), during which the failure of leading officials of the party and State organs in handling the health crisis was acknowledged. Kim Jong Un criticized the "immaturity", "non-positive attitude" and "slackness" of State officials, noting that it had revealed vulnerabilities in epidemic prevention. The meeting also recognized "the justness, efficiency and scientific accuracy of the State emergency epidemic prevention policy" and discussed additional steps to improve anti-epidemic measures through the establishment of a center for disseminating medicines and district treatment centers.¹⁰

On 21 May, the Political Bureau (Politburo) convened another meeting headed by Kim Jong Un to discuss "readjustment and reinforcement of the present State epidemic prevention capacities."¹¹ The outbreak was described as "stable", with the nationwide spread having been "gradually diffused" and the death toll experiencing a sharp decrease. The positive trend was described as an outcome of the WPK's "correct guidance" and the "ideological superiority" of the socialist system. Issues related to the deployment of medical forces, the establishment of medicine supply centers across the country and "positively using Koryo medicines", traditional North Korean medicine, were discussed. A day later, on 22 May, tens of thousands of North Korean citizens reportedly gathered on the streets of Pyongyang to take part in the State funeral of the retired Korean People's Army (KPA) Marshal Hyon Chol Hae, despite the

⁷"北, 핵실험 준비 다 끝났고 타이밍만 보고있다" [North Korea, preparations for nuclear test completed, just looking for timing], Yonhap News Agency, 19 May 2022, available at:

<https://www.yonhapnewstv.co.kr/news/MYH20220519008500038?input=1825m>.

⁸"북한, 오미크론으로 최소 3만4천명 사망할 듯"...서울대 세미나" [At least 34,000 people will likely be killed in Omicron, North Korea. Seoul National University Seminar], Yonhap News Agency, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220516129400504?input=1195m>.

⁹"N. Korea won't accept help to stave off coronavirus crisis, experts fear," The Washington Post, 19 May 2022, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/19/north-korea-covid-vaccines-aid-china-united-states-covax/>.

¹⁰"Meeting of Presidium of Politburo of WPK Central Committee Held," KCNA, 18 May 2022.

¹¹"Politburo Consultative Meeting of WPK Central Committee Held," KCNA, 21 May 2022.

nationwide lockdown. Kim Jong Un and several honor guard members appeared without masks.¹² On 29 May, Kim Jong Un convened another Politburo meeting, which provided a “positive evaluation” of the current stable anti-epidemic situation.¹³ Later the same day, the city-wide lockdown in Pyongyang first imposed on 10 May was lifted.¹⁴ It does not appear that state media has broadcasted the lifting of the lockdown in the capital, and the state continues to implement lockdowns in the rest of the country.¹⁵

Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of the WPK’s Central Committee, has published numerous guides on COVID-19 home-treatment based on data introduced by Chinese health experts. These guides describe general symptoms and contain advice on quarantine measures, nutrition and drug treatments, and advise that suspected cases must undergo a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test.¹⁶ The guides have also included recommendations for treatment, such as ginger honeysuckle tea, willow-leaf drink, gargling of saltwater and the use of antibiotics.¹⁷ There have also been specific guides on treatments for infected children.¹⁸ Traditional Koryo medicine has been presented by KCNA as a “cure” to the epidemic.¹⁹ Rodong Sinmun published an article on 24 May on the proliferation of COVID-19 variants around the world and the development of new vaccines to counter these, but expressed doubt about the possibility of using such vaccines on a global scale.²⁰

International response

On 16 May, the ROK attempted to send a message offering working-level quarantine cooperation and extensive medical assistance through the inter-Korean communications channel.²¹ As of 7 June, it had not received a response.

¹² Colin Zwirko “Tens of thousands line Pyongyang streets for funeral amid COVID lockdown,” NK News, 23 May 2022, available at:

¹³ “Politburo Consultative Meeting of WPK Central Committee Held”, KCNA, 29 May 2022.

¹⁴ Ethan Jewell “North Korea lifts sweeping COVID-19 lockdown in Pyongyang: Sources,” NK News, 29 May 2022, available at:

<https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/north-korea-lifts-sweeping-covid-19-lockdown-in-pyongyang-sources/>.

¹⁵ Colin Zwirko “Vehicles return to Pyongyang streets as rest of North Korea remains locked down,” NK news, 3 June 2022, available at:

<https://www.nknews.org/2022/06/vehicles-return-to-pyongyang-streets-as-rest-of-north-korea-remains-locked-down/>.

¹⁶ “자택에서의 신형코로나비루스감염증치료방법과 자택격리시 지켜야 할 섭생” [Treatment of the novel coronavirus infection disease at home and the supplementation to be observed during home quarantine], KCNA, 16 May 2022.

¹⁷ “North Korea: Fighting Covid with traditional medicine,” BBC, 20 May 2022, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/61508440>.

¹⁸ “신형코로나비루스감염증치료안내지도서-어린이용(1)” [Guidelines for the Treatment of New Coronavirus Infections - for Children], KCNA, 22 May 2022.

¹⁹ “More Koryo Medicines Produced to Cure Epidemic,” KCNA, 20 May 2022.

²⁰ “신형코로나비루스감염증에 대한 국제적평가자료(1)” [International Assessment Data for New Coronavirus Infections (1)], KCNA, 24 May 2022.

²¹ “방역협력 실무접촉 제안에도 북한 '무응답'...상황 통제 자신감?” [North Korea's "no response" to the proposal for working-level contact with quarantine cooperation...Confidence in controlling the situation?], Yonhap News Agency, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.yonhapnewstv.co.kr/news/MYH20220516018100038?input=1825m>.

Unnamed sources in the ROK are reported to have stated 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-19.²² Yonhap News reported a day later that three Air Koryo airplanes had arrived at Shenyang Airport in the Chinese province of Liaoning on the morning of 16 May to be loaded with medicine before returning to the DPRK the same afternoon.²³ NK News was later able to confirm movement of three Air Koryo cargo planes at Pyongyang Airport based on satellite imagery.²⁴ As of 25 May, the planes still appeared to be in quarantine at the airport.²⁵ During a regular briefing that took place on 17 May, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Wang Wenbin, stated that he was not aware of such a shipment.²⁶ Other unnamed sources also reported to ROK media that two cargo trains carrying medical supplies crossed over the border from Dandong to Sinuiju on 26 May.²⁷ No further statements on either matter appear to have been made by China since.

Washington has also offered vaccines to Pyongyang, according to a statement made by President Biden at a press conference on 21 May in Seoul.²⁸ At a special briefing on 7 June, the U.S. Special Representative to the DPRK, Sung Kim, further stated that the offer had contained specific proposals and had been conveyed “almost as soon as they made public their COVID outbreak” through third parties, directly and in writing. He added that the U.S had not yet received a reply.²⁹ Russia and France have reportedly also not received a response to their offers of vaccine and related assistance.³⁰

²² “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>.

²³ “北고려항공 항공기 3대, 어제 중선양서 의약품 실어가” [Three North Korean Air planes, carried medicine from Shenyang yesterday], Yonhap News Agency, 17 May 2022, available at: <https://yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220517098000083>.

²⁴ “North Korean jets sent to China may have been cargo planes, imagery suggests,” NK News, 18 May 2022, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/north-korean-jets-sent-to-china-may-have-been-cargo-planes-imagery-suggests/>.

²⁵ “North Korean planes, COVID aid may be in quarantine after China trip: Imagery,” NK News, 25 May 2022, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/pro/north-korean-planes-covid-aid-may-be-in-quarantine-after-china-trip-imagery/>.

²⁶ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on May 17, 2022,” FMPRC, 17 May 2022, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202205/t20220517_10687211.html.

²⁷ “Chinese Cargo Trains Carrying Medical Aid Entered N. Korea Twice Thursday,” KBS World, 27 May 2022, available at: http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=169950.

²⁸ “Covid in North Korea: No response to US vaccine offer,” BBC, 21 May 2022, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61533715>.

²⁹ “U.S. Special Representative to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Sung Kim On Recent DPRK Missile Launches,” US Department of State, 7 June 2022, available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-special-representative-to-the-democratic-peoples-republic-of-korea-sung-kim-on-recent-dprk-missile-launches/>.

³⁰ “COVID-19 situation in North Korea likely getting ‘worse, not better’: WHO,” NK News, 2 June 2022, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/2022/06/covid-19-situation-in-north-korea-likely-getting-worse-not-better-who>.

The WHO reiterated its offer to support the DPRK to fight the pandemic with essential medical supplies and medicines on 16 May, but no response has been reported. Likewise, the suggestion by the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on 17 May for the DPRK to facilitate the return of UN and other international staff to the country to assist in the provision of humanitarian support has received no reply.³¹

Potential impacts

The pandemic is 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 will likely also have a significant impact on the DPRK's foreign policy, should the DPRK elect to engage external actors in its pandemic response. It could also have an impact on the timing of a possible next nuclear weapon test, although the outcome of this impact is not clear.

Agricultural activities and food security

By 9 May 2022, the DPRK had entered the most important and labor-intensive period of its annual agricultural cycle.³² Every year, rice transplantation and corn and potato sowing take place between May and June, to ensure the success of the annual harvest in the following autumn.³³ Winter crops, roughly 8% of the country's annual crop output, will be harvested starting in June.³⁴ Reportedly, the DPRK is currently combating a major drought with otherwise severely limited water irrigation capabilities.³⁵

A large number of people nation-wide, including those who are not farmers, have reportedly been mobilized across the country to carry out farming work and to combat the drought.³⁶ This is likely to have accelerated the spread of COVID-19.

³¹ "UN Human Rights briefing on COVID-19 outbreak in Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)," UN Geneva Multimedia Newsroom, 17 May 2022, available at: <https://www.unognewsroom.org/story/en/1280/dprk-covid-19-outbreak-17-may-2022>.

³² "Rice-Transplantation Begins in Chongsan-ri of DPRK," KCNA, 10 May 2022.

³³ 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).

³⁴ "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.

³⁵ 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/>.

³⁶ 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&>.

Since 31 May, KCNA has continuously reported on the successful progress on anti-drought measures and the finalization of rice transplanting in several areas. However, reports from inside the DPRK suggest that mobilization for farm work has been severely constrained by COVID-19 measures.³⁷ Further complicating a possible farm labor shortage, gasoline and diesel prices rose significantly near the time of the acknowledgement of the outbreak; this may decrease farmers' ability to utilize existing mechanical equipment and lead to an increased dependence on manual labor.³⁸ Failure to execute agricultural plans in May and June could adversely impact nearly all aspects of the annual domestic crop production, as crops are either sown or harvested during these two months.³⁹ Food shortages and malnutrition-related diseases following a disruption in farm work could be so severe as to result in more deaths than the COVID-19 epidemic itself.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ Furthermore, the general health of the population is poor: roughly 40% suffer from malnutrition, and diseases such as tuberculosis are prevalent.⁴² An outbreak of Omicron BA.2, which is known to be highly contagious,⁴³ could therefore have serious consequences for the DPRK, in which the majority of the population remain unvaccinated. Radio Free Asia reported on 17 May that the DPRK had imported Sinovac vaccines from China and had begun to inoculate border guards.⁴⁴ On 26 May, this was followed up by another report stating that the DPRK had begun distributing vaccines among soldiers working on high-priority

³⁷ "N. Korea's COVID-19 outbreak is presenting challenges for agricultural mobilizations," Daily NK, 26 May 2022, available at:

<https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-covid-19-outbreak-presenting-challenges-agricultural-mobilizations/>.

³⁸ "N. Korea's increasing gasoline and diesel prices may negatively impact farming activities," Daily NK, 20 May 2022, available at:

<https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-increasing-gasoline-diesel-prices-may-negatively-impact-farming-activities/>.

³⁹ "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.)

⁴⁰ "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/>.

⁴¹ "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&>.

⁴² "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.

⁴³ "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>.

⁴⁴ "North Korea prioritizes vaccines for border soldiers as COVID wave hits," RFA, 17 May 2022, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/covid-vaccines-05172022192437.html>.

construction projects.⁴⁵ On 3 June, Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, stated in a comment to NK News that they were “aware” that the DPRK had accepted vaccines from China and had started administering doses. The organization did not state the amount or type of vaccines, nor how Gavi had received the information. The impact of vaccinations on the current outbreak remains unclear. Professor Oh Myeong-don at Seoul National University Hospital stated on 16 May that, due to the time needed to distribute and await the full effect of vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines would not improve the current outbreak, even if the DPRK were to accept shipments immediately.⁴⁶

Possible next nuclear weapon test

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, to combat the drought and to step up farming efforts during this crucial point in the agricultural cycle. The leadership may feel that a nuclear weapon test during the pandemic would be viewed unfavorably by the domestic public. It could also disincentivise the global community from providing COVID-related assistance.

However, other indications point to the opposite. 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 security vacuum not be revealed in the national defence.”⁴⁷ This indicates that the DPRK will attempt to proceed as planned with the country’s national defence development, which includes the development of new nuclear weapons.⁴⁸ It should be noted that the DPRK launched three short-range ballistic missiles on 12 May 2022,⁴⁹ the same day that it publicly acknowledged the COVID outbreak. The country has subsequently tested an additional eleven missiles (on two separate occasions), including a suspected ICBM.⁵⁰ This seems to run counter to speculation by some observers that the COVID outbreak might hinder Pyongyang’s weapon testing.⁵¹

⁴⁵ “North Korea gives Chinese vaccines to soldiers working as construction labor”, RFA, 26 May 2022, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/vaccine-05262022162323.html>.

⁴⁶ “북한, 오미크론으로 최소 3만4천명 사망할 듯”...서울대 세미나 [At least 34,000 people will likely be killed in Omicron, North Korea. Seoul National University Seminar], Yonhap News Agency, 16 May 2022, available at: <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220516129400504?input=1195m>.

⁴⁷ “8th Political Bureau Meeting of 8th Central Committee of WPK Held,” KCNA, 12 May 2022.

⁴⁸ “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.

⁴⁹ “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/>.

⁵⁰ “North Korea fires volley of missiles, prompting joint military drill by Japan, U.S.,” Reuters, 5 June 2022, available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nkorea-fires-ballistic-missile-off-east-coast-skorea-military-2022-06-05/>. “North Korea launches ICBM after Biden summits with Asia allies,” Reuters, 25 May 2022, available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nkorea-fires-ballistic-missile-off-east-coast-skorea-military-2022-05-24/>.

⁵¹ “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/>.

The COVID outbreak could prompt DPRK leadership to opt for a hard line and carry out a nuclear weapon 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 troubles and solidify public support for the regime, while countering the views at home and abroad that the Kim regime is weak.⁵²

There are indications that Kim Jong Un has started a campaign claiming progress toward victory over the COVID outbreak. The Politburo meeting of 21 May showcased a sharp turn in rhetoric, from an overwhelming criticism of the failure of the State and the party in preventing the COVID-19 outbreak, to praising the WPK for its guidance in stabilizing the situation. This has been accompanied by domestic news reports on the considerable decline in daily new COVID cases and death rates, as well as reports on the "stably curbed" epidemic spread through successful medical supply across the country.⁵³ Reports further point to significantly increased production rates in the industrial and agricultural sectors.⁵⁴

Actions taking place following the 21 May Politburo meeting similarly point towards an attempt to portray the situation as having been improved. On 22 May, tens of thousands of Pyongyang residents reportedly were invited to take part in a State funeral for the former KPA Marshal with high media coverage, and the Pyongyang lockdown was reportedly lifted roughly a week later. Furthermore, on 5 June, Rodong Sinmun released a story stating that the epidemic prevention situation had begun to improve following Kim Jong Un's personal visits to pharmacies in Pyongyang on 15 May, praising him for "the miracle wrought by the great and self-sacrificing leadership".⁵⁵ These actions attempting to showcase the State's ability to control the epidemic situation could indicate any plans for nuclear weapons test could continue unabated.

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

⁵² "North Korea's Anti-South Korea Campaign," 38 North, 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/>.

⁵³ "Anti-epidemic Campaign Intensified in DPRK," KCNA, 22 May 2022.

⁵⁴ "Struggle of Ten Days under Maximum Emergency Epidemic Prevention System," KCNA, 22 May 2022.

⁵⁵ "May in 2022 Can Never Be Forgotten", KCNA, 5 June 2022.

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