

Opening Remarks by Vice Minister of Health and Welfare at Briefing Session for Foreign Correspondents

March 9, 2020

I am grateful to the many foreign correspondents for joining the briefing arranged today.

This briefing is very significant as it provides an opportunity to explain the current status of Korea's COVID-19 outbreak and our response to it.

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Korea to date is not small. However, an important aspect of the situation is missed if we simply look at it in numerical terms.

In fact, most of the COVID-19 patients are from a single cluster in a single region.

Here in Korea, as you all know, COVID-19 infections spread rapidly within a certain religious organization known as the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu. Geographically, therefore, the contagion is mainly concentrated within the city of Daegu and the immediate vicinity.

Up until recently, the Korean Government has devoted a tremendous amount of its medical testing capabilities on the Daegu area and on Shincheonji members. As a result, we've managed to identify and isolate most of the people who've been infected with the virus in the Daegu community in a short span of time.

Moreover, we continue to monitor and control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, conducting at least 10,000 diagnostic tests nationwide each day.

Initially, the greater-than-expected rapidity and scale of the contagion caused some confusion, but now the situation is steadily coming under control. We are seeing success in our efforts to stem the spread of this infectious disease.

Of all the confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country to date, 89 percent are confined to Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do Province. And 95 percent of the cases – not counting those still under epidemiological investigation – have been linked to the Shincheonji religious community.

As such, the COVID-19 spread in Korea, despite the many cases, has been mainly confined to a single cluster in a single geographical region. This has facilitated the public health authorities' task of controlling the contagion.

In a moment, I will explain what steps are being taken in greater detail. For now, however, suffice it to say that Korea is creating a new system for responding to infectious diseases.

The traditional response to an outbreak of contagious disease has stressed the importance of locking down afflicted areas and isolating infected victims. Such an approach has had modest effectiveness, but it has such drawbacks as being close-minded, coercive and inflexible. For these reasons, we have experienced harmful consequences with democracy being undermined and active public participation in the process being reduced.

Korea, as a democratic country, values globalization and a pluralistic society. Thus, we believe we must transcend the limitations of the conventional approach to fighting infectious diseases.

For these reasons, Korea is adopting a different model for responding to contagious disease outbreaks. The key tenet of our model can be defined as “a dynamic response system for open democratic societies.”

In this regard, we consider two core values to be important.

The first is that public participation must be secured through openness and transparency.

The second is to respect creative thinking and use cutting-edge technology to develop the most effective means of response.

Korea's contagious disease response program that I am now going to introduce has the following characteristics:

First, information is disclosed transparently and rapidly.

The Government is working on various ways to ensure that the information that

citizens need to stay safe includes detailed explanations. For example, the travel histories of confirmed patients are being made public, and briefings are being conducted twice a day.

The more transparently and quickly accurate information is provided, the more the people will trust the Government. They will also act rationally for the good of the community at large.

Second, many citizens who respect an open democracy and community spirit are voluntarily taking part in the COVID-19 response effort.

With individuals maintaining good hygiene and giving others ample space as part of social distancing, the same preventative effects that would have been expected from a physical lockdown have been achieved. This way, openness is maintained as people can avoid the intrusions on their daily lives that would be imposed by mandatory lockdowns.

In the interest of community awareness, the Government is covering the financial costs for related testing and treatment instead of saddling individuals with those expenses. The Government is also reimbursing medical facilities for losses incurred from imposed quarantines.

Third, we are seeking creative solutions, and we are making full use of advanced information technology in this regard.

We have come up with some world-class best practices in our fight against the disease. These include drive-thru testing stations and epidemiological investigations supported by GPS data.

These actions have been a big help in allowing us to maintain an open society while effectively preventing further spread of the disease.

Fourth, we are conducting more diagnostic testing faster than any other country in the world.

Korea is capable of processing up to 15,000 diagnostic tests a day, and the aggregate number has reached 190,000 already. If doctors suspect a COVID-19 case, they can proceed with testing without restriction. Of course, the testing is conducted free of charge.

The enormous testing capability allows us to identify patients early and minimize the harmful effects. Indeed, this is the most important means of fending off a contagious disease outbreak. Ironically, the large number of confirmed cases in Korea has enabled us to prove our excellent ability to fight the virus. This includes our superb diagnostic testing capabilities and thorough epidemiological investigation.

Finally, our highly-trained, outstanding medical professionals and our top-notch medical institutions are devoted to the task at hand with a sense of mission.

The Korean Government, through the process of responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, is convinced that our model is working effectively. We are now confident that we will overcome COVID-19 while minimizing damage.

Those infected with COVID-19 suffer cold-like symptoms; it is highly contagious from the start, and the rate of spread is rapid. Such characteristics render the traditional response to contagious diseases – which stresses the need for physical lockdown and isolation – ineffective. That simply delays the timing of the initial entry, and subsequently makes blocking the spread difficult.

With a transparent and open society as the goal, we recommend a response system that blends voluntary public participation with creative applications of advanced technology. The world now faces a common threat, COVID-19. Close collaboration through solidarity will enable us to defeat our common enemy. Korea, as a member of the global community, will share the experience and knowledge gained thus far with the rest of the world. I'd like today's event to be of assistance to other countries who are confronting this issue. Thank you.