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## HAS NORTH KOREA REALLY DODGED THE COVID-19 BULLET?

An Analysis from the Recent Media Reporting

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There remains a widespread speculation about how, North Korea- one of the countries with the most troubled healthcare system in the world is handling its COVID-19 crisis. While the availability of information and real-time assessments all over the world about the pandemic sometimes ranges from overflowing amounts to a superfluous quantity; opposite is true for the Hermit Kingdom. One can argue that, little is known about the country and even less than little is known so far the status of COVID-19 is concerned.

Much of the information is available through the western media, as well as through the focused media monitoring of North Korean news sources; however, a gap in analysing the same remains. A quick survey and brief assessment therefore becomes necessary. In this context, the brief is an attempt to bring forth three issues- i) A status update of North Korea's

COVID-19 ii) How is the country engaged in handling COVID-19 outbreak? iii) Connecting the dots.

### **Zero COVID-19 Cases?**

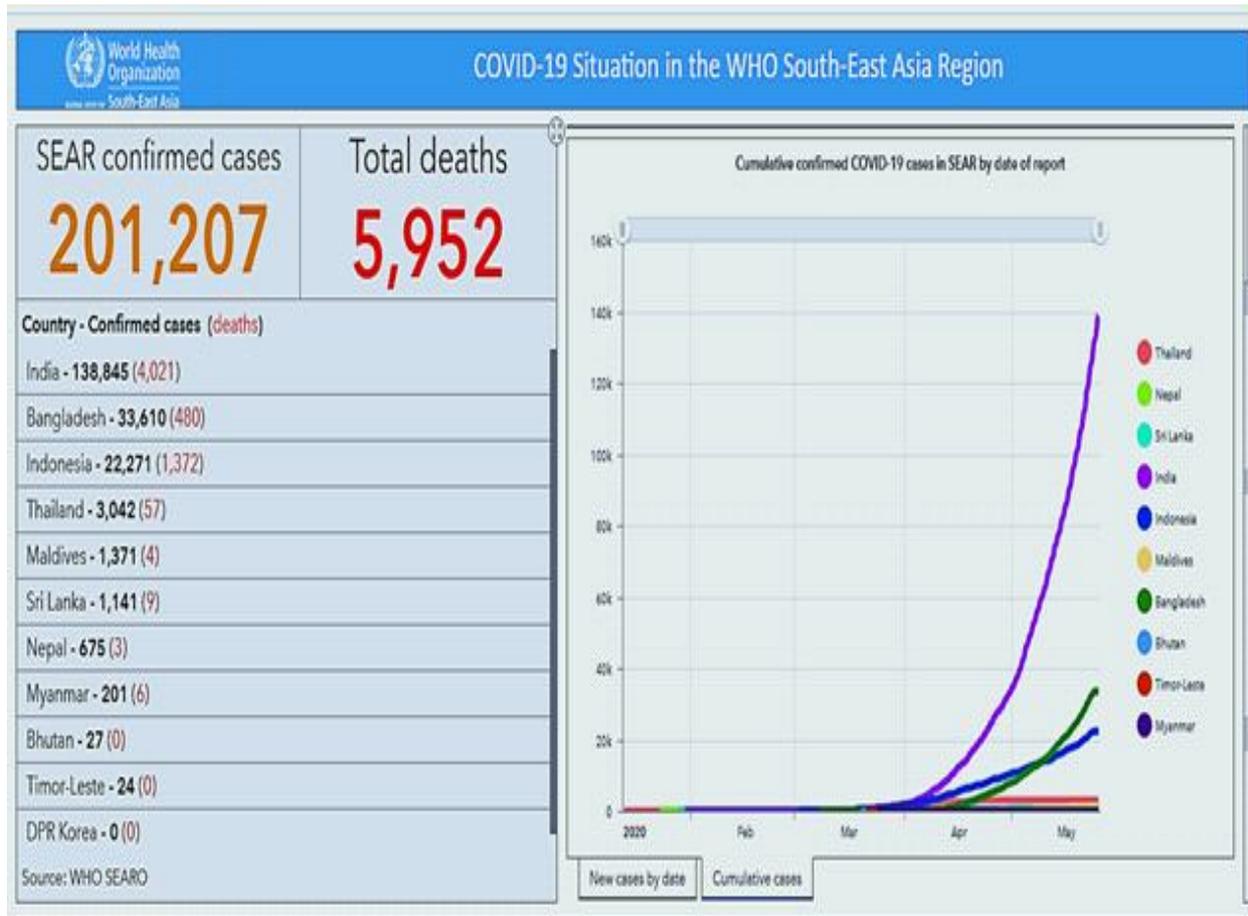
The Democratic People's Republic Korea (DPRK) that shares its borders with three former COVID-19 hot-spot countries (China, Russia, South Korea) one of them being a porous border has claimed that, it has successfully dodged the

COVID-19 bullet. The State media has regularly painted a COVID-19 free picture and has claimed that, its swift anti-pandemic efforts have kept a successful check on the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country. Interestingly, the latest WHO dataset (accessed on May 25, 2020) too indicates zero cases in North Korea, while many other countries in the same

WHO South East Asian Region (SEAR) have been witnessing rising COVID-19 cases (see figure 1).

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Figure 1: COVID-19 Situation in the WHO SEAR (region)



Source: WHO COVID-19 Dashboard for South East Asian Region (SEAR), <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/56d2642cb379485ebf78371e744b8c6a>. Accessed on 25 May 2020

Amidst the fact that global confirmed COVID-19 numbers stands at 5,206,614<sup>1</sup> cases as on May 25, 2020, with various countries such as the US, Russia, Brazil, UK, Spain, Italy, Germany, Turkey and France ( in that order) unfortunately leading the numbers, the North Korean claims of zero cases seem far from reality. It is to be noted that, the aforementioned countries despite their geographical distance from China, seemed to have surpassed the number of COVID-19 cases as compared to China (the pandemic’s primary epicenter) which reported a total of 84,063<sup>2</sup> confirmed cases. Additionally, within the Asian region countries such as India, Pakistan, Singapore, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, and Afghanistan (geographically closer to China) are currently grappling with the issue of flattening the curve. Thus, the claims of zero COVID-19 from North Korea from the same Asian region are difficult to

fathom. Moreover due to the credibility of the available information most of which is propaganda dominated; the overall picture of North Korea’s COVID-19 reality seems rather confusing.

However, the North Korean narrative needs to be revisited if not accepted in-toto because it is established that with adequate and strict preventive measures, the spread of the outbreak has been mitigated and even reported zero by a few countries. For instance “...there have been no deaths or local cases of human-to-human transmission in Mongolia...”<sup>3</sup> by May. Additionally, Bhutan too, (the landlocked country between China and India) seemingly COVID-19 vulnerable has been able to contain the spread of the pandemic with only 27 confirmed cases<sup>4</sup> reported on May 25, 2020. The country is even touted as a COVID-19 “success story”<sup>5</sup> because of little evidence of community

transmission. Similarly, various other countries such as “Turkmenistan, Marshal Islands, Kiribati including six others”<sup>6</sup> have not reported any COVID-19 cases yet. The Indian states of Nagaland and Lakshadweep too, remained COVID-19 free until 24<sup>th</sup> May 2020 while India almost reached the list of top 10 worst affected countries.<sup>7</sup> Considering North Korea is an isolated country and that there have been only “few numbers of COVID-19 confirmed cases (less than 300) in the Chinese province of Liaoning and Jilin”<sup>8</sup> bordering the country, the zero COVID-19 cases do not seem an impossibility. However, before furthering this claim, it remains imperative to get a clearer picture about the status of the epidemic within the country.

### North Korea’s COVID-19 Fight

As per the recent reporting by *The Pyongyang Times*, the “global COVID-19 casualty toll neared 4m” including zero COVID-19 cases in South Korea. No indication of any COVID-19 cases or casualty within the country was provided. In fact, until the first week of April, there were reportedly zero COVID-19 cases reported from the State Media.

Media reporting from February 01, 2020-May 21, 2020 indicated that the DPRK initiated COVID-19 prevention efforts as early as February when the virus has spread to only 51 countries<sup>9</sup> and was not even declared a pandemic by the WHO. Pyongyang has claimed that, an active campaign to prevent COVID-19 in the country was already underway, even intensified by the second week of February. A non-permanent Central Public Health Guidance Committee was established guiding all the ‘anti-epidemic’ efforts such as the broadcasting of information through the installation of electronic boards, public announcements, taking routine hygiene inspections, sterilization drives at hospitals, schools, airports, harbors and isolation of suspected patients, etc. Medical checkpoints at various places were set up for examining suspected patients. Educational and childcare institutions too were paid special attention in terms of sterilization in the month of February.

School vacations were declared all over the country from February 20 - March. There were also reports of public amenities being shut down as of 25 February. Other measures such as the inspection of quarantine of imported goods and materials were intensified at border areas as well as major ports. North Korea has claimed that ‘borders, airspace, waters and the areas along the Military Demarcation Line were completely blocked’ and strict measures remained in place to ensure no inflow of COVID-19 carriers.<sup>10</sup>

It is to be noted that by February the Red Cross Society in DPRK in close cooperation with the volunteers and doctors had begun conducting medical checkups of suspected cases. By the second week of February, the ‘non-permanent Central Public Health Guidance Committee of the DPRK’ had planned to prolong the isolation period required for quarantine as a preventive strategy in the fight against COVID-19. The Presidium had in fact, adopted to provisionally extend the isolation period to 30 days within the DPRK territory.<sup>11</sup>

The anti-epidemic drive also included the participation of medical workers from various hospitals such as Pyongyang University of Medical Science, Kim Man Yu, and others. Interestingly, one report even stated that “researchers at the Pyongyang University of Medical Sciences even developed a potential COVID-19 remedy”.<sup>12</sup> In terms of domestic efforts, news reporting has pointed out that emergency anti-epidemic work was further intensified in the month of March-April as well, including the extension of the quarantine of individuals. During the same time spring cleaning in the country was carried out focused on fighting the pandemic including the sterilization of cash handling units (ATMs) of the Central Bank all over the country. Media reports suggest that they were sterilized and disinfected over three times a day. Additionally, the Sinuiju Cosmetics Factory in North Phyongan Province had begun developing sterilizing products to be used as a disinfectant against the virus. The country’s COVID-19 preparedness included increasing the mass production of chlorine dioxide solution and other disinfectants. It was reported that over a hundred

thousand officials of the Party and administrative organs were actively engaged in daily activities to prevent outbreak of COVID-19. Interestingly, recently the State media has even reported about the Ministry of Public Health to be working on developing a vaccine against the disease.<sup>13</sup>

The Provinces of Jagang and North Hamgyong had already registered citizens who had visited foreign countries for a timely quarantine. The daily commute of passengers, cargos, border transport (railways) were reported to have been routinely and strictly supervised for anti-epidemic operations. Furthermore, it is clear from the reporting that DPRK took a regular note of the spread of the pandemic, including advisories/data released from the World Health Organisation (WHO), monitoring the increase of COVID-19 cases in China, US, Russia, Italy, Spain, Japan, Turkey, Australia, Canada, Iran, France, etc. The country took note of negative economic consequences of the pandemic in mid-March including the anticipated global decline in the demand for oil. Some recent reports (May 07, 2020) continue to highlight that anti-epidemic efforts in the country have further been tightened in order to prevent the 'infiltration of the epidemic' indicating that State media continues to maintain zero COVID-19 cases.<sup>14</sup>

### Observations

If one accepts the COVID-19 news reporting from DPRK at face value, the North Korean narrative does not seem impossible. However, counterclaims of the COVID-19 narrative defeats the assumption that North Korea may have dodged the COVID-19 bullet. Furthermore, scholars who observe North Korea too have expressed doubts about its claim. Jagannath Panda and Jina Kim argue that the country's

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efforts of hiding the COVID-19 numbers are politically motivated and might be a part of, "a wait-and-watch" strategy that includes disclosure of numbers to demand medical aid combined with a possible offer to resume talks"<sup>15</sup>. Additionally, any admission to how adversely North Korea has been affected by the pandemic would imply "acknowledging the hollowness of *Juche* philosophy- one of the founding philosophical pillars of the country."<sup>16</sup>

### The Number Game and Counterclaims

It is important to take note that even with counter claims, the real COVID-19 numbers can only be revealed with transparent nationwide testing. There is however one imaginable way in which North Korean claim makes some sense. Notwithstanding, the political motivations for not revealing the actual numbers; one can argue that North Korea might be considering only the 'local transmission' as well as 'community transmission' cases in its COVID-19 tally. In this manner confirmed cases reported outside of this, such as foreigners present and inbound travelers/citizens do not get counted as a part of the national tally. More so because a possibility of these cases kept as separate from the population exists. It is noteworthy that the North Korean approach to quarantine has been a mandatory state-run isolation of 15 days (later extended to 30 days). By the end of March, close to "...5,400 people were released from quarantine..."<sup>17</sup> including 70 foreigners. Subsequently, a total number of 9950 were reportedly in the State quarantine by April end including 990 from the provinces of North Phyongan and 720 from the South Phyongan. Nearly half of them were reported to be released from the isolation.<sup>18</sup> In fact, as per reports since December 31, 2019, approximately "... 25,351 people have been released from quarantine

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including 382 foreigners..." by the end of April.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, the status and number of individuals quarantined itself raises doubts about COVID-19 free narrative. Only a few sources are available to know the status of North Korean COVID-19 reality such as the WHO's official data, yet that is dependent on the information shared by the host country. The gap remains, for instance; the official website of WHO reports nil cases, (cited above), however, some media reports have highlighted that, "...as per the weekly country update of WHO, approximately 709 people in North Korea had been tested for COVID-19, none confirmed as positive as on 02 April 2020.." <sup>20</sup> This stands in contrast with what the Russian media has reported that, "...cases of COVID-19 infection have been detected in the country as early as March 2020..." <sup>21</sup> The *NK News'* COVID-19 tracker too suggests that "...since early February COVID-19 cases have been emerging inside the country including military doctors..." <sup>22</sup>

Additionally, much can be inferred from the kind of aid North Korea has received in its fight against COVID-19. Medical aid in the form of supplies including masks, gloves, goggles, hand hygiene products, and antibiotics had reportedly arrived by March 30. <sup>23</sup> During the same time "UNICEF, Doctors without Borders, The Swiss Aid and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)... have been actively engaged in North Korea" <sup>24</sup>. However, it cannot be pointed with certainty whether their operations are specifically COVID-19 focused. Furthermore, this is to be read in the light that ICRC's Director General Robert Mardini dismissed any reports of North Korea secretly approaching ICRC for help to fight the pandemic. <sup>25</sup>

Finally, it has to be reiterated that so far the status of COVID-19 in any country is concerned, the facts on ground change on an hourly basis. Viewed in this context, any exact approximation

of numbers especially in the case of North Korea seems questionable. However, despite this, a comprehensive assessment of North Korea's COVID-19 reality needs to include these pointers. First, that the country has acquired some experience from the past in fighting epidemics such as SARS and Ebola in 2003, 2014 respectively. It is important to note that "North Korea emerged from SARS and Ebola unscathed..." <sup>26</sup> Lastly, North Korea's contact with the outside world remains negligible and it was perhaps the only country to shut its borders as

early as January 2020. The possibility of swift, strict and preventive action against the spread of pandemic translating into mitigating COVID-19 crisis at the very beginning cannot be ignored.

Finding certain answers to whether North Korea has dodged the COVID-19 bullet or not seems difficult

without a transparent record of nation wise testing; additionally any data available is bound to change given the dynamic reality of the subject itself. At present three realities makes some sense- a) North Korea may have been able to contain the spread of outbreak with early preventive measures b) However, real numbers might be revealed later if the country is following a strategy of wait and watch c) The numbers are bound to change in case of reopening of borders in which case cooperation on COVID-19 prevention might be sought by North Korea sooner than later.

*\*Data is mined from publically available media sources (predominantly from)- The Pyongyang Times, KCNA Watch, NK News, Rodong Sinmun, the Sputnik News etc. A focussed media monitoring of COVID-19 related news from Pyongyang Times, (DPRK's only English newspaper) has been conducted from 01 February -22 May 2020. More than 100 articles have been read and analysed. Close to 70 have been referred and cited including 46 in the references. To corroborate the information Google translation of Rodong Sinmun has also been utilized for some parts.*

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## Notes

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