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# DPRK'S DECLARED COVID-19 VICTORY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR A NEXT NUCLEAR TEST

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# **DPRK'S DECLARED COVID-19 VICTORY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR A NEXT NUCLEAR TEST**

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 10 August 2022, Kim Jong Un declared “victory” over the COVID-19 epidemic at the “National meeting of reviewing the emergency anti-epidemic work”, while Kim Yo Jong reiterated previous North Korean claims that the virus had entered the country from South Korea and threatened to wipe out the South Korean leadership. The focus on reinforcing border closures among Kim Jong Un and several senior officials at the meeting indicates that North Korea’s borders will remain closed in the foreseeable future, with the potential exception of rail-based trade between China and the DPRK. Kim Yo Jong’s speech, although harsh in language, is not

indicative of any impending escalatory action, although it appears to lay the groundwork for potentially escalating tensions in the future. It remains unclear whether the declaration of victory over COVID-19 will have an impact on the timing of a potential next nuclear test; while it has likely removed obstacles of resource allocation and domestic public opinion, other obstacles remain. Continuous heavy rains and floods may further obstruct nuclear testing capabilities until the end of the monsoon season in September. The DPRK may also decide to delay a potential nuclear test in the light of the 20th Party Congress of the CPC.

## II. COVID-19 VICTORY DECLARED

On 11 August 2022, North Korean media reported that the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and the Cabinet of the DPRK had convened a "National meeting of reviewing the emergency anti-epidemic work", guided by Kim Jong Un, on 10 August 2022 in Pyongyang.<sup>1</sup> Attending the meeting were several prominent senior officials, six of whom gave speeches.<sup>2</sup> At some point during the event, Kim Jong Un met with officials and scientists from the anti-epidemic and public health sector who contributed to the "maximum emergency anti-epidemic campaign"; congratulating them on their success and holding a photo opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

At the meeting, Kim Jong Un "solemnly declared the victory in the maximum

emergency anti-epidemic campaign for exterminating the novel coronavirus".<sup>4</sup> In his speech, Kim Jong Un attributed the victory to the party's quarantine policy and the country's crisis response strategy, stating that strict containment and a strong national drug supply coupled with the "highly organized and self-aware nature" of the North Korean people had led to thorough enforcement of the quarantine policies. Kim Jong Un declared that the emergency anti-epidemic system would be downgraded to a "normal" level, but warned that the declaration of victory over COVID-19 did not mean that the risk of contagion had been completely eliminated. He further stated that the epidemic must remain one of three major crises under constant focus, alongside the crises of war and natural disasters.



Kim Jong Un holding a speech at the National Meeting of Reviewing Emergency Anti-Epidemic Work on 11 August 2022.

Source: KCNA<sup>5</sup>

## A. Border Tightening

Kim Jong Un and some of the officials highlighted the need to reinforce the national border closure despite the country's "victory" in the battle against the COVID-19 outbreak. Kim Jong Un stated in his 11 August 2022 speech that the nation must focus on maintaining quarantine barriers built like "ironclad bars" across borders, coasts and in the air to prevent the virus from regaining entrance into the country until the end of the global health crisis.<sup>6</sup> This was echoed both other 11 August 2022 speakers including Ri Chung Gil, department director of the Central Committee of the WPK and commander of the state emergency anti-epidemic headquarters, who confirmed that the anti-epidemic headquarters will control the potential inroads of the virus by "perfectly locking down the front, borderline and coastal areas, sea and air."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Cabinet Premier Kim Tok Hun stated that the DPRK "should tighten the closure of border, frontline and coastline and keep maximum vigilance to prevent any slight gap or defect in the anti-epidemic work."<sup>8</sup> Minister of National Defense Ri Yong Gil similarly expressed a will to "fulfill guard duty in the areas near the front, border, coasts, the sea and air, in particular, and to ensure that there would be neither security gap in national defense nor defect in the anti-epidemic work".<sup>9</sup>

This focus on reinforcing border closures indicates that North Korea, despite expressing confidence that the country has managed the epidemic in a "stable manner", remains vigilant about a surge or another epidemic outbreak, and that its borders will remain closed for the foreseeable future. It was further reflected in North Korea's subsequent quarantine guidelines, which lifted obligatory mask-wearing and social distancing and normalized the epidemic prevention system "except frontline areas and borderline cities and counties" on 13 August 2022.<sup>10</sup> Vice-premier Ri Song Hak's decision to praise Kim Jong Un during his speech at the review meeting for ensuring that a military airport was utilized for "importing materials indispensable to the economic construction" while strengthening

anti-epidemic work, may indicate that the continued lockdown could exclude PRC-DPRK rail-based trade. The military airport referenced in the speech is likely Uiju airfield outside Sinuiju, which has been repurposed into a disinfection center for train cargo entering from Dandong, China.<sup>11</sup>

## B. COVID-19 Origins

During her speech, Kim Yo Jong, sister of Kim Jong Un and Vice Department Director of the Central Committee of the WPK, reiterated the previous North Korean claim that the COVID-19 pandemic entered the country via leaflets delivered by balloons across the DMZ.<sup>12</sup> Cross-border leafleting was criminalized by South Korean law in early 2021, but the defector group Fighters for a Free North Korea reportedly restarted their campaign in April 2022.<sup>13</sup> Stating that the transmission of the virus had been initiated by South Korea to escalate confrontation with the DPRK, Kim Yo Jong called the act a "crime against humanity" and expressed that, while under review, the "countermeasure must be a deadly retaliatory one".<sup>14</sup> She further stated that "if the enemy persists in such dangerous deeds as fomenting the inroads of virus into our Republic, we will respond to it by not only exterminating the virus but also wiping out the south Korean authorities" and referred to South Korea as the "invariable principal enemy of us".<sup>15</sup>

Kim Yo Jong has previously used similarly harsh language for statements aimed at Seoul. Three points in particular indicate this speech may be considered largely rhetorical, and not indicative of any impending escalatory action: 1) the reportedly "deadly" counteractions remain under review; 2) the threat of wiping out the South Korean authorities remain conditional; and 3) the threats against South Korea do not have a final point and lead straight into a call to step up ideological/class education. It should be noted that Minister of National Defense Ri Yong Gil's speech contained nothing about South Korea that would seem to indicate that North Korea is actively looking to escalate in the immediate future. However, Kim Yo Jong's speech seems to lay the groundwork for escalating tensions in the future.

### C. Kim Jong Un's Health

Kim Yo Jong's speech implied, but stopped short of acknowledging, that Kim Jong Un may have contracted COVID-19 at some point, by saying he was "severely ill from high fever during the quarantine war but did not lie down even for a second while thinking only of his responsibility for the people".<sup>16</sup> It did not specify that he had tested positive for COVID-19.

Kim Yo Jong appears to have deliberately made the point of raising Kim Jong Un's ill health conditions to highlight one of the key themes of this conference—Kim Jong Un's leadership and sacrifice for the people during the pandemic.



*Kim Yo Jong holding a speech at the National Meeting of Reviewing Emergency Anti-Epidemic Work on 11 August 2022.*

*Source: Rodong Sinmun<sup>17</sup>*

## D. National Public Health Situation

Kim Jong Un stated in his speech at the 11 August 2022 meeting that the total number of deaths stood at 74, that all confirmed cases of COVID-19 had been Omicron BA.2 and that no other subtypes or mutations had entered the country. Department Director Ri Chung Gil further stated in his speech that 4.7 million “fevered persons” had completely recovered within three months after the introduction of the “maximum emergency anti-epidemic system” and that the fatality rate was 0.0016%.<sup>18</sup> If accurate, this would be by far the lowest fatality rate in the world. South Korea, where nearly 90% of the population is vaccinated, has a fatality rate of 0.13%.<sup>19</sup> However, international medical experts have expressed doubt over these recovery rates and exclamations of stabilization of the epidemic.<sup>20</sup> The DPRK’s fragile health infrastructure, its lack of antiviral treatments and its limited medical testing capabilities make the country ill-equipped to respond to severe illnesses and contagions.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the general health of the population is poor: roughly 40% suffer from malnutrition, and diseases such as tuberculosis are prevalent.<sup>22</sup> Given these factors, previous expert assessments predicted between 34,000-125,000 deaths from COVID-19 during the first wave of Omicron BA.2.<sup>23</sup> Further, Kim Jong Un acknowledged in his speech at the review meeting that the material and technological foundation of the national health system is weak, and that the country lacked quarantine experience.<sup>24</sup> DPRK media has reported no new “fever” cases since 29 July 2022,<sup>25</sup> and has reported zero active “fever” cases since 4 August 2022.<sup>26</sup>

The national vaccination rate of the DPRK is unknown. Kim Jong Un stated in his speech that the population remained unvaccinated; however, the Global Vaccine Alliance (GAVI) stated in early June 2022 that they were “aware” that the DPRK had accepted vaccines from China and begun inoculation, without providing any details.<sup>27</sup>



### III. IMPLICATIONS FOR A POTENTIAL NEXT NUCLEAR WEAPONS TEST

Available commercial satellite images have indicated increased levels of activity at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, particularly around the secondary entrance to Tunnel 3, since February 2022.<sup>28</sup> Sung Kim, US special representative to North Korea, stated on 7 June 2022 that preparations had been made at the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site and that a test may take place at “any time”.<sup>29</sup> The ROK foreign minister Park Jin stated on 13 June 2022 that he believed North Korea had “finished preparation for another nuclear test”.<sup>30</sup> Three of North Korea’s previous six nuclear tests have taken place in September and October. Five tests have been conducted within 10 months of a satellite launch or an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test. The DPRK tested a total of four ICBMs in February and March 2022, placing the period August to November as a plausible period for the next nuclear test.

It is possible that the DPRK leadership’s announcement of the end of the COVID-19 epidemic may have removed an obstacle to a next nuclear test. The ONN team assessed in a previous publication that the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak in the DPRK could delay a nuclear test as the leadership focused resources on combating the virus.<sup>31</sup> It was also considered that a nuclear weapons test in the middle of a national epidemic may have been viewed unfavorably by a domestic audience. The official proclamation of the end of the COVID-19 epidemic in the country indicates that resources allocated to combatting the virus could be available for other priority tasks, possibly to include a

nuclear test. Finally, with this proclamation, the DPRK domestic audience would be unlikely to view a nuclear test as competing for State attention.

However, two events unrelated to COVID-19 may further impact the timing of the next nuclear test: (1) the monsoon season, which may continue into September; and (2) the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which will reportedly be held in the second half of 2022.

#### A. Monsoon Season

It is possible that the DPRK may decide to delay the timing of its next nuclear test in light of the country’s ongoing efforts to minimize damage from floods during the current monsoon season. The heavy rains have reportedly impacted sites related to North Korea’s nuclear programme.

According to 38North satellite imagery analysis of the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site, repair work on the road leading to tunnels number 2 and 4 appears to have been halted by a landslide likely caused by the heavy rains in the late June to mid-July 2022 period, leaving the roads inaccessible to vehicles.<sup>32</sup> Not only do flooding and landslides complicate preparations, transportation and personnel movement, but humidity and poor weather conditions could negatively affect testing conditions. In this case, the DPRK might choose to delay the test until after the monsoon season to avoid less-than-ideal nuclear test conditions.

According to Beyond Parallel satellite imagery analysis, increased water levels in the Kuryong River running through the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Centre could be observed in July 2022, although no damage to pump houses was visible.<sup>33</sup> The Yongbyon complex may have been further impacted by the heavy rains around 7 and 14 to 16 August 2022. While Yongbyon is likely not directly involved in execution of a nuclear test, materials or personnel might need to be transported to or from the facility in order to carry out testing. As is the case with the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site, flooding and landslides could complicate or prevent this transportation or timely reparations, which may cause the DPRK to delay a possible nuclear test until the end of the monsoon season.

Depending on the timing of the monsoon season's end, conducting a nuclear test may not be plausible until at least September 2022.

## B. The 20th Party Congress of the CPC

The 20th Party Congress of the CPC, to be held in the second half of 2022,<sup>34</sup> is the most important political event in China in decades because it is widely expected that Chinese leader Xi Jinping will secure a groundbreaking third term.<sup>35</sup> The WPK is well aware of the importance of the 20th Party Congress, as demonstrated by a solidarity letter sent to the central committee of the CPC from the central committee of the WPK on 9 August 2022. In this letter, Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan was framed by the WPK as an "unpardonable political provocation aimed to defame the authority of the CPC and disturb the successful holding of its 20th Congress".<sup>36</sup>

So as not to disturb or pull focus from this important event, the DPRK may choose to wait to detonate its next nuclear test device until after the conclusion of the Congress. While the DPRK in September 2017 conducted its sixth nuclear test only six weeks before the 19th Party Congress of the CPC, DPRK-PRC relations have since improved, and the upcoming Party Congress may be considered of much greater significance. That said, this factor may not weigh as heavily in planning the timing of the seventh nuclear test as other factors, some of which have been mentioned above, to include operational requirements.

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


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

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