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Coronavirus Outbreak: South Korea reports 231 new cases, seventh death as infections leap to 833

Monday 24 February 2020, by [PARK Chan-kyong](#), [Press Agencies](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2020).

- **More than 100 of the new cases were linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu**
- **South Korean airlines halt flights to Daegu a day after the country raised its virus alert to the highest level**

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South Korea reported 231 new cases of the coronavirus, bringing the total number of infected patients in the country to 833, health authorities said on Monday, a day after the government raised its infectious disease alert to its highest level.

Of the new cases, 115 were linked to a church in the southeastern city of Daegu after a 61-year-old woman known as "Patient 31" who attended services there tested positive, according to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC).

KCDC also reported the seventh death from the virus, a 62-year-old man from a hospital in Cheongdo, a county that saw surges in confirmed cases along with nearby Daegu in recent weeks.

Authorities are still investigating the exact cause of the new outbreak, with Patient 31 having no recent record of overseas travel.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in on Sunday said the government had raised the country's disease alert by one notch to the fourth and highest level in a bid to contain a surge in new cases.

Of the total confirmed cases, more than 300 were linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus congregation in Daegu.

The escalation in the alert level allows the government to send extra resources to Daegu city and Cheongdo county, which were designated "special care zones" on Friday.

The alert level enables the government to forcibly prevent public activities and order the temporary closure of schools, the health ministry said.

The ministry also said Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun will take charge of policy decisions related to the virus outbreak, which is the first time the country's prime minister has intervened to take over from a minister in this way.

“The coronavirus virus is more contagious and spreads quickly during the early stage of the outbreak, and therefore pre-emptive measures are needed considering a possibility that the virus could develop to a nationwide spread from a community spread,” health minister Park Neung-hoo told a news conference. “We believe a week to 10 days will be crucial to determine the spread of the coronavirus.”

Education minister Yoo Eun-hae told the news conference that kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools will start the new semester one week later on March 9, from March 2.

The last time South Korea raised the alert level to “red” was 11 years ago during the H1N1 outbreak, Yonhap reported.

Earlier on Sunday, the ruling Democratic Party asked the government for an extra budget and also to free up emergency funds from the existing budget worth 3.4 trillion won (US\$2.82 billion) to tackle the outbreak. Parliament would hold a plenary session on Monday to discuss further measures, according to Yonhap.

South Korea on Monday vowed to act “quickly, firmly” should the won move in one direction excessively. The currency dropped to a six-month low and stocks plunged after the government raised its infectious disease alert to the highest level.

“The virus appears to have a bigger-than-expected negative impact on the financial markets,” said Park Sang-hyun, an economist at HI Investment & Securities Co. “The point is whether the virus outbreak would stabilise in end-February or early March.”

Some South Korean workers at Samsung Electronics and Hyundai Motor are staying home as a precautionary measure.

About 1,500 workers of Samsung’s phone complex in the southeastern city of Gumi have self-quarantined after one of its workers was infected with the disease.

They include 900 workers who commute to Gumi from neighbouring Daegu. Samsung said it has restarted production at its factory in Gumi after closing it over the weekend, adding that the floor where the infected employee worked will resume production on Tuesday.

Six employees at Hyundai Motor’s factories in the southeastern city of Ulsan are also at home, with four of them linked to the Daegu church, a union spokesman said in a statement.

South Korea’s earlier cases were linked to China but the new infections centre on Daegu, a city of about 2.5 million, and a hospital in Cheongdo, a county with about 43,000 people.

Kim Simon, a spokesman from the Shincheonji Church, said on YouTube on Sunday that the church would make all-out efforts to curb the virus’ spread and closely cooperate with health authorities.

Since the first confirmed case on January 20, seven people have died from the virus in South Korea, with three deaths reported on Sunday.

In Daegu and elsewhere, citizens flocked to large supermarkets and pharmacies to buy surgical masks and supplies. Local media photos showed hundreds of people lining up in front of E-Mart stores in Daegu starting as early as 8am.

A series of political and cultural events for this week has been cancelled, while the culture ministry said on Monday a total of 24 national museums and libraries will temporarily close.

The National Assembly called off a government questioning session slated for Thursday afternoon as at least three lawmakers underwent a check after coming in contact with an education official who tested positive.

Korean Air has decided to halt all flights to Daegu until March 28, while Asiana Airlines will suspend all flights to the city until March 9, their representatives said.

Vietnam's Bamboo Airways also announced on Monday that it would suspend all flights to South Korea from Wednesday. The suspension will affect the flights it operates connecting Seoul's Incheon International Airport with Da Nang and Nha Trang, and may also hit "a new route from Hanoi to Incheon" that was planned to start in June, a spokeswoman said.

Mongolia will also ban flights to and from South Korea starting on Tuesday until March 2, it said, weeks after closing its border with China over the epidemic.

At least 14 countries announced tighter restrictions on travel from South Korea in response to the growing number of cases. In the UK, travellers who have been to South Korea within the past 14 days must self-quarantine if they report symptoms and must report to authorities.

The US State Department on Saturday raised its travel advisory level for South Korea from 1 to 2, the second of four ratings, which asks travellers to avoid contact with sick people.

Seventeen South Korean Catholics from North Gyeongsang province and their tour guide in Seoul who had gone on a pilgrimage to Israel earlier this month were confirmed to have been infected with the virus, KCDC said.

Israeli and Palestinian authorities sought to allay fears of a potential local outbreak after learning that South Korean pilgrims who had toured some of the Holy Land's most popular sites were later found to be carrying the virus.

The Israel Defence Forces is preparing to quarantine some 200 South Korean tourists at a military base near Jerusalem.

South Koreans on board a Korean Air flight were refused entry at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion International airport on Saturday evening due to concerns over the virus, South Korea's foreign ministry said on Sunday.

"As the measure was taken without notice in advance by Israel, we have lodged a complaint for causing inconveniences to our travellers and asked to prevent a recurrence," the ministry said, adding Israeli counterparts had promised to cooperate with South Korea.

Meanwhile, Catholic churches in the cities of Daegu, Gwangju and elsewhere have suspended mass and other gatherings.

Reuters

Additional reporting by Bloomberg

• South China Morning Post. Published: 9:57am, 24 Feb, 2020:
<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3052016/coronavirus-south-korea-reports-seventh-death-infections-leap>

South Korea raises disease alert level to 'highest' as coronavirus cases surge

- **South Korea on Sunday reported 169 new cases of coronavirus and four new deaths, in the largest number of confirmed infections outside China**

- The outbreak can largely be traced to a religious sect in Daegu, the nation's fourth-largest city

South Korea raised its alert on the new coronavirus to the highest level on Sunday in the face of a sudden spike in the number of infections.

President Moon Jae-in said the country was facing a "grave turning point" following a government meeting called to discuss the outbreak.

The announcement came after the mayor of South Korea's fourth-biggest city Daegu urged people who may be infected to "not hide" as the country reported four additional deaths and 169 more cases - many connected to a religious sect.

Professor David Hui Shu-cheong, an infectious disease expert at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said the city's government might consider issuing travel advice on South Korea, but in the meantime any Hongkongers planning to visit "should wear masks and be vigilant about personal hygiene".

"The government could consider asking travellers from Korea and Japan to fill in a health declaration as a precaution," he said. "The cases in Japan are mostly to do with the Diamond Princess cruise ship, while those in South Korea are to do with some church gatherings in two regions. South Korea is still working to contain the virus, so asking people to avoid going there will do, unless there is a more serious outbreak."

Hong Kong's Security Bureau has not issued a travel alert for South Korea or Japan despite the rise in infections, but said it would issue an outbound travel alert, on the advice of the Food and Health Bureau, "should there be public health reasons" to do so.

Dr Leung Chi-chiu, chairman of the advisory committee on communicable diseases at the Hong Kong Medical Association, said the government should consider tightening the screening of Korean tourists if the outbreak worsened.

"Politically we may not be able to impose a ban on Korean visitors. But maybe we can tighten the quarantine requirements for Koreans to discourage them to come, like requiring them to be quarantined for 14 days on arrival. It is in effect asking them not to come," he said.

"Now they have also raised their alert status to serious level. It is not unfair for us to do something in response."

Hong Kong legislator Yiu Si-wing, who represents the travel sector, also urged the government to consider issuing a travel alert for South Korea if the outbreak continues.

In 2019, Hong Kong received more than 1.04 million South Korean tourists, accounting for about 8.5 per cent of non-mainland Chinese visitors, according to statistics by Hong Kong Tourism Board.

Since February 12, Seoul has adopted “strict quarantine screening” procedures for visitors from Hong Kong and Macau, in addition to those from China. They are required to use specific counters and fill out a special quarantine report that includes providing their mobile phone number, the address of where they are staying in South Korea, and disclosing any visits to Hubei province within the past 14 days.

More than 10 flights a day connect Hong Kong and Incheon Airport in Seoul, according to Airport Authority figures.

South Korea’s national toll of 602 cases is now the highest outside mainland China, apart from the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan, after the number of the infections soared in recent days.

The four deaths, reported on Sunday, take South Korea’s toll to six.

Mainland China reported 648 new infections for a total of 76,936. The daily death toll fell slightly to 97. In all, 2,442 people have died in the country from Covid-19.

One of the victims in South Korea was at a hospital in Cheongdo, a southern city linked to the religious sect, where around 100 cases were reported.

Among the latest infections, 75 involved the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in the southern city of Daegu, the Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention said in a statement.

Hundreds of members of the church have now been infected, starting with a 61-year-old woman who developed a fever on February 10 but attended at least four church services in Daegu before being diagnosed.

Daegu - with a population of 2.5 million - reported more than 90 new cases on Sunday, bringing the city’s total to 247, mayor Kwon Young-jin said.

“The crisis level of Daegu and the North Gyeongsang province is grave,” said Kwon, who advised locals to stay indoors.

The mayor asked all Shincheonji members with symptoms to come forward and be tested.

“Hiding is not the answer. If you hide, it could hurt your health, your family’s health, and will not help in the early cessation of the situation,” Kwon told a news conference.

Kwon said there were concerns that the number of those infected in Daegu could see yet another massive increase because authorities were launching intensive examinations of church members with virus-related symptoms. More than 9,000 worshippers were being tested.

Downtown Daegu was mostly deserted with shelves at some supermarkets and stores empty. Many restaurants, bars, real-estate offices and tour agencies have shut down as traffic nosedived and people stayed home, ordering food and supplies online.

Daegu and Cheongdo - the birthplace of Shincheonji’s founder Lee Man-hee - were designated as “special management zones” on Friday.

Established in 1984, the Shincheonji church has 200,000 followers across the country, including some 13,000 in Daegu. According to Pastor Shin Hyun-uk, an anti-cult campaigner, it has some 20,000 followers in about 30 other territories including Japan, China, Hong Kong and countries in Southeast Asia.

“They are in general seen as a dangerous, vile cult that has been growing fast by abusing the belief in the last judgment,” he said, referring to some denominations’ belief in the second coming of Christ.

Shincheonji claims its founder, Lee Man-hee, 88 has donned the mantle of Jesus Christ and will take 144,000 people with him to heaven on the day of judgment.

The US State Department on Saturday raised its travel advisory to South Korea, joining a handful of countries bolstering their vigilance against the country’s recent spike in the number of infections.

Singapore and Britain have also advised their nationals “against all but essential travel to Daegu and Cheongdo”. Anyone who has pneumonia or a severe respiratory infection and has been to the two Korean cities within 14 days will now be considered a “suspect case” for coronavirus, Singapore’s health ministry said in a statement.

From Monday midnight, Macau will impose medical surveillance at the border on any non-resident who visited South Korea in the past 14 days.

Leong Iek-hou, coordinator of the city’s Control of Communicable Diseases and Surveillance of Diseases Department, said South Korea had been listed as a “high risk area” given the spike in infections and that there “appeared to be community outbreak”.

The casino hub already requires travellers from the Chinese provinces of Guangdong, Henan, Zhejiang, as well as Beijing and Shanghai, to undergo medical screening. Macau health bureau chief Lei Chin-ion has previously said people would have to wait for six to eight hours at the border for such checks.

On Saturday, 43 South Koreans entered Macau. All flights between Macau and South Korea will be stopped from March 1 onwards.

Globally, nearly 78,000 people have been infected in 29 countries. In some countries, some virus clusters have shown no direct link to travel to China.

Israel, which reported one case, turned back a South Korean airliner with most of its passengers after it landed at the country’s Ben Gurion airport on Saturday evening. Twelve Israelis on board were evacuated and quarantined. The plane was taxied away from the allotted terminal, Israeli media reported.

South Korea earlier informed Israel that nine members of a group who toured Israel and the West Bank for a week this month tested positive for the virus. The tourists were diagnosed upon returning home. Israeli and Palestinian health authorities asked people who were in close contact with the tourists to quarantine themselves – including 180 pupils and 19 staff from three separate schools, according to Israel’s health ministry.

A team of global experts with the World Health Organisation is on the way to China’s Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Saturday. It has been visiting other parts of China this week.

Tedros also told a meeting of African health ministers that the WHO is concerned about cases with “no clear epidemiological link, such as travel history to China or contact with a confirmed case”. He is especially concerned about the growing number of cases in Iran, where 28 people have been infected.

Iranian health authorities on Saturday reported the country's sixth death from the virus.

Agencies

Reporting by Alvin Lum, Kang Chung Ng, Agence France-Presse, Associated Press, DPA

- South China Morning Post. Published: 12:10pm, 23 Feb, 2020:
<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3051952/grave-coronavirus-situation-south-korean-city-daegu-mayor>
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Coronavirus: South Korea in crisis mode as Daegu cases surge

• Infections have risen six-fold in three days to at least 208, with doomsday cult at centre of 'super-spreading event'

- New infections include three members of the 600,000-strong military

South Korea swung into emergency mode as it confirmed 104 more cases of the novel coronavirus on Friday, doubling its total number of patients in one day to 208 and making it the most infected country behind China and Japan.

It also reported a second casualty, a 54-year-old woman who died after being moved from Daegu to Busan for treatment, following the death of a man in his 60s on Thursday.

Three of the new cases involve a navy sailor, army officer and air force officer who were the first infections to be reported in South Korea's 600,000-strong military. They had reportedly visited the southern city of Daegu, which has seen a spike in infections this week.

More than six in 10 patients in South Korea are linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu, a group that mainstream churches describe as a doomsday cult with 200,000 followers in the country.

President Moon Jae-in described the situation as "serious" and authorities indicated they expected more infections to be reported.

Jun Eun-kyeong, head of the Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), said a survey of 4,500 church followers - about half of Shincheonji's congregation in Daegu - revealed more than 500 were experiencing symptoms of Covid-19, which causes a pneumonia-like illness.

In a televised statement, Prime Minister Chung Se-kyun said the central government would focus resources on the southeastern region to address a shortage in hospital beds, medical personnel and equipment, and declared Daegu city a "special management zone".

"A month into the (Covid-19 disease) outbreak, we have entered an emergency phase," Chung said. "Our efforts until now had been focused on blocking the illness from entering the country. But we will now shift the focus on preventing the illness from spreading further in local communities."

Defence Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo ordered military officials to work closely with health authorities

to prevent the virus from spreading inside the military, and take special quarantine steps. Jeong also ordered the military to strictly restrict all enlisted troops from taking holidays and meeting visitors from outside, the defence ministry said.

On Jeju, a popular destination for Chinese tourists, sailors at the naval base who had come into contact with the infected man who is in a civilian hospital were put under quarantine, with all soldiers ordered to wear face masks. The army officer is in a military hospital and in relatively stable condition, North Chungcheong Province governor Lee Si-jong told reporters.

The mayor of Daegu on Thursday urged the city's 2.5 million people to stay at home and wear masks even indoors if possible, while the city's US Army garrison - where about 10,000 soldiers, civilians and family members live or work - has restricted access and instructed any American troops who recently attended Shincheonji services to self-quarantine.

Streets in Daegu on Friday were deserted, with people avoiding shopping malls and markets, while the city closed public facilities. The Catholic Church suspended mass for the first time in its history.

In Seoul, commuters donned face masks and gave shops a wide berth. While the city government imposed a ban on mass public rallies, groups of conservatives defiantly vowed to push through with their weekly protests in the city centre against Moon's leadership.

OUT OF CONTROL

South Korea's second death and surge in cases, alongside new infections in Iran and Chinese hospitals and prisons, has rekindled concerns about the disease that has infected more than 76,000 people and killed more than 2,200.

Until Tuesday this week, South Korea had reported 31 patients, with most of these connected to travellers from mainland China. Since February 2, it had barred travellers from Hubei province, the epicentre of the contagion, but authorities had resisted calls to have an all-out ban on Chinese travellers. They did ramp up scrutiny of passengers from Hong Kong and Macau, which together have 79 cases.

Last week, Moon had even expressed confidence that the epidemic would be under control, and called for efforts to turn to revitalising the sluggish economy.

But a six-fold rise in patients in just three days has sparked fears that the outbreak is getting out of control and circulating within the local population, although World Health Organisation director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on Thursday said the new cases were mostly linked to known, existing clusters of infections, and that Seoul was following them very closely.

"The number of cases are really manageable, and I hope South Korea will do everything to contain this outbreak at this early stage," he said, adding that more than half of the virus cases outside China were from the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked in Japan.

The KCDC on Wednesday identified a 61-year-old Shincheonji follower as starting a "super-spreading event", after she attended at least four church services while having a fever. She had refused testing twice, saying she had not travelled to mainland China.

One patient died on Friday in the country's second casualty, becoming part of the 12 people to have died outside mainland China.

The outbreak of the disease is a devilry committed by Satan in order to stop our church from

growing

Lee Man-hee, founder of Shincheonji

Shincheonji said it had closed all of its 74 sanctuaries around the nation and told followers to instead watch its worship services on YouTube. Outside South Korea, it boasts 20,000 followers from 30 other places, including Hong Kong.

On Friday, the group's controversial leader, 88-year-old Lee Man-hee - whom the church describes as an angel of Jesus - urged followers to cooperate with health authorities to contain the virus.

"I know the outbreak of the disease is a devilry committed by Satan in order to stop our church from growing after seeing its fast growth," Lee wrote in a text message that was published in local news media.

Pastor Shin Hyun-wook, a former Shincheonji follower who quit the group in 2006 and is now an anti-cult campaigner, said: "Shincheonji followers are insensitive to catching virus ... They believe people get ill because they lack faith."

The church, set up in 1984 and known for attempting to recruit followers in the streets or in other churches without revealing their affiliation, has recently been mired in scandal.

Kim Nam-hee, who was Lee's "spiritual wife" and his second-in-command, publicly broke up with him after condemning him as a "crook who is interested in nothing but money".

She accused him of making advances to her when she was married with two children, asserting that she and her family members would die unless she divorced her husband.

"Lee Man-hee is neither a saviour nor a god but a human like all of us. Shincheonji which worships him as a saviour should be disbanded," she said in a YouTube video.

Park Chan-kyong

• South China Morning Post. Published: 6:07pm, 21 Feb, 2020:

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3051815/coronavirus-south-korea-crisis-mode-daegu-cases-surge>

Additional reporting by Associated Press, Agence France-Presse

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