

La Corée du Sud face au coronavirus - 3e partie: Stabilisation (4 mars-22 mars)

Sources du Korea Herald et du JoongAng Ilbo

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200304000609&ACE_SEARCH=1
516 more COVID-19 cases confirmed, total now at 5,328

By Park Han-na

Published : Mar 4, 2020

The total number of coronavirus cases in South Korea has climbed to 5,328, with the southeastern city of Daegu continuing to account for the majority.

The country had reported 516 more cases and four more deaths as of Wednesday at 12:01 a.m., according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Of the new cases, 405 were confirmed in Daegu; 89 in North Gyeongsang Province; seven in Gyeonggi Province; three each in Busan and Ulsan; two each in Incheon and Gwangju; and one each in Seoul, Daejeon, Gangwon Province, South Gyeongsang Province and South Chungcheong Province.

The death toll to date stood at 32. Seven people had fully recovered from COVID-19, bringing the total number of recovered patients to 41.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200304000280&ACE_SEARCH=1
3 additional coronavirus cases reported in military, total at 34

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 4, 2020 - 10:54 Updated : Mar 4, 2020 - 10:54

Three more service personnel tested positive for the new coronavirus, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in the military to 34 on Wednesday, the defense ministry said.

Two of the new COVID-19 cases were from the Army -- a rank-and-file soldier and an officer in Yongin, 50 kilometers south of Seoul -- and the other was an officer at a unit under the direct control of the ministry in the central city of Daejeon, it said.

Of the total, 19 were in the Army, 11 in the Air Force, two in the Marine Corps and one each in the Navy and the ministry unit.

Around 7,270 service members are quarantined at their bases as part of the military's broader efforts to prevent the virus from further spreading in barracks.

Of them, around 1,020 have either shown symptoms or had direct contact with infected patients, while the remainder recently visited Daegu, North Gyeongsang Province or other virus-hit countries such as China.

As of midnight, South Korea reported 5,328 virus patients, including 32 deaths.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200304000932&ACE_SEARCH=1
S. Korea to sharply restrict face mask exports, rev up weekend production

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 4, 2020 - 21:02 Updated : Mar 4, 2020 - 21:05

Government, ruling party and presidential officials agreed Wednesday to sharply restrict exports of face masks and spur their production even during weekends to fight against the new coronavirus.

The government has begun to provide face masks via public organizations since last week amid a surge in infections. But many people still find it difficult to buy protective goods due to a sharp supply shortage.

The ruling Democratic Party (DP), the government and the presidential office Cheong Wa Dae discussed ways to cope with a shortage of mask supply in their consultative meeting held at the National Assembly.

"(The participants) decided to come up with all measures to increase the production of face masks," Lee Nak-yon, head of the party's COVID-19 response panel, said.

"The measures include sharply reducing exports of face masks and encouraging their production during weekends," he added.

Later in the day, Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki said the government is working on ways to maintain the output level during weekends, including providing subsidies to manufacturers.

He made the remark in an interview with a local cable news channel.

"In case manufacturers face labor shortages, we are ready to mobilize military personnel," he added.

The country's daily production of masks is estimated at around 10-11 million units.

At last week's Cabinet meeting, the government approved a plan to limit mask exports to a maximum of 10 percent of total output and distribute 50 percent through government and public organizations.

But demand far surpassed supply amid the fast spread of COVID-19 in communities, with many people waiting in long lines for hours to buy face masks provided via public channels.

The participants in the three-way meeting agreed to find ways to raise the fairness in mask distribution and prevent people from buying face masks multiple times.

In particular, they proposed utilizing an online shared information program on medications that is being used at pharmacies, called the Drug Utilization Review.

The program allows pharmacists to check a consumer's history of medication purchases so as to prevent excessive use of medicine.

South Korea has reported nearly 5,200 cases of the new coronavirus since its outbreak on Jan. 20. More than half the cases have been traced to a church of the religious sect Shincheonji in the southeastern city of Daegu. (Yonhap)

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200304000757&ACE_SEARCH=1

Seoul strains to stop virus deaths

More community treatment centers coming for patients with mild symptoms, COVID-19 caseloads top 5,300

By Park Han-na

Published : Mar 4, 2020

On Wednesday, the government said it plans to distribute guidelines for operation of drive-through testing stations to local governments. The system enables drivers and passengers undergo the entire testing procedures in minutes, which will reduce the potential of virus exposure compared to hospital visits.

An application with Global Positioning System that sends notifications when people in self-quarantine leave their designated space will be launched this week.

Authorities will start using the app on Saturday for the people in Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province first where infection cases are concentrated.

There were some 27,700 people in self-isolation across the country as of Sunday.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200303000714&ACE_SEARCH=1

Reasons why so many in 20s, women contract virus in S. Korea

By Ahn Sung-mi

Published : Mar 3, 2020 - 16:01 Updated : Mar 3, 2020 - 17:30

The number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea is fast approaching 5,000 and paints a rather peculiar picture of patient demographics: 20-somethings make up the biggest age bracket, and women clearly outnumber men.

According to data from the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of the country's total 4,812 confirmed cases as of Tuesday afternoon, people in their 20s accounted for 29.4 percent, or 1,417 cases, followed by those in their 50s at 19.8 percent (952 cases).

By gender, 62.4 percent, or 3,002, were female, whereas 1,810 or 37.6 percent were male.

This departs from the World Health Organization's observations on coronavirus cases in China, which showed nearly 78 percent of the infected were from 30 to 69 years old, with the median age at 51.

According to officials at the KCDC, this is largely due to the fact that most cases here are linked to a particular religious group, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Around 60 percent of total cases are traceable to the Christian sect's branch in Daegu.

"Women in their 20s-30s reportedly make up a large amount of Shincheonji followers, and it is showing in the high percentage of COVID-19 cases in those age groups," KCDC director Jung Eun-kyeong said at a news briefing.

Local reports have said Shincheonji targets younger people aggressively with clandestine evangelistic activities, and that nearly 60 percent of its worshippers are thought to be in their 20s and 30s.

One possible explanation for the greater number of infections among women can be found in Korea's patient No. 31, a 61-year-old female Shincheonji follower who contracted the first identified infection within the church. She is suspected to have spread the virus at church services she attended in Daegu.

Observers say it is likely that she was in contact with more female church members, as men and women sit separately at Shincheonji services.

Of all COVID-19 patients in Korea, people in their 20s made up the greatest number with 1,417 cases (29.4 percent), followed by people in their 50s with 952 (19.8 percent), people in their 40s with 713 (14.8 percent), people in their 60s with 597 (12.4 percent), people in their 30s with 578 (14.8 percent), people in their 70s with 224 (4.7 percent), people 10-19 years old with 204 (4.2 percent), people over 80 at 93 cases (1.9 percent) and children under 10 with 32 (0.7 percent).

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200303000482&ACE_SEARCH=1
Compared with other OECD nations, Korea has far fewer doctors, nurses, per 1,000 people
But Korea is No. 2 in number of hospital beds, despite quarantine infrastructure gaps in Daegu

By Kim Yon-se

Published : Mar 3, 2020 - 11:39

SEJONG -- South Korean health care workers are suffering the effects of severe overwork from taking care of an exponentially increasing number of COVID-19 patients.

More and more doctors and nurses from across the country are volunteering to join emergency medical teams serving the Yeongnam area, which encompasses Daegu and neighboring North Gyeongsang Province, where the highest and second-highest numbers of infections with the new coronavirus disease have been reported among the nation's eight major cities and nine provinces so far.

International comparison data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development showed that Korea lags far behind most OECD member nations, as well as some nonmembers, in the proportion of doctors to the general population.

In 2018, Korea ranked 30th of 35 countries (30 of the 36 OECD members plus five other major economies) with 2.34 medical doctors per 1,000 people. This means doctors comprised only 0.234 percent of the population. Of the 30 member countries the OECD looked at, Korea ranked 29th.

Many emerging economies were ahead of Korea in this respect. Russia had 4.04 doctors per 1,000 people, placing seventh on the list, whereas Slovakia stood at 14th with 3.42, Hungary at 17th with 3.32, Israel 20th with 3.14, Mexico and Japan tied for 27th with 2.43 and Poland 29th with 2.38.

Austria topped the list with 5.18 doctors per 1,000 people, and proportions were relatively high in Nordic and Baltic nations as well. Norway ranked second at 4.82 per 1,000, Lithuania third at 4.56, Sweden sixth at 4.12, Denmark eighth at 4.0, Estonia 13th at 3.47 and Latvia 18th at 3.21.

Among English-speaking countries, Australia ranked 12th with 3.68 whereas New Zealand ranked 16th with 3.33. The UK ranked 24th with 2.85 and Canada 25th with 2.76. The US was in 26th place with 2.61.

China, where the novel coronavirus originated, was 32nd on the list with 2.01 doctors per 1,000 people. Italy, where the COVID-19 epidemic has also had a severe impact, was in ninth place with 3.99.

As of Tuesday, China, Korea, Italy, Iran and Japan were the top five countries in terms of number of coronavirus infections. Korea had 4,812 cases and 29 deaths, making it the world's worst-affected country outside China.

In a similar vein, the OECD looked at the proportion of nurses to the general population in 38 major countries -- 32 members plus six nonmembers.

Of all 38 countries studied, Korea ranked 21st with 6.91 nurses per 1,000 people, meaning nurses were 0.691 percent of the population. Of the 32 OECD members included in the analysis, Korea was 20th.

This figure far falls behind the proportion of nurses in Norway, which was first on the list with 17.81 per 1,000. Switzerland stood at No. 2 with 17.23, Iceland at No. 3 with 14.85, Germany at No. 4 with 12.93, Ireland at No. 5 with 12.16 and the US at No. 6 with 11.74.

Japan ranked ninth with 11.34, followed by Belgium (10th) with 10.96 France (12th) with 10.80, Slovenia (16th) with 9.92, Russia (17th) with 8.47, the Czech Republic (18th) with 8.06 and the UK (19th) with 7.80.

In contrast, Korea ranked second among the OECD members in the number of hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants, with 12.27. But some of the nation's metropolitan cities and provinces are suffering shortages of quarantine beds for coronavirus-infected patients.

Some coronavirus-positive patients in Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province died while waiting for spots in hospitals, because the two regions had vastly insufficient numbers of isolated hospital beds as well as the state-of-the-art quarantine hospital beds that were introduced here after the Middle East respiratory syndrome crisis of 2015.

Japan topped the list with 13.05 hospital beds, while the figures for China and Italy stood at 4.34 and 3.18. The figure for the US was especially low at 2.77, followed by New Zealand at 2.61, the UK at 2.54 and Canada at 2.50.

Meanwhile, devotees of a religious sect known as Shincheonji must be held accountable for the recent surge in the number of patients in the Daegu-North Gyeongsang area, online commenters say. They made up a significant portion of the 4,812 infections reported as of

Tuesday. Some politicians from the ruling Democratic Party of Korea are looking into alleged misconduct on the part of Shincheonji's leaders and its membership.

But the majority of Koreans share the view that a more critical factor is the lukewarm nature of the countermeasures taken by President Moon Jae-in, with many denouncing him for not issuing an entry ban on travelers from parts of China other than Hubei province.

“Doctors and nurses are engaging in desperate struggles to save patients. In contrast, President Moon has been conducting humiliating diplomacy versus China and Xi Jinping over the past month,” said an online commenter.

“It is lamentable that Moon has belatedly ordered ministers to secure masks for Koreans after donating 3 million masks (including 1 million for medical purposes) and 100,000 hazmat suits to the Chinese,” a commenter said.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200305000644&ACE_SEARCH=1

Minor clusters of infections continue to emerge

By Choi He-suk

Published : Mar 5, 2020 - 15:00 Updated : Mar 5, 2020 - 16:14

Thirty-four people at a nursing home were confirmed to have the new coronavirus on Wednesday, fanning fears of further mass transmission incidents.

On Thursday, the government's COVID-19 response team revealed that 34 people at a nursing home in Bonghwa, North Gyeongsang Province had been diagnosed with the illness, pushing up the total for the facility to 36.

So far, nearly two-thirds of COVID-19 cases in South Korea have resulted from mass transmission incidents, with hospitals and religious groups acting as localized centers of contagion.

As of midnight Wednesday, 5,766 people in Korea have been confirmed to have the virus. Of these, 5,187 are from Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province, more than half of which are connected to Shincheonji.

Shincheonji is a Christianity-based cult considered heretical by mainstream churches.

While Shincheonji accounts for the vast majority of mass transmission cases, minor clusters have been identified in hospitals, other religious groups and nursing facilities with no ties to the group.

In North Gyeongsang Province, there have been at least eight cases of mass transmission not traceable to Shincheonji, with Deanam Hospital in Cheongdo County accounting for about 1 in 8 of the province's 861 cases.

In addition to Deanam Hospital, where poor living conditions for its patients have been partly blamed for the rapid spread of the virus, a group from the Andong Catholic diocese who went on a pilgrimage together has produced 49 confirmed cases. A disabled nursing home in Chilgok as produced 24 patients, while Seorin nursing home in Gyeongsan has produced 13.

Seoul has also seen mass transmission cases, with about 60 percent of the cases in the capital being linked to such incidents. So far, 14 people connected to St. Mary's Hospital in Seoul's Eunpyeong-gu have been confirmed to have the virus, while 12 people were infected in an apartment complex in eastern Seoul.

New infections fall markedly

Mar 05, 2020

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074599>

The number of people infected with the new coronavirus in Korea hit 5,621 by 4 p.m. Wednesday 4 MARS, up 435 from the day before - a marked reduction from the previous four days when government officials tracked down followers of the Shincheonji religion.

Based on statistics from the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) released at 4 p.m. daily, the figure for new cases was 813 from last Friday to Saturday; 586 from Saturday to Sunday; 599 from Sunday to Monday; and 851 from Monday to Tuesday.

KCDC Director Jung Eun-kyeong said in a press briefing Wednesday afternoon that the number of new infections seem to be "overall decreasing" in Korea because many Shincheonji adherents have been tested, implying that their positive test results were swelling the daily counts of the past four days.

But Daegu Mayor Kwon Young-jin avoided over-optimism Wednesday morning, saying his city will now focus on testing non-Shincheonji citizens in Daegu for possible transmissions.

"We think this week is a very crucial moment to curb the upward trend of Covid-19," said Kwon, referring to the virus's official name. Kwon continued that his government office was entering "the final stages" of testing Shincheonji adherents in the area.

Most infections in Korea are still coming from Daegu and the surrounding province of North Gyeongsang, both located in the nation's southeastern region.

A large church in Daegu of the Shincheonji religion, also known as the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, has been the epicenter of Korea's outbreak since a middle-aged female Shincheonji adherent, Patient No. 31, tested positive for the virus on Feb. 18.

The death toll stood at 33 by Wednesday 7 p.m., two more than the day before. Both were senior citizens in Daegu.

The 32nd patient to have died was a 78-year-old man who had underlying illnesses including high blood pressure, hyperlipidemia and a history of heart problems. The 33rd patient, however, was a 67-year-old woman who appeared not to have any underlying illnesses and died from "pneumonia caused by Covid-19," health officials said.

Among Korea's 5,621 coronavirus patients, at least 41 have been discharged from hospitals after full recoveries, and some 25 people were in critical condition.

In Seoul, 99 patients were counted by 10 a.m. on Wednesday, one more than from the previous day.

As officials in Daegu, Korea's fourth-largest city with a population of 2.5 million, worried about a shortage of hospital beds and isolation facilities to treat coronavirus patients, local government offices, hospitals and private companies have offered space and medical services in their areas.

Now, some of Korea's megachurches are opening their doors - but perhaps not to Shincheonji-linked patients. The churches said they were "discussing" the issue and would make a final decision after consultation with the government.

Mainstream Christian churches in Korea consider Shincheonji a cult and accuse its followers of infiltrating their congregations to carry out missionary work.

Out of 4,006 coronavirus patients counted in Daegu by the KCDC by Tuesday midnight, 3,168 or 79.1 percent are believed to be Shincheonji believers.

The Yoido Full Gospel Church, a Pentecostal church based in Yeouido, western Seoul, which has some 560,000 adherents, said it was willing to offer two buildings in its Youngsan Camp in Paju, Gyeonggi, for treatment of coronavirus patients with light symptoms. Sarang Community Church, a Presbyterian church based in Seocho District, southern Seoul, which has about 100,000 adherents, says it could offer a church building in Anseong, Gyeonggi, and another in Jecheon, North Chungcheong, for patients to be isolated.

Kwanglim Methodist Church in Gangnam District, southern Seoul, is offering one of its facilities in Pocheon, Gyeonggi.

Korean health officials believe those buildings can take in as many as 3,000 coronavirus patients, or possibly less depending on the space needed for each patient.

Daegu officials are in the process of testing 10,914 Shincheonji members and so-called trainees, and by Wednesday morning, 7,913 had been tested. Of that figure, 5,715 had received their results, and 3,168 (55.4 percent) tested positive.

Officials said Wednesday that the infection rate of Shincheonji adherents in Daegu was declining as more churchgoers are being tested because those who had reported symptoms of the virus were tested first.

Shincheonji doesn't consider trainees as official members of the sect, yet they are being tested anyway.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074548>

Crisis mis-managers Mar 04,2020

In Daegu and North Gyeongsang — where the infections are concentrated — a critical dearth of sickbeds has emerged as a serious problem due to slow reactions from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Interior and Safety and local governments. As a result, an increasing number of patients are dying at home without going to the hospital. Currently, approximately 1,800 people confirmed infected cannot get hospital beds.

Doctors and nurses cannot afford to treat endless lines of patients. They complain of a lack of protective suits and sleep even after Daegu and North Gyeongsang were designated a “special disaster area.”

On Monday, Daegu Mayor Kwon Young-jin asked President Moon to issue an emergency order. The opposition United Future Party and the Korean Medical Association joined the chorus by calling for an immediate invocation of the law that allows a head of state to secure enough medical facilities and manpower to cope with a national emergency. On Tuesday, Moon declared a “war” against Covid-19 and ordered all government organizations to tackle the crisis on a 24-hour basis.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/opinion/covid-face-mask-shortage.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

How South Korea Solved Its Face Mask Shortage

At the end of February, it announced that it would purchase 50 percent of KF-94 masks from the nation’s 130 or so manufacturers. The government began to ship these masks, at a discounted price of 1,500 won each (about \$1.23), to some 23,000 pharmacies, in cooperation with the Korean Pharmaceutical Association.

On March 5, the government increased its share of mask purchases to 80 percent of national production. The following day, Ms. Yoo received a text message from President Moon Jae-in, addressed to “the pharmacists of Korea.” In addition to expanding mask manufacturing, the government was about to start a new rationing system.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074585>
No-go zone Mar 05,2020

Hyundai Construction Equipment’s plant in Ulsan on Wednesday 4 MARS was shut down after one of its employees was confirmed infected with the coronavirus. As of Wednesday, more than 5,000 cases have been confirmed. [YONHAP]

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074568>
Who’s sorry now? Mar 05,2020

Korea has an enormous edge over Japan, which takes two to three days, or the United States, which takes longer than that, to get test results. In Korea, lab experts work around the clock in three shifts to come out with the results in just four hours.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200305000730&ACE_SEARCH=1
South Korean government takes full control of face mask supply, bans exports
Price for 80 percent of masks set at 1,500 won, ID check mandatory for purchase
By Jung Min-kyung

Published : Mar 5, 2020 - 15:15 Updated : Mar 5, 2020 - 17:52

Vice Finance Minister Kim Yong-beom (second from right) announces government measures to stabilize supply and demand of face masks at a press briefing held at Seoul Government Complex on Thursday. Ranking officials from other ministries handling matters related to coronavirus, including Vice Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy Chung Seung-il (second from left) and Food and Drug Safety Minister Lee Eui-kyung (first from right) joined Kim in the briefing. Yonhap

The South Korean government said Thursday it will take full control of face masks distributed via public channels, and ban local companies from exporting them to cope with the severe supply shortage amid rising cases of coronavirus.

“To distribute face masks swiftly and fairly to all citizens, the government has decided to fundamentally manage the entire process of production, logistics and distribution,” the Ministry of Economy and Finance and other agencies monitoring the COVID-19 outbreak said in a joint press release.

Exports of masks will be fully banned, replacing the previous measure of allowing maximum 10 percent outbound shipments of the total output here.

Mandatory distribution of face masks to local pharmacies, post offices and stores operated by the National Agriculture Cooperative Federation (NongHyup) will be increased to 80 percent from 50 percent of the total supply -- costing 1,500 won (\$1.27) each.

The government said it would set a price limit on the remaining 20 percent, which will be privately sold at other venues, if necessary.

“The government will ban mask exports to secure its supply volume and redistribute the ones seized from illegal hoarders,” Vice Finance Minister Kim Yong-beom said in a press briefing held in line with the COVID-19 press release.

“We will also bolster support for the manufacturers,” he added.

To establish a fair system, the government will limit weekly sales of face masks sold in local pharmacies to two for every customer from Friday. It will also adopt the odd-even rule from Monday -- customers born on odd days can purchase masks on odd days and vice-versa.

Pharmacies, post offices and NongHyup stores will establish a digital system that will prevent customers from making excessive purchases. Pharmacies will check their identification cards, while the other two will merely limit sales of face masks to one per person a week, until their respective systems are established.

Expats will be required to present their health insurance documents and alien registration cards.

Distributions to medical facilities and special quarantine areas will be prioritized.

The government noted that the nation’s daily production of face masks has doubled to an average of around 10 million following its emergency measures adopted on Feb. 12.

An emergency Cabinet meeting, presided by Prime Minister Chung Se-kyun was also held earlier in the day.

Chung vowed to resolve the imbalance in supply and demand for melt-blown nonwoven fabrics, materials used to produce mask filters.

Korea has now joined global economies, including Germany, that have banned the export of medical protection gears to avoid local supply shortage.

As of Thursday, the nation saw 5,766 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, including 35 deaths, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200305000916&ACE_SEARCH=1

Passengers to undergo temperature checks at Incheon airport

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 5, 2020 - 20:12 Updated : Mar 6, 2020 - 08:57

South Korea will conduct pre-boarding temperature checks on all outbound passengers at the country's main gateway starting next week to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading further, the transport ministry said Thursday.

The Incheon International Airport Corp., the operator of the Incheon International Airport, will conduct passenger temperature checks for all flights departing from Incheon, just west of Seoul, beginning Monday to make the main gateway a "COVID-19 Free Airport," the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport said in a statement.

The temperature checks will be conducted on passengers bound for the United States, China and the United Arab Emirates in three stages: the first at the entrance of the airport's terminal, the second at the floor for departures and the last at the boarding gate for each flight to the three countries, the statement said.

Passengers not headed for the three countries are subject to the first two rounds of temperature checks, it said.

The three countries requested South Korea conduct temperature checks on passengers inbound from Incheon as they grapple with rising concerns about air travel over the potentially deadly respiratory illness.

Korean Air Lines Co., South Korea's top airline, has conducted temperature checks of passengers on all flights departing from Incheon to the US since Feb. 29.

In extended efforts to curb the virus, the national flag carrier on Thursday began checking temperatures of all outbound passengers on its international routes and disinfecting the cabin of flights to the US and those arriving from China.

Asiana Airlines Inc. said it will take the same measure starting Friday. Passengers bound for China will not be allowed to board the plane if they have a temperature of over 37.3 C. Those flying to the US and other regions could be refused if their temperature is measured at 37.5 C or higher.

Local airlines have suspended or reduced flights on most of their international routes since early this month as people opt not to travel amid virus fears and governments' restrictions on entry from South Korea.

As of Thursday, at least 98 countries and territories are imposing entry bans or stricter quarantine procedures for people from South Korea, which has reported a total of 6,088 confirmed coronavirus cases and 41 related deaths. (Yonhap)

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074592>
Billions of won, facilities donated for those affected
Corporations stepping up to provide support and space for the ill
Mar 05,2020

Samsung Electronics' employee training center in Yeongdeok, North Gyeongsang.
[SAMSUNG ELECTRONICS]
More Korean companies are providing support for people affected by the coronavirus outbreak.

Kakao is committing 2 billion won (\$1.7 million) in cash and 2 billion won worth of shares donated by Chairman Kim Beom-su.

A number of charities will receive the support, including Hope Bridge Korea Disaster Relief Association, the Beautiful Foundation, Korea Association of Social Welfare Centers and the Childfund Korea.

"The decision was made to help combat the impact of the coronavirus, and Kakao will continue to incorporate technology and platforms to bringing in more people to help," the company said in a statement.

Samsung Electronics dispatched health professionals to its training center in Yeongdeok, North Gyeongsang, a location the company offered as a care center for those with mild cases of the coronavirus.

Doctors and nurses from Samsung Medical Center volunteered for the duty. The professionals will monitor the health conditions of the patients and their temperatures.

LG Display is offering a dormitory and training center in the North Gyeongsang region, an area hit hard by the virus, to accommodate people with mild symptoms of the coronavirus. The dormitory, which is located in Gumi, North Gyeongsang, has 383 rooms.

The 2,500-square-meter (269,010-square-foot) facility can accommodate up to 499 people.

The training center is in Uljin County, North Gyeongsang, and has 167 rooms.

The location will be used to house people with mild cases, and health professionals will provide support remotely.

Halla Group, a machinery-focused group, donated 500 million won on Tuesday to Hope Bridge Korea Disaster Relief Association.

Tire maker Nexen Tire offered 200 million won the same day to the Daegu branch of the Korean Red Cross.

Hyundai Marine & Fire Insurance has offered 100 million won, while SBI Savings Bank donated the same amount to the Community Chest of Korea.

Lotte Hi-Mart, an electronics goods retailer, offered items such as hand sanitizers to 200 households.

Hana Bank is offering consulting services to people affected by the outbreak.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074653>

Recoveries from virus more than double

Health authorities say many patients showed negligible symptoms

Mar 06,2020

The number of people who recovered from the coronavirus more than doubled to reach 88, local health officials said Thursday, the largest number of such patients reported in a single day.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) announced that 88 patients had been cleared by Wednesday midnight, up 47 from the day before amid signs of a slowdown in the nation's coronavirus outbreak.

By 4 p.m. Thursday, 6,088 infections were counted by the KCDC, up 467 from 4 p.m. Wednesday. The number of new cases was slightly higher than that reported Wednesday, 435.

Yet both figures are still lower than on previous days when government officials extensively tracked down followers of the Shincheonji religion, whose church building in Daegu has been the epicenter of the outbreak.

Based on statistics from the KCDC released at 4 p.m. daily, there were 813 new cases from last Friday to Saturday; 586 from Saturday to Sunday; 599 from Sunday to Monday; and 851 from Monday to Tuesday.

Patient No. 31, a middle-aged Korean woman, was the first known case linked to Shincheonji's church in Daegu, and most of Korea's infections have been traced to the same church building since, either in churchgoers or people who contacted them.

The latest infections were again mostly from the southeastern city of Daegu, Korea's fourth-largest city with a population of about 2.5 million, and surrounding North Gyeongsang.

The death toll stood at 42 by Thursday at 8 p.m., nine more than the KCDC's total count by Wednesday at 8 p.m.

The latest deaths were mostly senior citizens with underlying illnesses such as high blood pressure or diabetes and lived in Daegu or North Gyeongsang.

In explaining the surge in recoveries, local health officials implied the phenomenon was natural and not surprising because many patients exhibited light symptoms that didn't require special treatments.

In Daegu, where 4,327 coronavirus patients have been counted so far, officials say around 80 percent seem to fall in that light-symptom category.

Daily counts of new recoveries were mostly five or less before Wednesday, ever since Patient No. 2 was first pronounced fully cured on Feb. 2.

"When we look at [coronavirus] cases from foreign countries," said Vice Health Minister Kim Gang-lip Thursday in a press briefing, "we can see that it usually takes about two to eight weeks to treat the virus, so we can expect to see more patients" in Korea recovering soon.

Kim said new infections in Daegu were also expected to drop, as Daegu officials complete their examinations of over 10,000 Shincheonji adherents and so-called trainees.

On a national scale, Kim said Korea was still "sporadically" seeing more patients here and there but that no serious community infection such as the one in the Shincheonji church community has appeared.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200306000696&ACE_SEARCH=1

Officials find link between Zumba and coronavirus cases

By Korea Herald

Published : Mar 6, 2020 - 18:25 Updated : Mar 6, 2020 - 18:25

South Korean officials tracking transmission routes of coronavirus patients have found a potential link in some cases reported in different cities: fitness dance Zumba.

According to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday, some 90 percent of 92 total cases in Cheonan and Asan, both in South Chungcheong Province, are connected by Zumba. The patients were either instructors, practitioners, their family members or close contacts.

"It is still early to confirm, but a workshop of Zumba instructors held last month may be behind all those cases," said a KCDC official.

According to the official, the workshop was held in Cheonan on Jan. 15 and attended by 29 instructors from all over the country, including three from Daegu, Korea's epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak.

So far, six participants -- three in Cheonan, two in Asan and one in Sejong -- have tested positive and 11 have tested negative. Test results for the rest were not available as of press time.

The first Zumba-related case was reported in Cheonan on Jan. 25, 10 days after the workshop.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200306000584&ACE_SEARCH=1

Govt. urges 'hagwon' to close, join anti-virus fight

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 6, 2020 - 15:44 Updated : Mar 6, 2020 - 15:44

In its latest tactic to combat the new coronavirus, South Korea on Friday again asked private sector cram schools to temporarily suspend classes to prevent group transmissions.

The move comes in line with the government's recent decision to push back the new school year by three weeks to March 23 to prevent COVID-19 infections in schools and communities.

South Korea has so far reported 6,284 cases, the largest outside of China, where the virus first emerged.

Most of the cases trace to mass transmission in the southeastern city of Daegu and nearby North Gyeongsang Province as well as minor clusters in churches and hospitals across the country, raising the need for "social distancing" in group facilities.

While child care facilities, kindergartens and schools across the country have suspended classes, the cram schools, also known as "hagwon" here, have remained in the gray zone as they are private-sector institutions.

On Friday, the education ministry ramped up its demand for the private sector cram schools as data showed that more than half of hagwon and other private education facilities are still in operation.

The ministry said it plans to team up with provincial governments and local education offices to inspect large hagwon next week on their safety and hygiene conditions and consider announcing the names of institutions where infections have occurred.

As of Thursday, 42.1 percent of 86,435 hagwon nationwide and 45.7 percent of 40,437 other private education facilities have suspended classes to stem the new coronavirus, according to education ministry data.

While around 90 percent of hagwon in Daegu and 76 percent of the cram schools in North Gyeongsang Province, two locations that have been pounded by the virus, have suspended classes, the numbers were much lower in other areas.

The data showed that business was usual at two-thirds of hagwon in Seoul, as well as 85 percent and 80 percent of hagwon in Incheon, just outside of Seoul, and Jeju, the country's southernmost resort island, respectively.

The government, meanwhile, also announced that it will "actively seek" support measures for hagwon that are suffering from the virus outbreak.

The education ministry plans to provide special funds or low interest rates for loans together with state-run financial firms.

Funds will also be given to hagwon that retain their staff despite difficult business prospects, according to the ministry's press release.

The hagwon industry has called for additional support measures, such as tax breaks, to minimize losses from the longer-than-expected virus outbreak.

"Students can opt for online lectures or private tutoring even if they don't go to hagwon. Illegal teaching at venues like study cafes or quasi-hagwon is already happening," the Korea Association of Hakwon said in a March 4 statement.

The organization that represents various hagwon across the country asked the government to also tighten inspection of illegal tutoring and visits to internet cafes. It also asked for a industrywide tax break on last year's revenues. (Yonhap)

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074662>

New coronavirus infections swell on Friday to 505

Mar 07,2020 Korea's coronavirus caseload continued to grow Friday, as alarming new clusters of infections were reported at a hospital in the capital region and a nursing home near Daegu, the epicenter of the outbreak.

According to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), the nation's total number of infections reached 6,593 as of 4 p.m. Friday. Since Thursday, 505 new cases were reported.

The country has seen hundreds of new cases over the past days. On Thursday, 467 new cases were detected compared to 435 on Wednesday and 851 on Tuesday.

The number of total deaths was 43 as of 4 p.m. Friday, up one from the previous day. The latest casualty was confirmed in Daegu.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200308000041&ACE_SEARCH=1

S. Korea's virus cases top 7,300 amid signs of infection slowdown

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 8, 2020 - 10:35 Updated : Mar 8, 2020 - 17:21

The number of new coronavirus infections in South Korea continued to rise, with an additional 179 cases confirmed Sunday, bringing the total to 7,313.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said the country confirmed 367 additional cases of COVID-19 on Saturday, the slowest on-day gain since Feb. 26.

It also marked the first time in 11 days the number of new infections fell to below 400, possibly offering signs of containment.

The additional 179 cases were confirmed over past 16 hours.

Tallies for the entire day are made available the following day.

A majority of the new cases again came from the southeastern city of Daegu and neighboring North Gyeongsang Province, the two epicenters of the virus outbreak that together account for more than 90 percent of all infection cases.

Of the 367 new cases detected Saturday, 297 cases came from Daegu, the country's fourth-largest city with a population of about 2.5 million that is located some 300 kilometers from Seoul.

About 60 percent of confirmed cases here have been linked to a Daegu branch of a religious sect, Shincheonji.

The total number of infection cases in Daegu now stands at 5,381.

Daegu Mayor Kwon Young-jin said the number of new cases may indicate a slowdown in the spread of the virus, noting the number of new cases in the city has dropped to below 300 for the first time since Feb. 29.

"The increase in the number of infection cases is showing signs of slowing down," he told a press briefing.

North Gyeongsang Province, one of the most severely hit areas, saw its infection cases rise 32 to 1,081, according to the KCDC.

KCDC Director-General Jeong Eun-kyeong said it may be too soon to say that the spread of the virus could be on the wane, noting the recent decline in the number of new cases was largely because of a drop in the number of cases linked to the Sincheonji church in Daegu.

"The number of new patients is dwindling with the tests on the followers of the Shincheonji church nearly coming to an end," she told a press briefing.

The number of infections traced to the religious sect is tallied at 4,482, accounting for 62.8 percent of the total cases here.

Jeong noted the rise in the number of virus patients could quickly accelerate if there is a new cluster of infection cases, which she said is still very much possible.

"We believe a fresh outbreak could be possible at any time in case the virus is exposed at group facilities or religious events because it is highly contagious," said Jeong, adding that 79.4 percent of all infections here have been linked to clusters of mass infection cases.

Seoul and nearby Gyeonggi Province reported 12 and 11 additional cases, respectively. Their totals now stand at 120 and 141, respectively.

South Korea raised its virus alert level to the highest on Feb. 23, enabling all-out quarantine measures by the health authorities as well as district governments.

A virus-hit apartment in Daegu has been under lockdown as one-third of its residents were confirmed to have contracted the illness.

The patients at the apartment complex were followers of the Shincheonji church.

The provincial government of North Gyeongsang Province said more than 580 facilities or houses in its own districts have been placed under such lockdowns.

So far, 50 people, mostly with preexisting medical conditions, have died of the respiratory disease that originated in China late last year.

South Korea reported its first COVID-19 case on Jan. 20.

Earlier, an official from the Ministry of Health and Welfare was diagnosed with COVID-19, leading to a temporary shutdown of the whole operation of at least the ministry office the patient worked at.

The ministry said on Sunday that 51 other officials from the same office have tested negative.

Still, at least 27 of those who had come in close contact with the patient have been told to take self-quarantine measures, it added.

The KCDC said the number of patients released from hospitals after recovering from the viral disease came to 130 as of Sunday, up 12 from the previous day.

The number of people being checked for the virus and under quarantine came to 19,376 as of Sunday, down 244 from the day before, the KCDC said. The country has tested a total of 181,384 suspected cases, with 162,008 testing negative.

Currently, there is no evidence that the new coronavirus is airborne. The World Health Organization said the virus is transmitted through droplets or close contact. One of the best ways to avoid contracting the virus is to wash one's hands with soap for at least 20 seconds and avoid mass gatherings, health officials said. (Yonhap)

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200306000581&ACE_SEARCH=1

Incheon airport pledges 'COVID-19 free facility'

South Korea's largest gateway begins full-fledged temperature monitoring program of all outbound passengers

By Kim Byung-wook

Published : Mar 8, 2020 - 14:47 Updated : Mar 8, 2020 - 14:47

Incheon International Airport Corp. CEO Koo Bon-hwan (center left) gives out wet wipes with pamphlets on how to prevent coronavirus during the campaign to promote its stronger disinfection plans. (IIAC)

Incheon International Airport Corp. CEO Koo Bon-hwan (center left) gives out wet wipes with pamphlets on how to prevent coronavirus during the campaign to promote its stronger disinfection plans. (IIAC)

Pledging to become a coronavirus-free airport amid the spread in South Korea, Incheon International Airport Corp. on Monday starts a full-fledged three-step temperature monitoring program on all outbound passengers.

The airport said the preboarding temperature checks, which have been running on a trial basis since Thursday, will officially begin as of 9 a.m. Monday as part of an effort to make the airport coronavirus free.

“As the gateway to Korea, Incheon airport will establish a rigorous disinfection system encompassing all arrival and departure procedures to boost safety and credibility and provide a safe environment to domestic, foreign travelers and employees stationed inside,” said IIAC President and CEO Koo Bon-hwan at the “COVID-19 Free Airport” declaration ceremony held in Millennium Hall at Terminal 1 on Thursday.

The three-step monitoring program includes the following stages.

First at terminals, airport personnel check passengers’ temperature with thermal imaging cameras. Next, military personnel repeat the process in the departure areas on the third floor. Finally, at boarding gates, airlines check passengers’ temperature again with handheld, noncontact infrared thermometers.

At terminals, the airport will guide passengers with above 37.5 degrees Celsius temperature to a quarantine station installed inside the airport for a contact investigation.

On the departure floor, the airport will guide passengers with temperatures over 37.5 C to airlines to have their temperature checked in the check-in counters or help with their ticket cancellations if their international routes are restricted to people with fever.

At boarding gates, airlines can check temperatures of passengers whose international routes are restricted to people with fever. Passengers with fever can be rejected from getting onboard. The monitoring is currently enforced on international routes to the United States, China and the United Arab Emirates.

Terminal 1 has five checkpoint stations at its entry and three checkpoint stations on the departure floor while Terminal 2 is equipped with three and two checkpoint stations each.

Also, the airport plans to strengthen its disinfection efforts in major facilities on the departure floor, including special sterilization on its check-in counters and disinfection of its security search equipment three times a day. Elevators and escalators, where

direct contacts are made by passengers, will be sterilized by alcohol three times a day instead of once.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200308000202&ACE_SEARCH=1

Virus doesn't stop kids from going to cram schools

Despite school closings, kids in S. Korea still go to after-school tutoring

By Kim Arin

Published : Mar 8, 2020 - 15:52 Updated : Mar 8, 2020 - 17:27

Busan Office of Education on Friday dispatched a team of officials to disinfect a cram school in the city's northern district of Dongnae. (Yonhap)

Busan Office of Education on Friday dispatched a team of officials to disinfect a cram school in the city's northern district of Dongnae. (Yonhap)

The new coronavirus epidemic in South Korea has led to an upheaval in school calendars across the country, with all schools ordered to suspend classes until at least March 23. But for many students here, their educational obligations extend beyond the K-12 curriculum to cram schools known as hagwons.

While the government has urged the private after-school tutoring services to defer classes to join the coronavirus fight, only 36,424 of 86,435 hagwons nationwide remain closed as of Thursday, with many expected to begin classes in the coming week or the next ahead of the postponed spring semester.

One such institute in Yeouido, central Seoul, said Friday that the classes will resume starting Monday, in light of the prolonged pause in program.

"After closing classes for two weeks since Feb. 24 due to the coronavirus outbreak, classes will proceed as normal from Monday," the hagwon's director said in a text message sent to the parents. "We respect the government efforts to curb the spread of the disease, and we are committed to taking the right steps to support such efforts."

As a precaution, the staff will disinfect the classrooms daily, have students wash their hands and wear face masks and get their temperatures checked, he said. Students will be discouraged from mingling, and seated some distance away from one another.

Although the hagwon said the decision to reopen classes was made following requests from "an increasing number of parents," a parent of a prospective high school freshman said she would rather have the classes be stalled until safety was guaranteed.

"If it's not safe for kids to go to school, then it's not safe for them to go to hagwons," she said.

Besides, students will be exhausting face masks that they will need to wear at schools, she added. She said her 15-year-old son barely had enough masks to wear for the three-month semester, should the outbreak persist.

Other franchise tutoring services Jongro Academy and Daesung Hagwon are also resuming all in-person class operations next week.

Students in upper grades report being anxious about the academic schedule being pushed back.

"I'm worried about falling behind and not being able to catch up once classes start," said Kim So-yeon, a high school senior in Dangsang, southern Seoul. "I also wonder if this will affect the college entrance exam in November."

But infection concerns linger as in Busan, a cluster of infections has been linked to a hagwon in the city's central district of Busanjin. The city government said last week the hagwon's two students, a parent of one of the students, teacher and the director tested positive for the virus.

To encourage shutdowns, the Ministry of Education said Friday it would conduct onsite inspections at some of the bigger hagwons.

On Feb. 27, Seoul Superintendent of Education Joe Hee-yeon warned that closing classrooms at schools as well as at hagwons was "not a choice but a must in order to protect public health." As of last week, only 34.2 percent of the 25,234 tutoring services in the city followed through with the recommended closure.

For some hagwons, closing is not something they can afford.

"As someone who runs a hagwon, I can't shut the operations altogether for too long considering the rent, teacher payrolls and other bills," said a director of a hagwon in Mapo, Seoul's central western district.

"Smaller institutes like ours aren't equipped with the infrastructure or staff necessary to move the classes online," she said. "Hagwons -- though in the education sector -- are businesses too and we can't help but contemplate the costs."

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200309000711&ACE_SEARCH=1
Virus patients to face fines over info concealment

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 9, 2020 - 15:01 Updated : Apr 2, 2020 - 13:20

South Korean health authorities warned Monday that any new coronavirus patients will face fines for concealing their travel history, residences and other important information.

The measure comes as a 78-year-old patient at a Seoul hospital was diagnosed with COVID-19 on Sunday. But despite repeated inquiries, the virus patient misled the hospital staff and gave incorrect information about her residence and other details.

The patient, a resident in the southeastern city of Daegu -- the epicenter of the virus outbreak here -- also denied her multiple trips to the city during hospitalization.

Inje University Seoul Paik Hospital in downtown Seoul has temporarily closed its emergency room since Sunday.

"The government can impose fines under 10 million won if patients do not tell the truth about their travel history to health authorities," Vice Health Minister Kim Ganglip said in a daily briefing. The amount is equivalent to US\$8,296.

According to the hospital, the patient hid her residence as she was previously denied entry to another general hospital in Seoul.

Health authorities and hospital officials said they are looking into the patient's records and CCTV footage to check anyone who had contact with her.

All medical staff and doctors who had previous contact are currently under self-quarantine, according to the hospital.

"Tests for the COVID-19 virus are conducted on any patient or medical staff suspected of having been in contact with the confirmed patient for the safety of all patients and staff," Oh Sang-hoon, a director at Paik Hospital, said.

Kim said the government will take administrative measures against hospitals that deny patients from Daegu without clear medical reasons.

In a written statement to reporters, National Police Agency chief Min Gab-ryong said police are looking into the case and will "swiftly and sternly" deal with any irregularities.

The police have so far received over 10,000 reports relating to the virus and are probing 20 cases that allegedly breached public health law, according to Min.

In a separate press briefing, Seoul city government's civil health bureau director, Na Baeg-ju, said the city will look into the case and seek legal advice.

Na added that the patient did not show typical symptoms of the virus, such as fever.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200309000712&ACE_SEARCH=1

Mask rationing system kicks off, confusion in some areas

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 9, 2020 - 15:05 Updated : Apr 2, 2020 - 13:20

South Korea on Monday launched a mask rationing system aimed at stabilizing supply amid the coronavirus outbreak, but confusion was reported in some areas as consumers adjusted to the new system.

Under the measure that took effect earlier in the day, citizens can only buy up to two protective masks per week from pharmacies, on designated days of the week, depending on the final digit of their year of birth.

Public frustration has built up due to a mask supply crunch, triggered by growing demand for the protective wear as well as excessive price surges and hoarding by some sellers and consumers.

On the first day of the system, confusion was reported in several areas as both the public and pharmacies adjusted to the rationing program, which supplies up to 250 masks to each pharmacy on a daily basis.

In Daegu, which has been most hit by the contagious virus, elderly citizens voiced frustration after visiting pharmacies on the wrong day of the week.

"(The pharmacist) told me to come on Wednesday since my birth year ends in eight," said a Daegu resident in her seventies, "My son told me not to leave the house since it's dangerous, so it's inconvenient that I would have to visit again."

Under the new system, those born in years ending in one and six can buy masks on Mondays, two and seven on Tuesdays, three and eight on Wednesday, four and nine on Thursdays and five and zero on Fridays. Those who didn't buy masks on weekdays can get them on weekends.

"We started selling masks at 8 a.m. and they sold out. Around 10 to 20 percent of customers had to leave empty-handed since they came on the wrong day. Most of them were elderly," said a pharmacist at Seoul's Seodaemun Ward.

Some parents who visited pharmacies to buy masks for children also voiced frustration.

"I have three kids whose last digit of birth are all different.

This means that I have to visit the pharmacy on three different days," said a father in his thirties, "It'd be better if I could buy them at once."

For those 10 years or younger or 80 years or older, family members can purchase the masks on their behalf when submitting their identification cards with government-issued housing resident registers.

But in line with the system policy, family members can only purchase the masks on the day of the person's birth year falls on.

Meanwhile, some have said there needs to be a system that does not require queuing.

"There was a long line in front of the pharmacy as usual. If masks continue to be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis, it will be difficult for people who are working to get them," said a 29-year-old resident who lives in Seoul's Gwanak Ward.

The Ministry of Food and Drug Safety said it supplied around 7 million masks through public channels on Monday, including 5.6 million that were distributed through nationwide pharmacies.

A total of 500,000 were sent to Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province, which have been hit hardest by the contagious virus, while another 593,000 were distributed to medical facilities. The remainder were distributed through local post offices and supermarkets run by a farm cooperative.

The mask rationing system is the latest in Seoul's efforts to better fight the COVID-19 virus. The country has reported 7,478 infections since its first confirmed case on Jan. 20. (Yonhap)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/health/coronavirus-restrictions-us.html>
[South Korea](#) avoided locking down any city, but only by moving early and with extraordinary speed. In January, the country had four companies making tests, and [as of March 9 had tested 210,000 citizens](#) — Anyone even potentially exposed is quarantined at home; a GPS app tells the police if that person goes outside. The fine for doing so is \$8,000.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200309000746&ACE_SEARCH=1
Coronavirus spread continues to slow

By Choi He-suk

Published : Mar 9, 2020 - 17:02 Updated : Mar 9, 2020 - 20:41

The COVID-19 outbreak in Korea appears to be slowing, with the number of new confirmed cases dropping for a third consecutive day.

According to the government's central response team, the number of confirmed patients came to 7,478 as of 4 p.m. Monday, with 96 new cases reported in the midday tally. The government's central response team releases the figures at midnight, and updates them again at 4 p.m.

That follows the addition of 248 new infections reported in the midnight Sunday data, which was the lowest daily increase since Feb. 26.

Daily increases have been slowing for three days in a row, with the numbers for Saturday, Friday and Thursday being 367, 483 and 518, respectively.

The 4 p.m. update with 96 new cases was also lower than the 179 confirmed cases added Sunday at 4 p.m. to the midnight figure, while 274 were added Saturday.

The number of deaths from the virus so far stood at 53.

"Having peaked at 916 on Feb. 28, new confirmed cases (fell) to 248 yesterday. This trend must be maintained," President Moon Jae-in said Monday at a weekly meeting with his top aides.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200309000246&ACE_SEARCH=1
S. Korea's virus cases near 7,500, but pace of new infections slows

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 9, 2020 - 10:32 Updated : Mar 9, 2020 - 17:39

South Korea's coronavirus caseload approached 7,500 on Monday, but the pace of new infections slowed after the extensive testing of members of a religious sect at the center of the disease's rapid spread was completed. Still, health authorities remained on high alert over new clusters of infections.

The 96 new cases, which were identified between midnight Sunday and 4 p.m., brought the nation's total number of infections to 7,478, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said.

The additional infections followed the 248 new cases detected on Sunday -- also far below the daily increases of 500 or more last week and the lowest daily number since Feb. 26. On Saturday, 367 new cases were identified, 438 were found on Friday and 518 were reported on Thursday.

So far, 51 people, mostly elderly patients with underlying illnesses, have died in South Korea from the respiratory virus that emerged in China late last year, the KCDC said. Two more fatalities have been reported, but they have not been included in an official update.

Starting Tuesday, the KCDC said it will announce the daily number of new infections once a day at 10:00 a.m.

Until now, the KCDC has announced tallies twice a day. A morning update is based on the number of new infections detected a day earlier, while an afternoon update is based on the number detected over the first 16 hours of the day.

About 63 percent of confirmed cases have been linked to a branch of the Shincheonji religious sect in Daegu, which, with a population of 2.5 million, is the country's fourth-largest city.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074730>

Number of new coronavirus patients falls to a two-week low

Mar 10, 2020

New coronavirus infections dropped to their lowest number in two weeks on Monday, with 165 new patients confirmed, a sign that the pace of contagion continues to slow.

Monday's number was more than 100 fewer patients than on Sunday, when 272 new cases were reported. From Friday to Saturday, 448 new infections were reported.

The total number of virus cases in Korea stands at 7,478 by 4 p.m. Monday, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC). According to KCDC statistics from noon on Monday, around 90 percent of all confirmed cases were found in Daegu or North Gyeongsang.

Two more fatalities were reported: a 75-year-old man and a 69-year-old woman, both in Daegu. That brought the virus's death toll in Korea to 53.

Yet the number of new infections in Daegu - the epicenter of the outbreak in Korea - dipped below 200 for the first time in weeks, as the government wrapped up its tests on nearly all known adherents of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in the area.

President Moon Jae-in in a meeting at the Blue House highlighted the positive news, saying the country's infection "trend is consistently on the decline" but added it was too early to be optimistic.

"In various regions, including Daegu and North Gyeongsang, there have been sporadic cases of small cluster infections," Moon said. "Continuing small-scale cluster contaminations means the danger of larger group infections can occur, so we cannot relax."

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074757>
Sindorim call center emerges as Seoul's biggest infection cluster
Mar 10, 2020

A call center in southwestern Seoul has emerged as the biggest COVID-19 infection cluster in Korea's capital Tuesday, prompting the city government to brace for a potentially mass transmission of the new coronavirus.

A high-rise in the neighborhood of Sindorim was closed down and disinfected late Monday after workers at a call center on its 11th floor were confirmed as patients, according to Guro District, which oversees Sindorim.

On Tuesday, the Seoul city government reported 26 new cases, bringing the total to 156 as of 10 a.m. The number is higher than the 141 reported by the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which was tallied at midnight.

The city said that 22 cases were attributed to the outbreak in the call center, but the numbers are feared to top 40 when cases linked to the call center but detected in the wider metropolitan area, such as Incheon and Gyeonggi, are included.

"All 207 workers have been quarantined and inspections are taking place. This is the biggest infection reported in Seoul so far, and we are looking at this in a serious and grave manner and striving to prevent additional cases," Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon said in a press briefing.

The city government said it has launched an emergency taskforce of 30 researchers to look into the outbreak and has urged residents in the building, which has 19 floors and six basement levels, to isolate themselves.

In addition to the offices and commercial facilities in floors one to 12, 140 residential flats are located on the top seven floors of the building in Sindorim, one of the busiest areas in southwestern Seoul, where subway lines No. 1 and 2 pass through.

An inspection center has been set up on the ground floor of the building for residents and employees to be screened for the new coronavirus, the city said.

The latest cluster of infections was identified at the call center operated by Metanet Mplatform, a call center whose clients include the local affiliate of global insurance group Chubb.

Nearly 80 percent of more than 7,000 infections reported in Korea are attributed to group transmissions, according to KCDC data.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074781a>

For the good of the many

Mar 11,2020

An employee waits at the building gate to pull down the shutters on Tuesday at Shinsegae Department Store's Gangnam branch in Seocho District, southern Seoul. The department store closed early on that day, at 4 p.m., after an individual confirmed as infected with the coronavirus was found to have visited the store on Saturday. The branch will resume normal operations today.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074801>

The roots of incompetence

Mar 11,2020

The government's incompetence should be blamed first. The country has a population of 52 million, and its full mask production capacity is 70 million per week. When you exclude supplies for medical facilities and 14 million people in Daegu and North Gyeongsang, the epicenter of infections, 56 million masks can at best go to the rest of the population. That means one mask for one person per week. Considering that everyone needs one to go out, those numbers are actually enough.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074805>

New policy on masks leaves foreign students exposed

Mar 11,2020

The government's new mask policy, which took effect on Monday, is threatening to leave hundreds of foreign students studying in Korea struggling to source face masks amid the ongoing coronavirus outbreak.

In order to prevent a run on face masks, which have become a rare commodity in drugstores nationwide as a result of the virus scare, the government imposed new rules on distribution that mandate that each citizen can only buy two masks per week and only after undergoing identity checks at drugstores.

The rule also applies to foreigners registered with Korea's National Health Insurance Service, who are required to present their alien registration card to buy face masks, which can be used to tell if they are registered for national health insurance or not.

Yet this rule has created problems for many foreign students legitimately residing in Korea, as many are not registered with the national health insurance system but instead with private insurance services provided by individual schools.

While all foreigners residing in Korea for a period of over 6 months must be registered with the National Health Insurance Service, foreign students are exempt from this requirement until next year.

Foreign students do have alternative sources to buy masks, like Hanaro Mart branches or post offices, but these locations also restrict people from buying more than one mask a day and often run out of stock quickly in densely populated areas.

In Seoul and Gyeonggi, government-distributed masks were only supplied to pharmacies.

These new rules have caused concerns among many foreign students. Choi Kang, a Chinese student studying at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, said he is almost out of the masks that he brought back from China and that he can't get any more sent to him from home. "I don't know what to do," he added.

On online forums used by foreign students in Korea, some complained the new rules were discriminatory. "[Requiring national health insurance registration] effectively is the same as saying foreign students should not wear masks," wrote one Chinese student.

Schools are likewise concerned that if their foreign student body cannot purchase face masks, these students may be exposed to the virus and become another source of contagion.

A Finance Ministry official in charge of face mask distribution who requested anonymity acknowledged the problems faced by foreigners not registered with the national health insurance system, though he explained the rules were in place to prevent foreign travelers visiting Korea for a brief period from hoarding masks.

In January, when the virus outbreak was rampant in China but had yet to spike in Korea, many Chinese tourists bought masks in bulk to take back home, prompting many Koreans to call upon the government to enforce stronger restrictions on the sale of masks.

Some foreigners in Korea say the government should allow them to buy masks as long as they present an alien registration card, since one must stay in Korea for over 90 days in order to be eligible for such identification.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074813>

Seoul's biggest cluster of virus cases found

Mar 11, 2020

At least 64 cases of the new coronavirus were traced to a call center in Seoul, local officials announced Tuesday, becoming the largest cluster of infections in the capital.

Officials in Seoul warned Tuesday that the figure was expected to rise as tests on employees at the call center in Sindorim-dong, Guro District, western Seoul, were

ongoing. Of the 64 cases of infection linked to the call center by 2 p.m. Tuesday, at least four are known to be relatives of the workers.

The Sindorim outbreak was reported as nationwide infections of the coronavirus have been dropping drastically compared to last week.

From Monday 4 p.m. to midnight, 35 new infections were reported, bringing total cases to 7,513. From Sunday 4 p.m. to midnight, 69 new infections were reported, according to data from the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC).

The KCDC used to compile daily infections twice everyday - at midnight and 4 p.m. - but starting from Tuesday, it ditched the 4 p.m. count to reduce confusion among local government offices tracking infections.

The Sindorim call center, which was operated by Metanet Mplatform and provided customer services for the local affiliate of the global insurance group Chubb, is known to have had at least 207 workers - including 148 employees and 59 so-called trainees - who worked on the 11th floor of the 19-story Korea Building.

Lee Seong, chief of the Guro District Office, said Tuesday there were about 550 more employees of the call center who worked on the seventh, eighth and ninth floors of the building, adding they were being tested as well.

Lee warned that more infections from the call center could be announced in coming days, saying "a significant number" of the 207 workers on the 11th floor had not been tested yet and that of those who did get tested so far, only about a half received their test results, including 64 who showed positive.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200311000127&ACE_SEARCH=1

Digital mask-supply services kick off in S. Korea

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 11, 2020

Various South Korean providers launched digital services providing real-time information about the availability of face masks at designated stores on Wednesday as the country strives to solve a mask supply crunch amid the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Ten mobile application and online service developers have started to offer information on mask stockpiles at state-designated retailers, according to the National Information Society Agency.

An open application programming interface has been publicly available since Tuesday evening, allowing programmers to create various online and mobile services using the country's data on face masks.

Such mobile apps and web services show the locations of authorized stores and how many masks they have in stock, helping people avoid visiting multiple stores to make their purchases.

They will display mask availability using four different colors. A store colored green means 100 or more masks are available, while yellow means there are fewer than 100 masks. Red means there are fewer than 30 masks in the store, while grey means masks are sold out.

South Korea's leading web portal operators, Naver and Kakao, will also provide mask stockpile information using their interactive maps.

South Korea began a rationing system for face masks on Monday amid growing public anger. Citizens have been waiting in long lines for hours to buy masks provided via public channels.

Under the new measure, citizens are able to buy only two protective masks per week from state-designated retailers, including pharmacies and post offices, on designated days of the week, depending on the final number of their year of birth. (Yonhap)

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200311000723&ACE_SEARCH=1
Korea initiates free counseling amid coronavirus

By Lim Jeong-yeo

Published : Mar 11, 2020

"This is my third week of telecommuting, and I'm feeling down for lack of human communication. Is this enough reason to receive psychological counseling?" is a question one can ask for free in South Korea amid the coronavirus situation.

The Korea Psychological Association, together with the nation's disease control body, said Wednesday that it would provide free counseling for anyone needing emotional care through the COVID-19 scare.

Some 48 counseling sessions are provided daily, thanks to the voluntary participation of some 230 certified counselors from the association, said Yook Seong-pil, the chairperson of an emergency committee formed within the Korea Psychological Association to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

"We may consider adding more capacity if requests for counseling increase," Yook said.

Im Ja-in, a 29-year-old office worker who had to scale back her daily activities during the coronavirus outbreak, tried the line.

"The effect of an understanding voice calmly nudging to hear more about my feelings was incredibly consoling, and somehow my voice nearly cracked telling this counselor about the very normal days I spent at home," Im said.

Im was among many citizens who have been taking precautions against the virus for nearly a month now -- working from home, canceling all or most social gatherings and feeling stressed over the prolonged change.

"The therapeutic power of that talk was addictive, but because I appreciate these counselors' volunteering efforts, I would save their time for people more in need than I am," Im said.

Those wishing to talk can call the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hotline, 1339, and press 3 to get the number of a counselor.

The session can go on for up to 30 minutes, and each person can call a maximum of three times.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200311000720&ACE_SEARCH=1
2,500 beds secured for patients with mild symptoms

By Park Han-na

Published : Mar 11, 2020 - 16:20 Updated : Mar 11, 2020 - 21:59

In response to a spike in the coronavirus caseload, South Korea has turned private dormitories and state-run training facilities into hospital wards now housing over 2,500 patients with mild symptoms.

As of Wednesday morning, 2,358 COVID-19 patients in Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province have been admitted to 13 such facilities across the country, according to the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasure Headquarters.

The virus treatment centers make use of existing facilities, such as training institutes and dormitories owned by the government and private companies. The makeshift clinics are part of measures to stop deaths outside hospitals, as the shortage of hospital beds, prompted by a steep increase of patients in Daegu and the surrounding North Gyeongsang Province, left hundreds waiting at home for days for a hospital bed. The two areas are where more than 80 percent of the country's total infections have been reported.

"We will work closely with municipal governments to ensure that they secure additional community treatment centers in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to establish a thorough preventive medical system," Interior Minister Chin Young told reporters.

Medical professionals are stationed at each site to check patients' conditions in readiness for emergency situation to transfer patients to hospitals.

While staying at the facilities, patients are required to check their body temperatures and respiratory symptoms twice a day for consultation with medical staff. They will have a chest X-ray every other day in case patients don't recognize symptoms.

Daily necessities and sanitation goods such as a thermometer, face mask and essential medicines, donated by the Korean Red Cross and Korea Disaster Relief Association and others, are offered to patients upon arrival at the facilities.

The centers provide meals and snacks free of charge.

The government will send the list of patients to community health centers in their jurisdiction once they are discharged to continue monitoring them.

On Wednesday, Daegu Mayor Kwon Young-jin urged patients at home awaiting hospital beds to check into the treatment centers.

"It is the best choice to get the accurate diagnosis from the medical staff by entering the centers. It is a definite and fastest way to get back to ordinary life and shorten the self-isolation period for your family members," he said.

Among 5,794 cases reported in Daegu, 2,304 were hospitalized and 2,154 were admitted to the treatment centers, while 1,138 remain at home after testing positive.

Some 535 infected people who are in self-isolation at home in the city refused to enter the treatment facilities, citing reasons including the need for child care and preference for a hospital.

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S. Korea to run system to better detect virus patients' routes

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 11, 2020 - 09:50 Updated : Mar 11, 2020 - 13:51

South Korea will operate a system to support epidemiological investigation of people infected with the novel coronavirus by utilizing various cutting-edge technology, government officials said Wednesday.

The system is aimed at helping health investigators to swiftly check various data such as surveillance camera footage and credit card transactions of confirmed COVID-19 patients to recreate their routes.

The system -- co-developed by the Ministry of Science and ICT; the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport; and the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) -- will kick off on Monday.

The system is based on the so-called smart city data hub program currently under development by the central government and the municipal government of Daegu, the local epicenter of the outbreak.

"The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport will actively support health authorities in containing the spread of the COVID-19 virus by utilizing various smart city technologies," Transportation Minister Kim Hyung-mee said in a press release.

Previously, KCDC investigators had to request important data such as CCTV footage and credit card transactions of confirmed patients from police investigators, resulting in a delay in epidemiological investigation.

The new system allows various data of the confirmed COVID-19 patients to be immediately analyzed and provided to health investigators.

As of Wednesday, the nation's total COVID-19 cases came to 7,755, with 60 people, mostly elderly patients with underlying illnesses, having died of the potentially fatal disease, according to the KCDC.

Of the total, 242 new cases were detected on Tuesday, far below the daily increases of 500 or more last week but higher than the 131 new cases detected on Monday

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200311000720&ACE_SEARCH=1
2,500 beds secured for patients with mild symptoms

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Korea initiates free counseling amid coronavirus

By Lim Jeong-yeo

Published : Mar 11, 2020 - 16:12 Updated : Mar 11, 2020 - 16:12

“This is my third week of telecommuting, and I’m feeling down for lack of human communication. Is this enough reason to receive psychological counseling?” is a question one can ask for free in South Korea amid the coronavirus situation.

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Some 48 counseling sessions are provided daily, thanks to the voluntary participation of some 230 certified counselors from the association, said Yook Seong-pil, the chairperson of an emergency committee formed within the Korea Psychological Association to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

“We may consider adding more capacity if requests for counseling increase,” Yook said.

Im Ja-in, a 29-year-old office worker who had to scale back her daily activities during the coronavirus outbreak, tried the line.

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Im was among many citizens who have been taking precautions against the virus for nearly a month now -- working from home, canceling all or most social gatherings and feeling stressed over the prolonged change.

“The therapeutic power of that talk was addictive, but because I appreciate these counselors’ volunteering efforts, I would save their time for people more in need than I am,” Im said.

Those wishing to talk can call the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hotline, 1339, and press 3 to get the number of a counselor.

The session can go on for up to 30 minutes, and each person can call a maximum of three times.

Counseling is available from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., every day of the week.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare also offers counseling services for confirmed patients and their families through the National Center for Disaster Trauma, which can be reached at 02-2204-0001 or 02-2204-0002.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074815>

Biggest cluster of coronavirus infections in Seoul grows to 93 cases

Mar 12, 2020

Health officials examine people at a special testing center set up on the first floor of the building in southwestern Seoul where the largest cluster of infections in Seoul were found on Tuesday. [YONHAP]

At least 93 cases of the new coronavirus have been traced to a call center in western Seoul, and local health officials warned Wednesday that the capital's largest infection cluster will most likely grow.

The Korean government said Wednesday it was planning to create a so-called infection management guidelines for densely populated workplaces with high risks of mass infection — such as call centers — and recommend they allow employees to work from home or come to the office on staggered schedules to prevent the spread of the virus.

Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon said on a CBS morning radio show Wednesday that his office was scheduled to meet with call center operators to urge them to follow government health guidelines, hinting he may force the establishments to shut down if they refuse to abide by the rules.

The cluster in Sindorim-dong, Guro District in western Seoul, was reported as nationwide infections have been drastically dropping, raising hopes that the spread of the virus in Korea was finally under control after three weeks of rising numbers in Daegu and North Gyeongsang.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) announced Wednesday morning that 242 new infections were counted on Tuesday, bringing Korea's total infections to 7,755. Tuesday's daily count was almost double the figure reported Monday, when 131 new cases were tallied. Still, those figures are a huge drop from last week, when daily infections numbered between 500 and 700.

Among Tuesday's new infections, most were still from Daegu, with 131 cases coming from Korea's fourth-largest city in the southeastern part of the country, where a church of the controversial Shincheonji religion was the epicenter of Korea's outbreak. Seoul had 52 new infections, and the province of North Gyeongsang, which surrounds Daegu, saw 18 new infections.

Seoul had a total of 205 infections as of 10 a.m. Wednesday, according to the Seoul Metropolitan Government Office, including 15 in Dongdaemun District, eastern Seoul; 14 in Eunpyeong District, northern Seoul, and Yangcheon District and Guro District in western Seoul; and 13 in Gangseo District, western Seoul, and Gwangak District and Songpa District, southern Seoul.

Seoul's infections account for only 2.5 percent of nationwide cases, while Daegu accounts for 74.7 percent and North Gyeongsang 14.6 percent, according to KCDC statistics.

The death toll stood at 60 by Tuesday midnight, six more than the previous day. A total of 288 people have fully recovered from the coronavirus, 41 more than the day before.

Health officials still don't know how the virus penetrated the Sindorim call center. At least five Shincheonji adherents work there, but they've all tested negative, said officials.

Seoul Mayor Park, however, didn't rule out the possibility that the Christian sect was the source of the infections, saying Wednesday that a list of Shincheonji adherents in Seoul, which his office received from the church, was not believed to be the full list, implying that the church omitted some worshippers on purpose.

Local officials counted 64 cases of the coronavirus linked to the Sindorim call center as of 2 p.m. Tuesday, and that figure rose to 93 at 10 a.m. Wednesday. Of that figure, Seoul residents accounted for 65 people, while the rest were from the neighboring city of Incheon or the province of Gyeonggi.

Of Seoul's 65 cases, 50 were identified as employees of the call center who live in various parts of Seoul, while 15 were said to have had close contact with them, such as their relatives. Thirteen live in Guro District, the highest among Seoul's 25 districts.

Of the 28 cases outside of Seoul connected to the call center, 15 live in Incheon while 13 live in Gyeonggi, health officials said.

At least 70 cases of the 93 in total are employees of the call center who all worked on the 11th floor of the 19-story Korea Building, and no infections have been traced yet to the seventh, eighth and ninth floors, which were also used by the call center, though virus tests are ongoing for every employee on all four floors.

Park said there were 207 workers on the 11th floor and 550 workers on the seventh through ninth floors.

Operated by Metanet Mplatform, which specializes in outsourced customer call services, the call center provided customer services for ACE Insurance Korea, which is part of the global insurance group Chubb.

The close seating at the call center plus the fact that the workers spent most of their 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. shifts talking are believed to be factors in why so many workers became infected. Government officials said most workers didn't wear face masks inside the office.

Officials from the KCDC and Nowon District Office in northern Seoul said the first patient diagnosed at the call center was a 55-year-old Korean woman who lives in Nowon and doesn't appear to have any links to the Shincheonji religion or visited China or Daegu or North Gyeongsang recently.

According to health officials, the patient, who works at the call center, felt a cold come on last Friday and tested positive for the virus on Sunday. Upon learning that the patient works in Guro District, the Guro District Office informed the call center to quarantine all its workers in their homes, get them tested and shut down the office.

Seoul Mayor Park said Wednesday on the radio show there were 417 call centers in Seoul and 745 in total throughout the nation. He said their work environments made employees particularly vulnerable to transmissions of the virus.

The mayor said there are 413 employees at the 120 Dasan Seoul Call Center, which is run by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, and that starting next week, half will work from home.

Officials on the southern resort island of Jeju scrambled to perform contact tracing for a middle-aged female worker at the call center Wednesday when it was revealed she visited Jeju last Saturday for about 12 hours.

That woman, who tested positive for the coronavirus on Tuesday, was said to have taken Asiana Airlines Flight 8915 from Gimpo International Airport in Seoul at 8:45 a.m. Saturday and visited several places in Jeju on a public city bus before returning to Seoul at 9:10 p.m. on Asiana Airlines Flight 8996.

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Local libraries provide drive-thru service as coronavirus spreads

By Song Seung-hyun

Published : Mar 12, 2020 - 14:36 Updated : Mar 12, 2020 - 14:36

More and more local public libraries in Korea are starting to provide drive-thru book services as a solution for the shutting down of libraries due to the spread of coronavirus.

A public library in Seongdong-gu, Seoul, on Wednesday said it was providing a drive-thru service to check out books. The library said that it is a temporary service and will operate until March 22.

Anyone who would like to check out books from this library can call (02) 2204-6440 from Tuesday to Sunday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and request books that they want to borrow. If a user reserves a book between 9 a.m. and noon, they can pick it up through the library's drive-thru service on the same day. If the reservation is placed in the afternoon, the users can pick it up the next day. Up to 5 books can be borrowed per household.

The library added that it was making sure that when picking up the books, the drivers can receive them while staying in the car, like the drive-thru service that coffee shops are offering to minimize person-to-person contact.

The Jeju Island government on Wednesday also announced that it was operating drive-thru services at two of its public libraries - Halla library and Woodang Library. It is providing the drive-thru service on Wednesday and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Those who would like to use the service can place their reservations on its website <http://lib.jeju.go.kr>.

Busan also started its drive-thru library service on Tuesday. On its first day, 260 people borrowed over 1000 books using the service at Simin Municipal Library in Busan.

Twelve libraries in Cheongju, North Chungcheong Province, also announced Thursday that they had started providing a drive-thru service.

The libraries said the service was launched to help citizens cope with the stress and hardships caused by the spread of the new coronavirus. They also emphasized that it is regularly sanitizing the books so that citizens can borrow them without worrying about possible infection through handling books.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200312000317&ACE_SEARCH=1

S Korea to apply enhanced quarantine on arrivals from 5 European countries

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 12, 2020 - 11:26 Updated : Mar 12, 2020 - 14:54

South Korea said Thursday that all people arriving in the country after visiting Germany and four other European countries will face strengthened quarantine starting next week as part of efforts to stem the inflow of the new coronavirus.

Starting Sunday, entrants from France, Germany, Spain, Britain and the Netherlands will be required to get fever checks and submit papers on their health condition, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC).

The strengthened measure came as many European countries are grappling with a spike in the novel coronavirus outbreak.

"Special entry measures are applied to those who have either visited or stayed at major European countries as COVID-19 is widely spreading in communities of the continent," said Yoon Tae-ho, a senior health ministry official who is in charge of quarantine work.

They are also required to download a smartphone application that will allow them to be put under supervision if they show symptoms, the KCDC said.

Also, the requirements will be applied to all people who arrive in South Korea via Dubai, Moscow and other cities after traveling to Europe in the previous two weeks.

Such requirements have been applied to people who have visited mainland China, Macau, Hong Kong, Iran and Italy.

The measures come as many European nations, particularly virus-hit Italy, have reported a spike in its new COVID-19 cases, prompting the health authorities here to raise their guard against further imported virus cases.

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S. Korea unveils virus prevention guidelines for confined workplaces

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 12, 2020 - 11:38 Updated : Mar 12, 2020 - 16:58

South Korea on Thursday unveiled virus prevention guidelines for confined workplaces and public-use facilities to stem cluster infections of the novel coronavirus following a massive group transmission at a call center in Seoul.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it will distribute the guidelines to those who operate their businesses in enclosed spaces, including internet cafes, karaoke rooms and fitness centers, which are vulnerable to group transmission of COVID-19.

The guidelines call for business operators to set up a prevention system to better protect their workers and customers from the contagious disease.

Under the guidelines, business owners are recommended to designate managers dedicated to quarantine activities and set up an emergency contact list with local health authorities. They are also advised to conduct fever checks on employees twice a day.

The KCDC also urged companies to actively adopt remote working and stagger commuting hours, while encouraging them to distance proximity at workplaces.

The guidelines come after a massive group transmission was reported at a call center in southwestern Seoul, where workers apparently worked at packed offices. So far, more than 100 COVID-19 cases have been founded to be linked to the call center.

"Managing business sites that are vulnerable to the new coronavirus infections has become an urgent task," said Yoon Tae-ho, a senior health ministry official who is in charge of quarantine work. "With the guidelines, business owners should set their prevention measures depending on their working conditions."

After the call center case rang warning bells about enclosed spaces' vulnerability to viral outbreaks, South Korean experts have called on the government to come up with toughened quarantine measures.

"In the Seoul metropolitan area, there are already quite a number of cases whose infection routes are unknown," said Kim Woo-joo, a professor of infectious medicine at Korea University Guro Hospital. "If they stay in confined space for a long time, it could lead to group transmission and the call center group transmission is an example of the worst scenario becoming a reality."

Some municipal governments hinted that they may even consider shutting down such public-use facilities to prevent small cluster infections.

Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon said Wednesday the city has recommended owners of karaoke rooms and internet cafes to suspend operations, while considering issuing administrative order for a temporary shutdown of such facilities.

Large companies in South Korea have toughened quarantine measures on their confined workplaces even before the government guidelines were released.

SK Telecom Co., South Korea's largest mobile carrier, said 1,500 workers at its call centers who applied for remote working will work from home starting Thursday. For those who have to work at offices, the company widened the distance between seats.

LG Electronics Inc. also allowed its call center workers to work at home. Some 800 workers for the company's six call centers nationwide.

Samsung Electronics Service Co., a maintenance service unit of Samsung Electronics Co., already reported virus-infected workers at its call center in Daegu, the epicenter of South Korea's virus outbreak, and has closed the facility since Feb. 27.

The company originally planned to reopen the call center on Friday but decided to push back the reopening until the end of this month following a request from the Daegu city government. Samsung Electronics Service said it will adopt a remote working system and allow its call center workers to take paid leave on a rotational basis to create a healthy office environment.

Infectious disease experts said it is a positive that the government is coming up with the guidelines for confined workplaces but urged the authorities to first establish a system that can monitor whether companies' prevention measures are properly working.

"There should be a system that makes companies report the health conditions of their employees daily to health authorities," said Jung Ki-suck, a doctor at Hallym University Sacred Heart Hospital and former head of the KCDC. "Making recommendations will not work."

Doctors emphasized that the best way to prevent group transmission at confined workplaces begins with personal hygiene, because in reality, it is difficult to block people from having conversations.

"The best way to prevent the virus infection is to wear masks even at office rooms and wash hands frequently," said Uhm Joong-shik, a doctor at Gachon University Gil Medical Center in Incheon, just west of Seoul. (Yonhap)

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074850>

Unless you have money to burn, don't try this at home

Mar 12, 2020

Banknotes are burnt after being microwaved. Notes can be replaced depending on the level of damage.

Don't microwave your won.

That may sound obvious, but the Bank of Korea is worried that people will do just that. So it issued a press release Wednesday to advise against the practice.

It seems that people have been showing up at their banking institutions with burnt banknotes after trying to disinfect the notes in the microwave.

The central bank, which is normally focused on such serious matters as monetary policy and systematic risk, is concerned that the at-home hack will not kill the coronavirus and that the bills could catch fire.

Just don't do it, the bank says.

But some have.

According to the bank, Mr. Lee, who lives in Pohang, North Gyeongsang, microwaved 1.8 million won (\$1,500) worth of 50,000 won bills fearing a coronavirus infection.

After most of the 50,000 won bills were blackened, crispy and carbonized, Lee asked a bank to exchange the damaged notes with fresh currency. The bank said that only two of the notes were in good enough shape to be replaced.

For the other 34 notes, he was only paid 850,000 won.

Mr. Park in Busan used ultraviolet light and high temperature to disinfect 390,000 won worth of 10,000 won bills.

When he tried to exchange the burnt cash, 27 notes were replaced, and 12 notes were redeemed at 50 percent.

To prevent the spread of the coronavirus through the widely circulated banknotes, the central bank is keeping money collected from financial institutions in quarantine for at least two weeks.

The Bank of Korea has strict terms for the replacement of damaged money. If three-quarters or more of a bill remains, the customer will receive a full refund of the face value.

If the remaining area is greater than two-fifths but less than three-quarters, half of the value is exchanged. If the remaining area is less than two-fifths, the bill cannot be exchanged.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074849>

Real-time data on mask supplies now available

Mar 12, 2020

A mobile app launched Wednesday shows the number of face masks available at pharmacies. [YONHAP]

As Korea strives to solve a face mask supply crunch fueled by coronavirus fears, the government is providing real-time data from designated mask vendors open to the public, allowing app developers to generate maps showing where supplies still remain.

Ten of these online services launched Wednesday morning, after the government requested that developers wait until after it rolled out the application programming interface (API) for the data the night before.

According to the National Information Society Agency (NIA), 10 mobile and online service developers started offering information on mask volume at government-designated retailers at 8 a.m. Wednesday.

The 10 services all use color-coded maps to allow users to find out how many masks remain at each designated seller.

At the moment, the government is limiting the number of masks individuals can buy to two per person per week at government-designated locations.

By Wednesday, the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety said nearly 6 million units of face masks out of a total of 7.8 million were provided to pharmacies nationwide and at Hanaro Mart stores (except Seoul and Gyeonggi) and post offices in smaller regions.

The per-person limits on mask purchases previously applied only to pharmacies, but post offices began following suit as well on Wednesday.

Since late last month, the growing epidemic created skyrocketing demand and subsequent shortages of protective face masks throughout the country. Despite government assurances that it would stabilize the supply, public frustration has remained high as people queue for hours to buy masks at designated sellers, only to leave empty-handed.

To save people from fruitless hours spent waiting on designated vendors, the NIA, along with five other government entities, made the sales data of government-secured face masks open to the public. The data is updated in real time as pharmacies and other mask vendors manually input their sales figures to the system. The NIA then codifies the data as part of its open API.

Naver and Kakao have announced they will incorporate the data into their own platforms soon, and Naver said it had launched a beta version of the service by Wednesday afternoon.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200313000120&ACE_SEARCH=1
S. Korea orders filter producer to offload inventory amid mask shortage
By Yonhap

Published : Mar 13, 2020 - 09:36 Updated : Mar 31, 2020 - 08:44

South Korea said Friday it has ordered one of the filter producers here to release its inventory as the country struggles to keep up the supply of protective masks amid the spread of the new coronavirus.

The order will add 4.4 tons of melt-blown nonwoven fabric filters into the market, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. The collected filters will be supplied to nine mask producers, which were on the verge of suspending their operations due to the shortage of materials.

The order came in line with the country's emergency policy implemented since last week, which allows the government to intervene into inventories and sales of filter producers.

All exports of masks and filters are banned under the policy as well.

The move is part of South Korea's efforts to expand local production of protective masks to 14 million sheets daily, up from the current 10 million.

South Korea has been making various efforts to speed up the production of materials as well, including renovating production facilities of diapers and tissues in the country to increase daily output of fabric filters.

South Korea plans to increase the production volume of filters to 27 tons by the end of April, up from the current 12.9 tons.

Starting Monday, South Korea adopted a de facto distribution system for protective masks, in which people can purchase two face masks per week from pharmacies on designated days of the week depending on their year of birth.

<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200313000500&np=1&mp=1>
[Video] Koreans adapt to mask rationing system to protect themselves against coronavirus

South Korea introduced a mask distribution policy under which individuals can buy only two masks per week, a move aimed at resolving the dire shortage of the protective tool

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=katglAKrROI>

By Park Jun-hee

Published : Mar 13, 2020 - 11:58 Updated : Mar 13, 2020 - 14:03

South Koreans are slowly adapting to a new distribution system of face masks, which was initiated by the government Monday to address the shortage of them.

A lot of Koreans see masks as a vital source for protection against the spread of COVID-19. But the distribution has been uneven and masks have been hard to get. Some resellers have engaged in hoarding and price-fixing to increase their profits.

Under the new rationing policy, individuals can buy only two masks per week at pharmacies and designated stores, after showing their identification cards.

After the new system was introduced on Monday, pharmacies attracted long lines of people wanting to buy masks. In most cases, the lines of people moved forward at a steady pace as they politely waited for their turn.

Thanks to the concerted of medical staff, government policymakers and cooperative citizens, the growth of confirmed cases appears to be slowing.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074906>

Masking the truth

Mar 13, 2020

Fortunately, Korea has the capacity to manufacture more than 10 million masks a day thanks to the yellow dust and fine dust particulates from China that tormented Korea even before the new coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan. Factories and distributors worked hard to make them and stocked them up for the spring — the time of the fine dust attack from China. Hundreds of millions of face masks were sold to China before the Lunar New Year's holiday. Some tourists bought them by the box. Officially, 700 million have been exported to China. There is an estimate that more than 1 billion units were sold to China through a countless number of Chinese peddlers and tourists.

Shortly after the Lunar New Year's holiday, many Korean families had dozens that they had stocked up when masks were cheap. After the virus infections were confirmed, the government said it should not be a concern as long as people wore face masks and washed hands properly. Reusing mask was not recommended. Around that time, people who had to go out to make a living wore one or two masks a day. As masks became scarce after their price soared to more than 4,000 won (\$3.3) per unit, I thought it was a temporary phenomenon due to manipulation by merchants. The president said there would be no interruption in mask supply. As it is only a face mask — not a vaccine or treatment — most people didn't know it was an empty promise.

Masks were used politically. Initially, they were used to reassure people. When voices calling for a ban on the entry of Chinese people grew, the government stressed the importance of wearing face masks. It highlighted the spreading of the virus within the country rather than blocking the virus inflow. Exports were not banned. As the number of our patients remained at 30 for several days, the government said, "The crisis will come to an end pretty soon." Administrators took off their masks and asked the public to return to their daily routine. Pedestrians with bare faces increased soon.

Then, after the Shincheonji church outbreak, the government stressed the importance of face masks again. It tried to calm the uneasiness, but masks were already in short supply. The government blocked export to China, but it was too late. Then it recommended citizens to reuse face masks for three days or to use fabric masks instead. Then, people without symptoms were told all of a sudden that they didn't need to wear masks. Shortly after, a group infection at a customer service center was reported. The government then backtracked on its instruction not to wear a mask.

Some say that people hardly wear masks in the United States and Europe. That is true. They don't have the experience of wearing masks for cold. It is hard to find areas with such a cold climate as Korea. Unlike Korea, winter is wet, and they don't need to block dry air. They don't have the fine dust problem either. They don't go to work or school if they have a respiratory disease such as the flu. If they go, they are seen lacking consideration and courtesy for others.

So they never wear masks throughout their lives unless they are doctors or construction workers. With such little demand, production and import volumes are also small. Their governments can hardly recommend their people wear face masks. That cannot be our standard. Unlike America and Europe, Korea is a highly dense society. Also, many

people think it is a virtue to go to work even if they are sick. Until recently, masks were abundant here.

There is no guarantee that masks can save lives. But I have only masks to rely upon. People who trust the government become fools. An increasing number of patients die without getting admitted to the hospital.

I felt something ominous when President Moon praised Korea for offering an “exemplary case in prevention.” So, the government must not expect “concession with good faith” from our mask refugees. It must first thank the great citizens who wait in line.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200313000553&ACE_SEARCH=1

Robots deployed to help fight coronavirus contagion

By Kim Bo-gyung

Published : Mar 13, 2020 - 14:26 Updated : Mar 13, 2020 - 14:26

Robots are helping doctors treat coronavirus patients at the Seoul Medical Center, the Seoul Metropolitan Government said Friday.

There are three types of robots at the hospital: One conducts temperature checks on visitors, one sterilizes negative pressure rooms and the other transports clothes and other goods to a disposal site after use by medical staff and patients.

Two robots of each model are deployed at the state-run facility, which has been designated as a COVID-19 treatment center, said the city government.

The disinfectant robots were provided free of charge by the Korea Institute for Robot Industry Advancement, and private companies donated the other two models.

Robots that measure visitors’ temperature with thermographic cameras are placed at the medical center’s entrance and in the lobby.

Visitors who show symptoms are asked to get checked out at a nearby screening clinic, said the Seoul City government.

An automatic motion sensor also provides hand sanitizer without users having to press a button.

The disinfectant robots used in the negative pressure rooms have two functions, absorbing oxygen and emitting eco-friendly ultraviolet and LED light.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074909>

Seoul cluster gets spotlight as infections nationwide tumble

Mar 13,2020

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun, left, and Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon, right, inspect a testing center in Sindorim-dong, Guro District in western Seoul, on Thursday. [NEWS1]

Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon vowed Thursday to focus his efforts on a neighborhood in western Seoul where at least 102 cases of the new coronavirus have been traced to an insurance call center.

The capital's largest cluster of infections grew even bigger Thursday as local health officials said more employees at the call center tested positive, as did people they were in recent contact with.

But Park refrained from comparing the outbreak in Sindorim-dong, Guro District in western Seoul to the cluster in Daegu, where three-quarters of Korea's total infections came from. He pointed out that some 200 people who actually lived in apartments on the 13th through 19th floors of the 19-story Korea Building tested negative for the coronavirus, implying that infections were mostly coming from the call center.

The call center used the seventh, eighth, ninth and 11th floors of the Korea Building, and most infections so far came from the 11th floor.

Of 102 infections traced to the Sindorim call center by 10 a.m. Thursday, 71 of the patients were residents of Seoul, 14 were from the surrounding province of Gyeonggi and 17 were from the neighboring metropolitan city of Incheon, said Park.

Tests on call center employees and other people who worked at other companies in the Korea Building were still ongoing Thursday.

Among the 102 cases, at least 80 were employees of the call center, while the rest were the people they were in contact with, including relatives, according to health officials.

By Wednesday, every worker at the call center who came down with the coronavirus had worked on the 11th floor, but officials said Thursday at least one more employee who worked on the 9th floor additionally tested positive. Some 207 people are known to have worked on the 11th floor, while 553 people worked on the three other floors, bringing the total number of employees at the call center to 760, officials said.

At least two people who worked at a different company in the Korea Building have been diagnosed so far.

Incheon officials announced Thursday that a 34-year-old man who worked on the 10th floor of the building tested positive for the coronavirus and that his wife was being tested. A 27-year-old woman who worked for a different company on the ninth floor tested positive as well. Health officials believe both patients could have had contact of some sort with call center employees.

Operated by Metanet Mplatform, which specializes in outsourced customer call services, the call center provided customer services for ACE Insurance Korea, which is part of the global insurance group Chubb.

Close seating at the call center plus the fact that workers spent most of their 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. shifts talking are believed to be factors in why so many became infected. Government officials said most workers didn't wear face masks inside the office.

The first patient diagnosed at the call center was a 55-year-old Korean woman who lives in Nowon District, northern Seoul, and worked on the 11th floor. Health officials still don't know how she contracted the disease. She doesn't appear to have any links to the Shincheonji religion, whose church building in Daegu was the epicenter of Daegu's outbreak, nor has she visited China or Daegu or North Gyeongsang recently, officials said.

The cluster in Sindorim-dong was reported as infections in Korea have been drastically dropping after three weeks of rising numbers in Daegu and North Gyeongsang.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) announced Thursday morning that 114 new infections were counted on Wednesday, bringing Korea's total infections to 7,869. Wednesday's daily count was less than half the 242 new infections reported Tuesday and a huge drop from last week, when daily infections numbered between 500 and 700.

Among Wednesday's new infections, most were still from Daegu, with 73 cases coming from Korea's fourth-largest city in the southeastern part of the country. Seoul had 19 new infections including those at the call center, and the province of North Gyeongsang, which surrounds Daegu, saw eight new infections.

By 10 a.m. Thursday, Seoul had a total of 219 infected patients, including 16 from both Eunpyeong District, northern Seoul, and Guro District, western Seoul. Seoul's infections accounted for 2.69 percent of nationwide cases, while Daegu accounted for 74.56 percent and North Gyeongsang 14.53 percent, KCDC statistics showed.

The death toll stood at 66 by Wednesday midnight, six more than the previous day. A total of 333 people have fully recovered from the coronavirus, 45 more than the day before. The KCDC said Thursday afternoon that 59 patients were in critical condition.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200313000725&ACE_SEARCH=1

S. Korea adopts telemedicine to battle coronavirus outbreak

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 13, 2020 - 17:29 Updated : Mar 13, 2020 - 17:29

Seoul National University Hospital has begun to provide a telemedicine service to coronavirus patients near the epicenter South Korea's virus outbreak.

A team of four doctors and 13 nurses at the general hospital in Seoul can monitor the status of COVID-19 patients with mild symptoms through video calls.

The team can also diagnose and write prescriptions for the patients quarantined at a state-run treatment center located in Mungyeong, a city about 180 kilometers southeast of Seoul.

Telemedicine is designed to provide health care to people who live in hard-to-reach areas such as remote islands by connecting patients to doctors over the internet.

In principle, telemedicine is banned in South Korea. However, the government has in recent years allowed limited telemedicine on a trial basis despite fierce opposition from doctors who question the safety of the service.

The situation has changed due to the rapid spread of the new coronavirus in South Korea. COVID-19 has killed 67 people in South Korea, mostly elderly patients with underlying illnesses, and infected nearly 8,000 others.

The government opened state-run isolation facilities in the hardest-hit region to quarantine and monitor COVID-19 patients who have shown mild symptoms after criticism that people with severe symptoms were not being properly treated due to the lack of hospital beds.

The government has so far opened 16 community centers that can admit up to 3,800 patients in the southeastern city of Daegu and surrounding North Gyeongsang Province.

"We are able to perform perfect telemedicine in the disaster areas of Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province where the number of COVID-19 patients has spiked," said Kim Yeon-soo, director at the Seoul National University Hospital.

Kim noted that virtual visits by doctors and nurses are a new way of safely treating patients and of containing the illness' spread in hospitals and clinics.

The center is equipped with medical staff but local health authorities have decided to deploy minimal personnel to limit person-to-person contact as much as possible.

Nurses hold video calls with patients through smartphones twice a day and doctors talk to patients every other day, the hospital said.

Still, the Korean Medical Association (KMA), which represents over 105,000 physicians across the country, has continued its opposition, citing safety concerns and other potential problems.

"There will be huge repercussions if something goes wrong with even one out of 100 patients after the approval of telemedicine," Park Jong-hyuk, a KMA spokesperson, said. "Moreover, the current system is only capable of monitoring patients."

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200314000044&ACE_SEARCH=1
Where to buy masks on weekend

By Choi Ji-won

Published : Mar 14, 2020 - 13:25 Updated : Mar 14, 2020 - 13:25

South Korea is spending its first weekend since the government on Monday kicked off the face mask-rationing system due to severe shortages caused by the spread of the coronavirus.

Unlike the weekdays, when people can buy face masks depending on the last digit of their birth year, anyone is eligible to make purchases regardless of birth dates on the weekends.

However, people who have already bought the two masks, rationed to each person weekly by the government, will be limited from purchase through the identification-based screening system.

Not all the state-appointed sellers -- pharmacies, post offices and NongHyup Hanaro Mart stores -- will provide the protective wears on Saturday and Sunday. Local post offices, one of the main mask distributors, are closed on the weekends, while only a limited number of pharmacies in each region operate on Sundays.

Drugstores operating on Sundays can be checked at www.pharm114.or.kr run by the Korean Pharmaceutical Association.

Meanwhile, NongHyup Hanaro Mart is selling masks in regions outside Seoul and Gyeonggi Province starting Saturday. Some 1,900 stores nationwide will start mask sales around 2 p.m. that day.

Starting this week, the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety has supplied around 6 million face masks daily through the designated channels, with around 250 masks allocated at the drugstores and 100 masks at the NongHyup Hanaro Mart stores and the post offices.

The final digits of birth year for those people who can purchase masks on weekdays are as follows: one and six for Mondays (for example, those born in 1971 or 1986 can buy on Mondays), two and seven for Tuesdays, three and eight for Wednesday, four and nine for Thursdays and five and zero for Fridays. Anyone who has missed out on their appointed days can buy on the weekend.

Purchasers must submit an official proof of identification -- resident registration card, driver's license or passport.

For citizens aged 10 years or younger or 80 years or older, registered family members may buy by submitting identification documents and government-issued household resident registers with the resident numbers displayed.

Further information on the availability of masks through mobile apps, such as "Goodoc" and "Mask Nearby," and online websites, that show real-time information on the locations and their inventories. Digital maps most prevalently used by South Koreans -- Naver Map and Kakao Map -- also provide similar functions.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200314000082&ACE_SEARCH=1

[Exclusive] Expats sidelined in Seoul's mask-rationing

Activists call for permission to buy masks with passports

By Choi Ji-won

Published : Mar 14, 2020 - 18:21 Updated : Mar 15, 2020 - 14:17

An illegal immigrant visits an immigration office in Seoul to voluntarily report herself on March 6. (Yonhap)

An illegal immigrant visits an immigration office in Seoul to voluntarily report herself on March 6. (Yonhap)

Hundreds of thousands of foreign residents in South Korea have been sidelined in the government's face mask-rationing measure, prompting activists to call for improving the system.

Korea kicked off a distribution system on Monday after the growing shortage of face masks caused by the coronavirus infection spread.

The government has been supplying masks to citizens, allowing each person to buy two masks at government-designated pharmacies, post offices and NongHyup Hanaro Mart stores every week. An identification proof must be presented for purchase.

While foreigners are also eligible to buy masks, the government has limited purchases to subscribers of the national health insurance, making nearly half of the foreigners unable to access the supplied masks. There are over 2 million foreign nationals living in Korea, including those who have overstayed their visas, but only around 1.25 million are subscribed to the public health insurance, according to government data.

"The situation is especially bad for social minorities. Asylum-seekers, unregistered immigrants and foreign workers in rural areas -- where they cannot, or do not subscribe to health insurance -- have fallen in the holes," Kim Young-ah, executive director of Migration to Asia Peace, a nonprofit organization that helps refugees here -- told The Korea Herald. "Some of these people have told me that they are continuously reusing disposable masks."

According to Kim, the situation is worsened by the fact that most government-run migrant support centers have not been operating properly since late February due to fears of the virus infection within the locations where people transit on a daily basis.

"We're currently coping entirely with a small number of masks that we purchased ourselves or have been sponsored by organizations or individuals, and delivering them to people short of masks," Kim added.

Some foreign residents are also unqualified to subscribe to the health insurance if they have been in Korea for less than six months. This includes students who have come to study and travelers staying for short periods.

Even among those who subscribe to the health insurance, many are not able to buy masks through the provided channels.

"A majority of the foreign laborers usually live alone and it's not easy for them to visit pharmacies close by during their working hours. Even after work, the locations are mostly closed or the masks are sold-out," said Jung Yong-sup, general secretary of Migrant Workers Movement Supporters Group.

"It would be better if the government allows foreigners to buy masks with their passports, or else, supply masks to some 200 local migrant support centers around the nation to sell to foreigners in the blind spot of the system," Jung said.

Meanwhile, the Joint Committee of Migrants in Korea on Thursday filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission, requesting the government to allow foreigners without health insurance to purchase face masks.

“We’re not asking for free masks. Immigrants should be given the right to buy publicly-supplied masks,” the committee said.

Starting this week, people are able to buy two masks every week depending on the last digit of their birth year. While those born in the years ending with one or six can buy on Monday, those people born in years ending two and seven can buy on Tuesday -- three and eight on Wednesday, four and nine on Thursday, five and zero on Friday. Anyone who has not bought the rationed amount on weekdays can make purchases over the weekends.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200314000021&ACE_SEARCH=1

When can children go to school?

Impending spring semester could pose uncharted challenges for virus containment

By Kim Arin

Published : Mar 14, 2020 - 13:06 Updated : Mar 14, 2020 - 21:46

The spring semester is set to start in 10 days after closing for three weeks, but is it safe for children to go to school?

The Ministry of Education says it plans on resuming K-12 classes March 23, a date that has already been postponed twice over the outbreak of coronavirus here.

“Pushing back the school calendar further is not something we are considering at the moment. But then again, nothing is set in stone because the outbreak is so rapidly developing,” a ministry official told The Korea Herald.

Among some 7,755 virus patients, at least 299 are students and 90 faculty members, the Education Ministry said, citing Wednesday’s data.

During a parliamentary meeting for virus response on Thursday, minor opposition lawmaker Rep. Kim Kwang-soo said classes needed to be put off once more, arguing opening as scheduled could “pose challenges” given the escalating health crisis. Rep. Ki Dong-min of ruling Democratic Party, on the other hand, said halting classes indefinitely was “not the answer,” as the outbreak is forecast to linger longer.

Calls for delaying the start of school are growing amid a worsening outbreak. A petition on Cheong Wa Dae website demanding the school year to be postponed has garnered over 80,000 signatures since being posted Monday.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200315000156&ACE_SEARCH=1

Virus spread continues to slow, 76 new infections reported

By Park Han-na

Published : Mar 15, 2020 - 12:35 Updated : Mar 15, 2020 - 14:03

South Korea reported 76 new cases of coronavirus and three more deaths on Sunday, bringing the nation’s total infections to 8,162 and death toll to 75, according to health authorities.

New infections dropped below 100 for the first time in over three weeks since Feb. 21.

Of the new cases, 45 were confirmed in the southeastern city of Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province at the heart of the country's virus outbreak.

In the aftermath of mass transmission at a call center in Guro-gu, southwest Seoul, the metropolitan area confirmed 22 new cases, including nine in Seoul, 11 in Gyeonggi Province and two in Incheon.

Other cases include three each in Busan and North Chungcheong Province as well as one each in Gwangju, Ulsan and Sejong.

According to the government data, Daegu and North Gyeongsang accounted for 88.1 percent of the country's coronavirus cases with 6,031 and 1,157, respectively, largely due to widespread transmission among followers of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu City.

Among the infected people, female accounted for 61.6 percent. By age, those in their 20s' made up the largest portion with 28.2 percent, followed by those in 50s' (19.2 percent), in 40s (14 percent) and 60s (12.4 percent).

The death rate for the novel coronavirus here is 0.92 percent, lower than the global rate of 3.4 percent reported by the World Health Organization on March 4.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200315000236&ACE_SEARCH=1
'The Plague' by Albert Camus makes bestseller list

As coronavirus pandemic wreaks havoc, readers turn to 60-year-old tale of epidemic
By Song Seung-hyun

Published : Mar 15, 2020 - 15:16 Updated : Mar 15, 2020 - 15:16

More and more Korean readers have found themselves cracking open "The Plague" by Albert Camus anew, amid the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The Camus novel was published in 1947 and is set in the same time, though it is believed to be based on the cholera epidemic that killed a large percentage of the population in the French Algerian city of Oran in 1849.

"The Plague," which portrays people's diverse responses to the plague, won the French Critics' Prize in 1947 and also led to the Nobel Prize in literature for the French Algerian author in 1957.

Kyobo Book Centre, the nation's largest bookstore chain, on Sunday said 3,500 copies of "The Plague" were sold between Feb. 1 and Thursday, which is over 18 times more than the number of copies sold during the same period in 2019. The bookstore added that it is currently carrying "The Plague" in Korean published by more than 20 different publishers.

"It is unusual for a classic novel to appear on the bestselling list and to see a surge in sales, as the list is usually filled by new books," a Kyobo Book Centre official said in a

statement. According to the bookseller, sales appear to have jumped largely due to increased curiosity about infectious diseases as the novel coronavirus spreads. It added that sales soared markedly after broadcaster tvN on Tuesday aired an episode about the book on its show "The Page Turners."

As of Sunday, the book also ranked at the No. 2 spot on the bestseller list of online bookselling platform Yes24. The list is based on accumulated data of the sales and number of orders during the last seven days on its platform.

E-book readers are also showing keen interest in the book.

"Since the second week of March, 'The Plague' has been on our popular e-books list," Millie's Library spokesperson Jeon Som-yi told The Korea Herald. Millie's Library is a local subscription-based e-book service provider.

"Even on our monthly list, the book is ranked at 14th place, which shows high interest. And around 5,581 people are currently listening to the book," the spokesperson said Sunday. As of Sunday, "The Plague" also topped the e-book startup's daily best e-book list.

"The Plague" also ranked at No. 2 of popular books on e-book service provider Ridi Books.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074926>
Daegu, North Gyeongsang designated special disaster zones
Mar 15, 2020

The Korean government designated Daegu and North Gyeongsang as special disaster zones Sunday, allowing the country's hardest hit areas of the new coronavirus to receive special financial, administrative and medical support from the central government.

It was the first time Seoul has ever declared an area to be a special disaster zone due to the spread of a contagious disease, not a natural disaster.

Daegu and North Gyeongsang were named so-called special care zones on Feb. 29 when hundreds of infections were traced to a church building of the Shincheonji religion in Daegu, but the designation of a special disaster zone usually comes with far more benefits.

Blue House spokesman Kang Min-seok said in a statement Sunday afternoon that President Moon Jae-in authorized the special disaster zone designations at 2:10 p.m. Minister of Health and Welfare Park Neung-hoo is expected to hold a joint press conference with Minister of Interior and Safety Chin Young later in the afternoon.

The designations came as daily infections of the coronavirus have been dropping in Korea lately, yet still mostly coming from Daegu, the country's fourth-largest city, and the surrounding province of North Gyeongsang, both in the southeastern parts of the nation.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200316000798&ACE_SEARCH=1

'Do not gather in enclosed spaces,' urges government
Coronavirus fatality rate rises to 0.9%; 4 new infections come in from abroad
By Park Han-na
Published : Mar 16, 2020

Among the 76 new cases reported in Korea, 40 were linked to a Christian church in Seongnam, south of Seoul, raising the total number of infections from the River of Grace Church to 46.

Local officials found that the church had held a service March 8 despite a government request to refrain from doing so, addressed to religious people nationwide.

The city tested 135 followers who took part in the service and found a cluster of linked cases.

The largest cluster of infections in the metropolitan area -- an insurance company's call center in Guro-gu, Seoul -- added two more confirmed cases Monday, bringing the total to 129.

A church attended by a call center employee in Bucheon, Gyeonggi Province, reported a total of 14 cases.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200316000775&ACE_SEARCH=1
Church services likely to lead to community spread of coronavirus
By Lim Jang-won

Published : Mar 16, 2020 - 16:32 Updated : Mar 16, 2020 - 21:19
Another cluster outbreak of COVID-19 occurred near the capital, as 40 members of River of Grace Community Church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province, were newly confirmed with the novel coronavirus infection on Monday morning. Another person who came in contact with a church member was also confirmed Monday afternoon.

The first patient at the church was confirmed on March 9, followed by a couple on Friday. On Saturday, one woman was confirmed and on Sunday, the head pastor and his wife, both asymptomatic, were confirmed positive.

Only seven of the 135 people who had attended Sunday service together on March 8 were quarantined at home after the first case was confirmed, leading authorities to fear the start of a community spread. One of the infected patients worked at a community center helping the elderly until Friday.

Tests of 106 of the 135 people who attended the Sunday service on March 8 showed 40 people infected with the novel coronavirus. Eight people are being retested.

"We were reducing the number of services to only Sunday services when this happened. As the senior pastor, I will take responsibility and criticism," said Rev. Kim of the River of Grace Community Church, according to media reports. "I don't know about big churches, but small churches like ours or churches with old pastors do not have the infrastructure to go live on YouTube," Kim added.

This is the second highest number for a cluster infection in the area surrounding the capital after a cluster infection was confirmed March 8 at a call center in Guro-gu, Seoul. A total of 129 people have been confirmed with the infection in relation to the call center.

“If any member of the River of Grace Community Church or family member has any symptoms of the coronavirus, we sincerely request that people self-report and be tested,” said Seongnam Mayor Eun Soo-mi in an emergency briefing Monday.

“We also sincerely request once again that religious facilities in Seongnam cancel group gatherings and services,” she added. “We hope you understand that this is not a persecution of religion, but unavoidable safety measures for people in our city.”

An inspection of 225 small and medium-sized churches on March 13 and 14 by city officials found churchgoers not wearing masks, not maintaining social distance and barring officials from entering the church.

Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon also delivered a briefing Monday, mentioning that churches still holding services in person are sources of contamination.

“Over 30 percent of the churches in Seoul are still holding offline services. It is a reality that this is causing cluster infections. We once again ask strongly that churches convert to online service or refrain from holding services for a while,” said Mayor Park.

While most megachurches continue suspend offline services, holding online services instead, some megachurches holding offline services and smaller sized churches continuing to hold worship services and church retreats are emerging as sources of mass infection.

Thirty-four people were confirmed with COVID-19 in relation to Oncheon Church in Busan, where the first confirmed patient had attended a two-day church retreat with around 150 participants.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200316000895&ACE_SEARCH=1

River of Grace Community Church sprays saltwater into worshippers' mouths

By Lim Jang-won

Published : Mar 16, 2020 - 17:42 Updated : Mar 17, 2020 - 09:10

Security camera footage shows a River of Grace Community Church member spraying saltwater in another member's mouth upon entering the church. (Yonhap)

Security camera footage shows a River of Grace Community Church member spraying saltwater in another member's mouth upon entering the church. (Yonhap)

River of Grace Community Church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province, is alleged to have sprayed saltwater into the mouths of people attending church services on March 1 and 8, which may have contributed to the cluster infection of at least 46 people with the novel coronavirus.

“It is very unfortunate. As we were reviewing the CCTV footage from River of Grace Community Church, we found that members of the congregation were sprayed saltwater into their mouths one-by-one because of misinformation that saltwater is effective in preventing the spread of coronavirus. This is an example of ‘infodemic,’ an epidemic caused by misinformation,” said Lee Hee-young, co-chief of the Gyeonggi Province COVID-19 Emergency Response team, on Monday.

“We expect more people to show up positive with coronavirus as everyone was sprayed,” Lee continued. “The spray nozzle was not sanitized after each spray, so we consider it almost, if not direct, contact.”

So far, this is the second largest cluster infection in the area surrounding the capital.

<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200316000920&ACE>

Virus fight inundated by misinformation

By Kim Arin

Published : Mar 16, 2020 - 18:35 Updated : Mar 16, 2020 - 23:26

What’s making the fight against the coronavirus harder in South Korea is the spread of misleading information surrounding the new disease.

The National Police Agency embarked on a crackdown on circulation of coronavirus fake news as early as January, in coordination with the Korea Communications Commission and other relevant agencies.

The police said producing and peddling false information regarding the virus would be punishable under laws on obstruction of official duties and defamation.

The Korean Medical Association has warned against giving nonexperts a platform to weigh in on the disease.

“Doctors who lack expertise in coronavirus, such as a veterinarian or cosmetic surgeon, giving advice on the coronavirus can contribute to propagation of misinformation and misguide people,” said a KMA official. Speaking to reporters, he said citing nonspecialists can also imbue their opinions with a false authority.

Salacious stories disseminating unverified add to the confusion.

Last week, a claim that followers of Shincheonji -- a messianic Christian sect linked to over half of confirmed cases in Korea -- refused medical help circulated widely online, which was later picked up by certain local outlets.

Seoul National University Hospital, which housed the said patients at one of its centers, denied the reports, saying there has been “no confrontation at all” between inpatients and the staff.

Lee Dong-gwi, a psychology professor at Yonsei University, said confirmation bias is what is driving the spread of falsehoods amid the outbreak and uncertainties that surround it.

“Rising anxiety and fear as the little known infectious disease spreads is impelling people to look for and readily believe in explanations that are sometimes unsupported by evidence,” he said.

“We live in a world inundated with information where experts increasingly lose ground for authority. People tend to listen to things that match their preexisting beliefs, while ignoring those that contradict them.”

Conflicting messages from the government and experts is also what mystifies the public.

Doctors’ groups have contradicted the government’s guidance and decisions on multiple fronts from travel restrictions to face masks.

While Health Minister Park Neung-hoo said during a Feb. 26 meeting of the Legislation and Judiciary Committee that the Korean Society of Infectious Diseases had not recommended a broadened ban on arrivals from China, the society’s member doctors said the claims were untrue.

“There are divergent opinions on travel ban but (what the minister said) is not what the society has agreed on,” said one infectious disease professor at a Seoul medical school.

The medical society’s official statement published Feb. 2 says that the travel restrictions should extend beyond Hubei Province to include other affected Chinese provinces.

The KMA’s guidelines on face mask use also goes against the government’s, which says cotton face masks without filters and reuse of disposable masks are OK.

“For protection from the virus, using nonrespirator face masks or recycling single-use masks are not advisable,” a KMA official said.

On Sunday, the Health Ministry said the outbreak in Korea was stabilizing, with the curve beginning to flatten. But highlighting the progress at this point can be risky, experts said. One of them is preventive medicine specialist Choi Jae-wook at Korea University Hospital.

“The kind of aggressive testing that has taken place in (the country’s worst-hit) Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province should be conducted in other regions, in order to get a more comprehensive picture,” Choi said.

“What has to be made clear is that the COVID-19 is not likely to go away any time soon, and clusters of community infection will continue to emerge,” he said. “There are signs of a slowdown, yes, but we don’t want to read too much into numbers with the way things are now.”

Citizens say such mixed messages leave them confounded.

“It’s hard to decide if it’s safe to wear the same mask twice, or if we can believe things are starting to get better,” said a 31-year-old resident in Bonghwa, a North Gyeongsang county.

Addressing the discrepancies, the ruling Democratic Party has accused the KMA of political motives.

“The medical association, its leadership in particular, seems to be speaking with a political agenda,” the party’s spokesperson Hong Ihk-pyo said.

Sociologist Koo Jeong-woo of Sungkyunkwan University said health professionals have a responsibility for clear, consistent communication in a public health emergency.

“Health officials and experts need to be extremely wary of demonstrating political bias, which hurts the credibility of their opinions,” he said.

“Keeping their messages free of politics and staying neutral is a something that is a duty for health experts in a pandemic crisis. Politics meddling in risk communications inconveniences the public, who count on experts to deliver reliable information.”

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074945>

Countries look to Korea’s approach to fight Covid-19

Mar 16,2020

The diplomatic corps in Korea inspects health check procedures for incoming and outgoing passengers at Incheon International Airport’s Terminal 1 on Friday. [NEWS1] More countries are looking to Korea’s experience in containing the spread of the coronavirus through a comprehensive approach - pairing swift and extensive testing with transparent dissemination of information to the public - as the world struggles to fight the global pandemic.

French President Emmanuel Macron told President Moon Jae-in that he respects the Korean government’s “transparent and effective” response to the coronavirus outbreak, saying that France would like to learn from the approach.

The two leaders held a 35-minute phone conversation Friday, according to the Blue House, in which Macron asked Moon to share Korea’s experience of containing the coronavirus, officially called Covid-19, outbreak.

Moon said Korea is ready to “share Korea’s experience and clinical data secured in the process of treating patients to the international community,” said a Blue House spokesman, and emphasized the need for international efforts to develop a vaccine and help the recovery of the global economy.

Moon also explained Korea’s special entry procedures implemented Sunday for travelers coming from France and four other European countries, screening their health upon arrival.

Korea’s approach is characterized by a rapid response to curb the spread of the virus through swift screening and quarantining of patients and their contacts, monitoring the inflow and outflow of travelers and using innovative technology including smartphone apps and drive-through testing stations.

At one point, Korea was the country with the most number of confirmed coronavirus patients outside of mainland China and saw an exponential increase in coronavirus cases in late February, mostly in the Daegu and North Gyeongsang areas and linked with Shincheonji, a religious sect. The high number of cases came as Korea has tested more patients than any other country - more than 15,000 people daily at its peak.

As of Sunday, Korea, with a population of around 51 million, has tested 268,212 people, of which 243,778 were found negative. Korea has over 8,100 confirmed cases as of Sunday but has seen a slowdown in new cases over the past week and reported a two-digit increase in patients Sunday, the lowest since Feb. 21.

But Korea has not yet had to enforce major lockdowns like in China and Italy and instead has encouraged a system based on public trust and cooperation. The Korean government is sharing updates nearly in real time through daily briefings by the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) and emergency alert text messages sent via mobile networks.

There are over 150,000 coronavirus cases in over 123 countries and 5,800 deaths as of Sunday.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), said in a briefing Friday, "Europe has now become the epicenter of the pandemic, with more reported cases and deaths than the rest of the world combined," apart from mainland China, and urged countries to take a "comprehensive approach" to limit the spread of the virus.

U.S. President Donald Trump introduced drive-through testing as part of efforts to contain the virus in a press conference at the White House Friday as the United States declared a national emergency over the coronavirus.

Free drive-through stations have been used in Korea as a swift and accessible way to get tested for the virus while avoiding contamination. Trump had previously questioned the effectiveness of the drive-through testing.

"In South Korea, they did have large number of tests available over the last several weeks," said Trump. "Their positivity rate is between 3 and 4 percent. With LabCorp and Quest expanded testing, their positivity rate is between 1 and 2 percent."

Trump continued, "The goal is for individuals to be able to drive up and be swabbed without having to leave your car."

On travel restrictions to China and Korea he said that he hopes to "be able to open things up as quickly as possible" as they "make progress, as they get down to the number that we all think is right."

The state of New York opened its first drive-through test site Friday in New Rochelle, the city with the biggest cluster of coronavirus cases in the United States, and expects to eventually be able to test hundreds of people per day.

U.S. health experts have also often cited Korean data and indicated expectations that the U.S. curve would align similarly with that of Korea. Amid criticism about the lack of test kits available in the United States, Vice President Mike Pence announced that free coronavirus testing would be provided for every American.

“When this is all over - and it will end - you will see a curve of how the coronavirus outbreak evolved,” said Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, during a White House coronavirus task force press briefing Saturday. “We’ve seen it already with China; we’re starting to see it with Korea - which brings us now to what we can expect in our own country.”

Members of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have recently visited the KCDC and observed Korea’s system of curbing the spread of the virus, collection of data and the relaying of information to the public, said Seoul officials.

The United States on Saturday extended its travel ban to Britain and Ireland effective Monday midnight after imposing one on 26 European countries last week.

Foreign media have also been looking to the Korea model in containing the virus.

Britain’s BBC on Thursday presented a report titled “Coronavirus in South Korea: How ‘trace, test and treat’ may be saving lives,” and noted that the “preventative measures being taken in South Korea have so far involved no lockdowns, no roadblocks and no restriction on movement.”

U.S. broadcaster NBC reported Friday that the drive-through model in New York “follows what health care workers in South Korea were doing weeks ago, helping that nation become a leader in testing capabilities.”

On Friday, members of the diplomatic corps in Seoul visited Incheon International Airport to observe Korea’s quarantine procedures aimed at containing the spread of the virus both in the departure and arrival processes.

Diplomats from 47 countries, including 15 ambassadors, visited Terminal 1 of the airport in two groups, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

They were briefed by Koo Bon-hwan, president of the Incheon International Airport Corporation, and witnessed the multi-tiered health screening process including temperature checks for outbound passengers.

They also observed the special entry procedures for travelers arriving from certain countries most affected by the virus, including filling out health questionnaires and downloading a phone app.

Korea’s screening and quarantine process is paired with IT technology such as mobile apps tracking the conditions and movements of infected patients.

Self-quarantine violators domestically can face fines or imprisonment. Korea doesn't allow those who have been in contact with confirmed cases to exit the country for 14 days.

The country has not yet applied entry bans on travelers except for those coming from Hubei Province in China.

Instead, it has special entry procedures for travelers from China, which was expanded to include several European countries starting Sunday.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3074998>
New cluster of 46 found at a church south of Seoul Mar 17,2020

At least 46 infections of the new coronavirus have been traced to a small Protestant church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi, just south of Seoul, health officials announced Monday, making it the second-largest cluster in Korea's capital area.

Seongnam officials said Monday morning that 40 members of the so-called River of Grace Community Church tested positive for the coronavirus, on top of six people connected to the church who tested positive from March 9 to Sunday.

That brings total infections linked to the church to 46, though officials anticipate the figure will rise as tests on the churchgoers are still ongoing.

The second-largest cluster surfaced as daily new cases of the coronavirus, officially known as Covid-19, have been dropping in Korea.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) announced Monday morning that 74 new infections were counted Sunday, the lowest day-to-day figure in nearly three weeks, bringing Korea's total infections to 8,236.

As of Sunday midnight, 75 people were reported dead from the coronavirus, the same figure than the previous day, while 1,137 patients fully recovered, 303 more than the day before. The KCDC said Monday afternoon that 59 people were in critical condition.

The largest cluster in Korea's capital area - which includes Seoul, the surrounding province of Gyeonggi and the neighboring city of Incheon - was traced to an insurance call center in western Seoul.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200317000794&ACE_SEARCH=1
Protestant churches under fire for holding Sunday services despite coronavirus epidemic
By Yonhap

Published : Mar 17, 2020 - 15:40 Updated : Mar 17, 2020 - 16:31

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South Korea reported fewer than 100 new coronavirus cases for a third straight day on Tuesday, but concerns lingered in the metropolitan area as group transmission and imported cases emerged as new risks in the anti-virus fight.

Gyeonggi Province, which surrounds Seoul, reported a sharp increase of 31 cases, which brought the total in the province to 262, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In Seoul, cases increased by 12 to 265, while Incheon, west of Seoul, added just one case from the previous day.

The recent cases apparently trace to a group transmission at a church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province, which has emerged as an infection cluster that has affected at least 51 people in the greater Seoul area.

In a separate case, an insurance call center, in the Sindorim neighborhood of the southwestern Seoul ward of Guro, has also been identified as an infection cluster. Cases related to the call center reached 134.

Eighteen cases have been also reported in relation to a Protestant church and an internet cafe in the Imun neighborhood of the eastern Seoul ward of Dongdaemun.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200317000686&ACE_SEARCH=1
S. Korea again pushes back new school year on virus fears

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 17, 2020 - 14:11 Updated : Mar 17, 2020 - 16:50

South Korea said Tuesday it will be postponing the new school year for another two weeks as it fights COVID-19 group infections that have occurred at churches, hospitals and even Zumba classes.

Under the measure, the new school year at kindergartens and elementary, middle and high schools nationwide will begin on April 6, five weeks later than in normal years, according to the education ministry.

Child care centers, which provide care for toddlers and children up to 7 years old, will also close for another two weeks and open April 6, the health ministry said.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200318000202&ACE_SEARCH=1
New virus cases below 100 for 4th day, but clusters continue to emerge

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 18, 2020

South Korea recorded daily new infections of the new coronavirus in double digits for the fourth straight day Wednesday, as health authorities stay alert for cluster infections across the nation. Authorities also called for people to delay or cancel nonessential overseas travel to help keep the virus outbreak under control.

The 93 new cases, which were detected Tuesday and followed the 84 new cases detected on Monday and 74 on Sunday, brought the nation's total infections to 8,413, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said.

So far, 84 people, mostly elderly patients with underlying illnesses, have died in South Korea from the respiratory virus that emerged in China late last year, the KCDC said.

Seven more fatalities, including a 77-year-old person with underlying illnesses, were reported earlier in the day, but they have not been included in an official update.

The KCDC said 58 virus patients are in critical condition. The flu-like virus causes a fever, cough, runny nose and headache for most healthy people, but the risk of severe infection is high for elderly people with underlying health problems.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200318000639&ACE_SEARCH=1

Majority of S. Koreans support Seoul's response to COVID-19

By Choi Si-young

Published : Mar 18, 2020 - 13:41 Updated : Apr 7, 2020 - 12:17

58.4 percent of people in South Korea say their government's response to the coronavirus pandemic was satisfactory, while 39.9 percent disagreed. (Realmeter)

58.4 percent of people in South Korea say their government's response to the coronavirus pandemic was satisfactory, while 39.9 percent disagreed. (Realmeter)

A majority of South Koreans approve of their government's efforts to contain the novel coronavirus that has sickened more than 8,000 people and killed 84 here.

According to the latest survey, released Tuesday by local polling firm Realmeter, 58.4 percent of respondents satisfied with the government's response to the pandemic, while 39.9 percent disagreed.

The approval rate represented a 3 percentage point rise since the same survey came out six weeks ago, though the increase fell within the margin of error.

Almost 9 out of 10 supporters of the ruling Democratic Party endorsed the government's response, while 8 out of 10 followers of the main opposition United Future Party said the government was not handling the pandemic well.

In the politically neutral cities of Sejong and Daejeon, opinion was almost evenly split, with a slight majority in Daegu and nearby North Gyeongsang Province dissatisfied with the government's response.

Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province are traditional conservative strongholds.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3075021>

Korean National Ballet dancer who broke quarantine has been fired

Mar 18, 2020

A dancer at the Korean National Ballet (KNB) has been fired for traveling to Japan during a self-quarantine period amid the spread of coronavirus, the KNB said Tuesday.

The decision about the dancer, identified only as Na, was made during a disciplinary committee meeting the previous day.

Na, a member of the corps de ballet, the group of non-soloist dancers, went to Japan in late February and uploaded photos of him alongside his girlfriend on social media.

All members of the KNB were under self-quarantine from Feb. 24-March 1 after performing in virus-stricken Daegu, where a majority of Covid-19 infections were reported at that time.

“We are reflecting on our conduct in the time of emergency as the whole country is struggling with Covid-19,” the KNB said. “We will overhaul the organization and beef up the discipline of our members.”

The KNB also punished two other members for engaging in private lessons during the self-quarantine period.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3075069>
New coronavirus cluster of at least 74 found in Daegu hospital
Mar 18,2020

Hansarang Care Hospital in Seo District, Daegu, on Wednesday. [YONHAP]
At least 74 new infections of the coronavirus have been traced to a hospital for the elderly in Daegu, city officials announced Wednesday morning, igniting fears of another major outbreak in Korea’s epicenter.

The latest cluster of infections was reported as daily new infections in Daegu and the surrounding province of North Gyeongsang in Korea’s southeastern regions had been dropping lately.

Daegu officials announced in a press briefing Wednesday morning that 57 out of 117 patients at the Hansarang Care Hospital in Seo District, Daegu, as well as 17 out of 71 medical workers tested positive for the coronavirus so far.

A nurse at the hospital started showing symptoms of the virus on Monday and tested positive, prompting health officials to run a test on everyone at her workplace.

The hospital is currently under cohort isolation, the shutting down of an entire building or institution to prevent the spread of a contagious disease.

Daegu officials said patients who have already tested positive were in the process of being transferred to a state-designated hospital for coronavirus treatment or, if their symptoms are not severe, to a facility for isolated treatment.

Daegu Mayor Kwon Young-jin said officials had been in the process of going down a list of about 390 establishments in the city where mass infections seemed feasible, such as nursing homes and social welfare centers, to check whether any coronavirus patients had gone unnoticed.

Kwon said Wednesday the city detected 87 patients after getting through around "30 percent" of the list, including the cluster of 74 from Hansarang Care Hospital. The rest were from four other hospitals and a nursing home in Daegu.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) announced Wednesday morning that 93 new coronavirus infections were counted Tuesday, higher than Monday's figure of 84, bringing Korea's total infections to 8,413.

Daegu had 46 infections, Gyeonggi 15, North Gyeongsang nine and Seoul five. Some of the 74 cases from Hansarang Care Hospital were not included in Daegu's count because they received their test results Wednesday morning, meaning their cases would be announced by the KCDC Thursday morning.

The national death toll stood at 84, three more than the previous day, while 1,540 people were proclaimed to be fully recovered, 139 more than the day before.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200318000713&ACE_SEARCH=1

S. Korea dials up virus testing with hospital 'phone booths'

By AFP

Published : Mar 18, 2020 - 14:22 Updated : Mar 18, 2020 - 14:22

A South Korean hospital has introduced phone booth-style coronavirus testing facilities that allow medical staff to examine patients from behind the safety of a plastic panel, the latest innovation in the country's drive to track down infections.

The row of four booths -- which use negative air pressure to prevent harmful particles from escaping outside -- stand under a tented shelter outside the H Plus Yangji Hospital in Seoul.

The hospital dubs them the "Safe Assessment and Fast Evaluation Technical booths of Yangji hospital" -- or SAFETY for short.

Each patient steps into the box for a rapid consultation by intercom with a medical professional who, if necessary, takes their samples by swabbing their nose and throat using arm-length rubber gloves built into the panel.

The whole process takes about seven minutes and the booth is then disinfected and ventilated.

The smaller SAFETY boxes are "significantly easier" to disinfect than the usual negative-pressure rooms and so are a "much safer space to be tested in", hospital president Kim Sang-il told AFP.

"Also each booth only accepts one patient at a time, unlike negative pressure rooms where patients often need to share space as they get tested," he said, adding the hospital's negative pressure units are now reserved for treatment purposes.

The South was once the hardest-hit country outside China, where the virus first emerged, but appears to have brought its outbreak under control thanks to a huge testing and contact-tracing effort.

By midnight on Monday almost 300,000 people had been tested -- processes that are free to anyone who has been told to have a test by a doctor, or who tests positive.

Early in the epidemic it introduced drive-through testing for the virus, with medical staff in protective suits swabbing noses through car windows, a practice now adopted internationally.

The SAFETY booths offer similar accessibility for those who do not drive -- and children -- and by keeping suspected patients outside, avoid the need to disinfect parts of the hospital building.

The facility was created based on biosafety cabinets -- also known as isolation glove boxes -- where laboratory workers perform operations through arm-length rubber sleeves.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200318000894&ACE_SEARCH=1
Gyeonggi issues quarantine order for internet cafes, karaoke rooms, clubs

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 18, 2020 - 17:26 Updated : Mar 18, 2020 - 17:26

Public-use businesses in Gyeonggi Province, which surrounds Seoul, were ordered on Wednesday to thoroughly observe a set of guidelines for preventing the coronavirus outbreak.

Issuing a rare administrative order, the provincial government instructed internet cafes, karaoke rooms, clubs and other places of business frequented by the public to abide by seven quarantine requirements, including regular disinfection and ventilation, until April 6 to help curb the spread of COVID-19.

The government said the administrative order will be applied to about 15,000 public-use establishments in the province whose confined spaces may increase the risk of virus transmissions through droplets.

Such establishments are ordered to designate quarantine managers, have all employees and customers wear a face mask, ban the entry of people with fever or respiratory symptoms, list all visitors and their contact numbers, conduct hand disinfection for all visitors and maintain the maximum distance between customers.

Violators will face a fine of up to 3 million won (US\$2,400) and a suspension of business. If coronavirus infections occur at violators' premises, the government will also demand an indemnity over the relevant quarantine and treatment expenses.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200319000713&ACE_SEARCH=1
Why do Sunday services continue service despite coronavirus spread?

Critics say some smaller churches press on for financial reasons

By Song Seung-hyun

Published : Mar 19, 2020 - 14:54 Updated : Mar 19, 2020 - 14:54

River of Grace Community Church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province, shut down on March 9. The government has confirmed at least 66 coronavirus cases linked to the church's Sunday service. (Yonhap)

River of Grace Community Church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province, shut down on March 9. The government has confirmed at least 66 coronavirus cases linked to the church's Sunday service. (Yonhap)

As cluster infections of the novel coronavirus among those attending church worship services increase in Korea, public concerns about the issue are also on the rise.

This week saw at least 66 coronavirus cases related to River of Grace Community Church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province.

In response to rising concerns, the government of Gyeonggi Province on Tuesday issued an administrative order that imposes strict conditions on church worship services. The Gyeonggi Province government started enforcing seven requirements for worship services at 137 churches from Tuesday to March 29. These requirements include churches providing lists of people attending worship services and their phone numbers, in addition to observing usual precautionary measures.

Churches caught violating the guidelines face an outright ban on offline services or a fine.

However, the Health Ministry remains careful about forcing all churches to stop holding worship services due to concerns about the issue of religious freedom.

"When violating the fundamental rights of the people, it should be dealt with carefully while weighing the benefits that can be obtained," Vice Health Minister Kim Kang-lip said during a press briefing Wednesday.

Historic, theological background to pressing on with service?

Despite the government's repeated urging to suspend holding worship services as the country fights the spread of the highly contagious respiratory illness, some experts say it is a decision hard for some churches to make.

"There are some churches that are very conservative about canceling the worship service, mainly due to historic reasons," Secretary-General of the Communion of Churches in Korea the Rev. Choi Gui-soo told The Korea Herald. "Those people say even at difficult times like when the country was a Japanese colony or during the Korean War which broke out on June 25, 1950, the churches still held worship services, and they see the current situation in a similar view."

Ahn Kyo-sung, a historical theology professor of Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, explains such arguments by conservative Christians in an article published by local Christian news outlet the Kidok Kong Bo in Korea.

Arguing that it is not right to apply the same paradigm to the current situation, Ahn said, "The current situation has to be considered based on catastrophe paradigm, not persecution. Holding worship services is not just a religious act as it can lead to the spread of the disaster and may become uncontrollable."

Those who agree with Ahn also point out that Korean churches and their followers' religious activities have largely relied on pastors continuing to preach.

"Part of the reason why they became more reliant on the pastors is that for churches, it is much easier to control its members that way and also to grow its size. This has to change," the Rev. Lee Hun-joo told The Korea Herald. Lee is secretary-general of Protest 2002, a Protestant Church reform group.

Concerning claims that theologically it is important for the faithful to gather and hold worship service, especially in difficult times, as stated in the Bible, Rev. Lee says the Bible also points out not to solely focus on physical gathering.

"I am not saying that the Bible says offline Sunday worship is not important. (Theologically speaking,) churches should adjust to different situations of society. Holding online worship in special circumstances like now is also following the words of the Bible."

Small church dilemma

River of Grace Community Church in Seongnam said it was difficult to hold its worship service through a YouTube livestream like megachurches because its pastor and congregation are more elderly and do not know how to operate the online system. It added that small churches do not have sufficient infrastructure to hold worship services online.

The Rev. Choi, however, said this is not the main problem.

"These days, there are diverse means like Christian TV channels and radio stations that small churches can use to continue their worship service for a few weeks," he said. "The more critical problem is the rent that the small churches have to pay. Unlike megachurches, small churches usually do not have their own buildings. If they skip two to three weeks of service and no offerings are collected, many of them cannot pay the rent."

He also added that the government should consider small churches like small business operators and prepare some sort of assistance instead of just pushing them to stop holding offline worship services.

Nonetheless, the Rev. Lee says "Although I feel pity about small churches' financial difficulties, I think that the current situation is part of the process and opportunity for Korean churches to move forward and stop focusing too much on physical space for worship."

What next?

Meanwhile, there are also concerns over conflicts that might arise among different religious groups to which churches belong after the current chaos comes to an end.

“Historically, after the hard time ends, churches’ different religious bodies had serious conflicts,” Choi said. “We expect conservative churches to point fingers at those who gave up the worship service. This can be a bigger problem for the Christian community, so we do worry about such situation unfolding.”

Lee predicted even bigger changes in Korean churches, including the gradual demise of conservative churches.

“This will show which churches have conservative values and cannot adjust to modern society,” Lee said. “Young people will not agree with this and not attend those churches. We expect that through this process churches with old values, mostly with elderly members, will gradually disappear.”

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200320000108&ACE_SEARCH=1
S. Korea to import 53 tons of mask filters amid supply shortage

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 20, 2020 - 09:43 Updated : Mar 20, 2020 - 09:49

South Korea said Friday it plans to import 53 tons of mask filters through June to keep up the supply of the sanitary item amid the spread of the new coronavirus.

The first batch of 2.5 tons of melt-blown nonwoven fabric filters will arrive here next week, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy.

The country has been running short of protective masks, as well as their materials, as demand for them has soared amid the COVID-19 epidemic.

Starting last week, South Korea has been adopting a de facto rationing scheme system for protective masks, in which people can purchase two face masks per week from pharmacies on designated days of the week depending on their year of birth.

South Korea's daily production of masks currently stands around 13 million sheets, up sharply from 3 million estimated in 2019.

The country saw an uptick in daily new infections of the novel coronavirus as new clusters of infection continued to pop up in the virus-hit southeastern city of Daegu, as well as Seoul and neighboring areas.

The 152 new cases, which were detected Wednesday and reversed four days of double-digit daily new infections, brought the nation's total number of infections to 8,565. (Yonhap)

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200321000100&ACE_SEARCH=1

Prime minister urges suspension of public facility to stem COVID-19

By Choi Si-young

Published : Mar 21, 2020 - 17:58 Updated : Mar 21, 2020 - 18:28

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun appeals people Saturday not to visit public venues or take part in public gatherings in the next two weeks to stop the coronavirus pandemic.

He says next two weeks are

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun appeals people Saturday not to visit public venues or take part in public gatherings in the next two weeks to stop the coronavirus pandemic.

He says next two weeks are "critical" in containing the pandemic here. (Yonhap)

South Korean Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun urged people Saturday to refrain from visiting public facilities – from bars and restaurants to indoor gyms to religious gatherings – in the next two weeks to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

“Stronger self-isolation is unavoidable to contain the virus and to restore peaceful daily life to our children,” Chung said in a public statement.

The government will invoke relevant laws to force noncompliant facility operators to close down their shops and to disband public gatherings that obstruct concerted efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19, which has sickened nearly 9,000 people here and killed 104 as of Saturday.

The prime minister appealed to people to stay indoors as long as possible and to cancel or postpone gatherings.

When outside, people are advised to follow all the recommended precautions such as wearing face masks and keeping a safe distance from each other to avoid mass infections, he added.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200322000156&ACE_SEARCH=1

Many churches press ahead with services despite pleas for social distancing

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 22, 2020 - 13:22 Updated : Apr 2, 2020 - 13:30

Hundreds of South Korean Protestant churches pressed ahead with their worship services Sunday, defying the government's repeated appeals to call off large gatherings and deepening fears of coronavirus cluster infections.

Most churches tried to comply with infection prevention guidelines, such as wearing masks and keeping a certain distance between worshipers, but raised the ire of quarantine officials focusing on a stepped-up social distancing campaign.

Amid the defiant religious services, Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun warned of a "stern" legal action against any breach of the government's quarantine guidelines or orders -- in his latest plea to rally public support for the anti-virus efforts.

"There can't be tolerance any more when it comes to acts that impede the government's quarantine efforts and do harm to our community," Chung said during a session of the Central Disaster Safety Countermeasures Headquarters.

"We should take stern legal action, such as punishing those who breach the (quarantine-related order)," he added.

The premier also stressed the need to focus on enforcing the government-recommended suspension of the operation of religious, indoor sports and entertainment facilities for 15 days until April 5.

Earlier in the day, Culture Minister Park Yang-woo renewed an appeal for religious circles to "actively" join the social distancing efforts, during his visit to Younknak Presbyterian Church in central Seoul.

"I make this earnest call for the religious sector to actively partake in this measure based on the understanding that this is an inevitable step to protect the life and safety (of citizens), though the recommended social distance measure is difficult," Park told church officials.

"I also would like to extend my deep gratitude for the Korean churches' best efforts to prevent COVID-19 by turning services into online ones," he added.

South Korea had reported 8,897 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of midnight with 80.9 percent of them considered mass infections, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A total of 104 people have died from the virus.

Despite the government's call for restraint, many churches, including some nearly 540 churches in the southeastern city of Busan, have held their weekend services with their masked members singing hymns and saying prayers in close proximity to one another, raising fears that they could cause an increase in cluster infections.

Among the defiant churches was Sarang Jeil Church in northern Seoul.

Its members entered a Sunday morning service after being checked for fever and identifying themselves on the church's visitors' book. Some squabbled with municipal officials deployed to the church premises to check the situation.

A Seoul city official pointed out that the church failed to adhere to the guideline of maintaining a distance between worshipers during the service as the chamber was crowded.

"We requested that the breach be addressed, and we will consider issuing an administrative order banning such a gathering if (the church) continues to flout that guideline," the official said.

Other churches also conducted their routine weekend services, though they tried to strictly comply with state-recommended containment guidelines.

Their members stepped into the main chambers after sanitizing their hands and checking body temperatures. Only registered members were admitted into the chapels, with the entrances plastered with a blunt warning: "One that provides a source of COVID-19 infection could face legal responsibility."

During the unusually muted services, the members sat one or two meters away from one another, with the stages, once replete with devout choir members, emptied out.

Before the services, some churches sent out a notice that they would not provide any lunch or transportation services "until the COVID-19 situation calms down."

In line with the government recommendations, many other churches held online services, using their own broadcasting systems or such global platforms as YouTube.

Some large churches created a fund for cash-strapped churches that have been struggling to fund online services and pay rental fees amid declining membership. (Yonhap)

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3075184>
All travelers arriving from Europe will be held for 24 hours for virus tests
Mar 22,2020

Korea began testing all travelers coming from Europe for the coronavirus Sunday — Korean nationals and foreigners alike — and holding them for 24 hours until the results of their tests come through.

Even after that initial test, all travelers will have to go into 14 days of self-quarantine or government quarantine — even those who are confirmed negative for the disease.

Travelers coming into Korea from Europe will be separated into two groups: people showing symptoms and people without symptoms.

Those without symptoms will be transported by bus to one of seven temporary accommodations arranged by the government near Seoul where they will stay for 24 hours and be tested.

Passengers with symptoms will be tested in a separate quarantine facility.

People who have somewhere to stay in Korea who test negative will be required to self-isolate at home for two weeks. People who don't have a residence in Korea will be isolated at government-arranged facilities.

Both Koreans and foreigners who do not abide by self-isolation can face a fine of up to 3 million won (\$2,400).

Korea expected around 1,000 passengers coming from Europe Sunday, with flights scheduled from Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam and Paris. They were informed of the new regulations before boarding flights.

There were over 307,000 confirmed cases globally and 13,000 deaths as of Sunday, according to the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Systems Science and Engineering.

Over 53,000 cases and 4,800 deaths were recorded in Italy. Spain has over 25,000 cases and 1,300 deaths recorded. Other European countries have also seen spikes in cases with 22,000 cases in Germany and 14,000 in France.

The United States also has over 26,000 confirmed cases and over 320 deaths, and California and New York are among states that are forcing nonessential workers to stay home.

Korea has seen a slowdown in new cases and the daily rate of infections were generally in the double digits in the past week, with the exceptions of Wednesday and Friday.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said Sunday that 98 new cases were tallied Saturday, bringing the nation's total infections to 8,897, and a total of 104 deaths.

Of the 98 new cases, 15 patients, or 15.3 percent, were infected from abroad.

Health authorities also continue to remain cautious of cluster infections especially with recent outbreaks at a call center in Guro District in western Seoul and a Protestant church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi.

The Korean government starting Sunday called for the suspension of religious, entertainment and indoor sports activities for 15 days through April 5 in order to contain the coronavirus. In case their operation is inevitable, then they are expected to abide by quarantine authorities' measures or be penalized.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun in a press conference Saturday made the announcement strongly urging to suspend such activities Saturday, stressing the importance of social distancing for the next two weeks calling it a "critical" period.

The government postponed the new school year three times already, so the following two weeks are critical for the schools to reopen without another delay on April 6.

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3075209>

Testing booths offer faster, cheaper virus screening

Mar 23, 2020

Ahn Yeo-hyun, a medical doctor at the Nam District Health Center in Busan, demonstrates how to take samples from the negative air pressure booth. [LABSEED] Korea has introduced a phone booth-style testing facility that officials say will allow suspected coronavirus patients to be tested more cheaply and efficiently.

The booths allow medical staff to quickly and safely collect samples from suspected patients behind the plastic panel and reduces the post-test sterilizing process to a minute.

This pioneering idea came from Ahn Yeo-hyun, a 41-year-old a medical doctor at the Nam District Health Center in Busan. As the coronavirus pandemic worsened in February, Ahn began looking for new ways to reduce the risk of infection to medical workers within the existing negative pressure tents and sample collecting.

“The booth guarantees safety by completely separating the test subject and the medical staff and saves materials, such as protective clothing, and time,” Ahn said. “It took us a month to come up with the idea and build the actual product.”

Testing inside negative air pressure tents forces medical staff to take samples of suspected patients in the same space. The process of sterilizing the tents and circulating air to kill viruses before admitting the next patient has proved time-consuming, and additionally the cost of the tents averaged about 24 million won (\$19,000) per unit.

Before working at the Nam District Health Center in Busan since 2016, she majored in anesthesia and pain medicine and worked at Inje University Ilsan Paik Hospital and Busan Korea Hospital.

The sample-collecting booths introduced after the Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS, outbreak in 2015 often resulted in inaccurate test results, as patients had to collect the samples themselves.

“While accurate sampling is more important than anything else for infectious diseases, chances of failure are high if patients are to take their samples,” Ahn said.

To address this problem, she sketched out some ideas on paper in early February, when the coronavirus began spreading more aggressively throughout the country. She made a prototype with acrylic plates and installed the booth inside negative air pressure tents. After testing her idea through the end of February, she asked a laboratory safety product manufacturing company, Labseed in Ansan, Gyeonggi, to make her customized testing booth.

Labseed finished the product in early March. It is a small negative air pressure booth in which a single person can fit. It contains a glove box-like attachment, through which a medical worker can put their hands into the booth to collect the sample, while a glass panel keeps them separate. Only the medical worker’s gloves need to be changed after sampling, and due to the small booth space, the air circulates fast enough that it only takes a minute to sterilize.

The booth measures 1.3 meters (4.3 feet) in width, 0.8 meters in length and two meters in height. It weighs 160 kilograms (353 pounds), and the attached wheels allow it to be easily moved by two adults.

They also carry a price tag less than half the cost of a negative air pressure tent - about 10 million won.

With news spreading that the booths were distributed in Busan, health centers across the country have begun asking Labseed to duplicate the idea. So far, 13 health centers and hospitals are using the new testing booth or plan to begin using them soon.

In addition to two districts in Busan, the booths have also been deployed to the Changnyeong County health center in South Gyeongsang, Gwangju health center, Jeju health center and the Korea Worker's Compensation & Welfare Service Ansan Hospital.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200323000230&ACE_SEARCH=1

S. Korea reports lowest daily increase in coronavirus cases in month

By Ock Hyun-ju

Published : Mar 23, 2020 - 10:25 Updated : Mar 23, 2020 - 11:19

South Korea's novel coronavirus cases climbed by 64 to 8,961 Monday, as the government tightened rules on social distancing and toughened quarantine screening on all arrivals from Europe.

The new cases marked the lowest daily increase in a month in the country, continuing a downward trend in new infections from the peak of 909 cases reported on Feb. 29.

The death toll rose by seven to 111, with the overall fatality rate standing at 1.24 percent, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The death rate is 6.34 percent for those in their 70s and 11.62 percent for those in their 80s.

http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200323000155&ACE_SEARCH=1

S. Korea to take legal actions against churches violating coronavirus guidelines

By Yonhap

Published : Mar 23, 2020 - 09:58 Updated : Mar 23, 2020 - 14:22

South Korea will take legal action against some Protestant churches for violating the government's guidelines for preventing the massive spread of the new coronavirus, the prime minister said Monday.

As part of the government's drive for stricter social distancing, health authorities advised churches to follow quarantine measures, including keeping the distance between followers at least 2 meters while attending services and having their temperature checked.

But some churches, including Sarang Jeil Church in northern Seoul, pressed ahead with weekend religious services, without abiding by some of the guidelines.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun said stern government measures, including banning gatherings, should be imposed on churches that have ignored the virus guidelines.

"The churches' act seriously hurt the safety of not only individuals attending the service but also communities," Chung said at a pan-government meeting on coronavirus responses.

"Now is an emergency situation that amounts to a quasi-wartime situation. People should not regard the government's administrative orders as a bluff," he stressed.

In a public message on social distancing, Chung "strongly" called for religious, indoor sports and entertainment facilities to suspend operations for 15 days on Saturday, calling the next two weeks a "critical" time.

He also warned the government will issue an administrative order to ban gatherings if the facilities do not abide by the virus guidelines when they keep operating.

For facilities that do not follow the orders, the government will take legal action, including closures and filing compensation suits, he said.

Small-scale cluster infections have been reported at Protestant churches in recent weeks after the bulk of cases tied to the Shincheonji religious sect subsided.

Followers at Sarang Jeil Church, led by now-jailed conservative pastor Rev. Jun Kwang-hoon, closely sat together when they attended the services.

On Monday, the Seoul city government imposed a two-week administrative order on the church, banning it from holding services until April 5.

Mayor Park Won-soon told reporters in a briefing that the city imposed the order after the church breached virus guidelines that include running fever checks, compiling lists of attendees and making sure that congregants sit apart and wear masks.

The city government had earlier warned that it will take countermeasures for churches that do not follow the guidelines and file compensation suits if infections occur.

"More than 2,000 took part in a packed service, (but) the church did not compile a list of the attendees and some attendees weren't even wearing masks," Park said, adding that the church did not comply with an on-site inspector's request to follow the rules.

"(The inspector) asked the church to follow the guidelines, but the church (officials) ignored this and instead verbally harassed the public servant. This is not acceptable," the mayor said.

Park said that 384 cases of violations were found at 282 churches across the city but all except for Sarang Jeil Church immediately followed the guidelines once they were told to.

Chung, meanwhile, called on health authorities to consider whether to expand stricter screening procedures for arrivals from North America where the number of COVID-19 cases has spiked.

Since Sunday, the government has had all arrivals from Europe tested for the virus and begun to impose a two-week self-isolation period on them. The country also has implemented stricter quarantine steps on all international arrivals.

"The number of visitors from North America is double that of arrivals from Europe," Chung said. "We need to seriously review whether to take any effective, stronger quarantine measures." (Yonhap)

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3075208>

Drive-by fish monger

Mar 23,2020

Tourists buy seafood Sunday at a drive-through shop near Guryongpo Beach in Pohang, North Gyeongsang. The city and related agencies have used drive-through as a means to limit the contact of people but still allow businesses to run amid the coronavirus outbreak. [YONHAP]

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3075257>

Drive-through meeting

Mar 24,2020

Members of the Korean Federation of Community Credit Cooperatives, located near GM Korea's manufacturing plant in Changwon, South Gyeongsang, attend an annual general meeting in their cars to prevent the spread of the coronavirus Monday. Around 500 members were present at the meeting. [YONHAP]

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/world/asia/coronavirus-south-korea-flatten-curve.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

At 50 drive-through stations, patients are tested without leaving their cars. They are given a questionnaire, a remote temperature scan and a throat swab. The process takes about 10 minutes. Test results are usually back within hours.

Offices, hotels and other large buildings often use thermal image cameras to identify people with fevers. Many restaurants check customers' temperatures before accepting them.

"We did our epidemiological investigations like police detectives," Dr. Ki said. "Later, we had laws revised to prioritize social security over individual privacy at times of infectious disease crises."

As the coronavirus outbreak grew too big to track patients so intensively, officials relied more on mass messaging.

South Koreans' cellphones vibrate with emergency alerts whenever new cases are discovered in their districts. Websites and smartphone apps detail hour-by-hour, sometimes minute-by-minute, timelines of infected people's travel — which buses they took, when and where they got on and off, even whether they were wearing masks. People who believe they may have crossed paths with a patient are urged to report to testing centers.

South Koreans have broadly accepted the loss of privacy as a necessary trade-off.

People ordered into self-quarantine must download another app, which alerts officials if a patient ventures out of isolation. Fines for violations can reach \$2,500.

There aren't enough health workers or body-temperature scanners to track everybody, so everyday people must pitch in.

Leaders concluded that subduing the outbreak required keeping citizens fully informed and asking for their cooperation, said Mr. Kim, the vice health minister.

Television broadcasts, subway station announcements and smartphone alerts provide endless reminders to wear face masks, pointers on social distancing and the day's transmission data.

The messaging instills a near-wartime sense of common purpose. Polls show majority approval for the government's efforts, with confidence high, panic low and scant hoarding.

"This public trust has resulted in a very high level of civic awareness and voluntary cooperation that strengthens our collective effort," Lee Tae-ho, the vice minister of foreign affairs, told reporters earlier this month.

Experts cite three major hurdles to following South Korea's lead, none related to cost or technology.

One is political will. Many governments have hesitated to impose onerous measures in the absence of a crisis-level outbreak.

Another is public will. Social trust is higher in South Korea than in many other countries, particularly Western democracies beset by polarization and populist backlash.

<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200406000987>

France asks South Korea to share knowhow from fight against coronavirus

By Yonhap

Published : Apr 6, 2020 - 20:00 Updated : Apr 6, 2020 - 20:03

A member of the French Civil Protection service talks with the mother of a 18 year-old woman (not pictured) suspected of being infected with the coronavirus disease as its spread continues, in Paris on Saturday. (Yonhap)

A member of the French Civil Protection service talks with the mother of a 18 year-old woman (not pictured) suspected of being infected with the coronavirus disease as its spread continues, in Paris on Saturday. (Yonhap)

France asked South Korea on Monday to share its knowhow related to containing the novel coronavirus, Seoul's transport ministry said, as both countries are striving to stop the spread of the highly contagious disease.

French Transport Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari made the request during a phone conversation with his South Korean counterpart, Kim Hyun-mee, and the two sides agreed to maintain active communication in their fight against COVID-19, according to Kim's office.

The French minister highly praised Seoul's fight against

COVID-19 as an exemplary model for the world and asked for sharing of the knowhow it has accumulated in containing the spread of the virus, in particular, in the transportation sector, Kim's said.

Kim explained that South Korea has neither restricted movement within the country nor blocked public transportation altogether but people's active cooperation in heeding the government's call for social distancing has contributed a lot to stemming the spread of the virus.

She also emphasized that the public is strictly following government guidelines to voluntarily wear masks, avoid outdoor activities and maintain personal hygiene, according to her office.

South Korea has reported more than 10,000 coronavirus infections since January but the number of new cases appears to be waning in recent weeks, with fewer than 50 cases reported on Monday.

France is struggling to contain the virus as it has confirmed around 93,000 COVID-19 infections with over 8,000 people dying due to the pneumonia-like disease, according to media reports. (Yonhap)