

North Korea's Kim praises Xi for outbreak gains

09/05/2020 15:41 by admin

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China is North Korea's most significant ally and economic lifeline, accounting for about 90% of the country's external trade. (Korea Summit Press Pool via AP, File) FILE

Bangkok: North Korea says leader Kim Jong Un sent a personal message to Chinese President Xi Jinping praising what he described as China's success in getting its coronavirus epidemic under control.

The report by North Korea's state media followed an assessment by South Korea's spy agency that the pandemic is hurting the North's economy, already crippled by decades of policy failures and U.S.-led international sanctions over its nuclear weapons program.

China is North Korea's most significant ally and economic lifeline, accounting for about 90% of the country's external trade. With China's COVID-19 caseload easing, some experts say the North could reach out to China to reinstate cross-border trade that had been significantly reduced in past months.

The Korean Central News Agency says Kim in the message to Xi "congratulated him, highly appreciating that he is seizing a chance of victory in the war against the unprecedented epidemic."

It did not specify when the message was sent. South Korea's spy agency recently told lawmakers in a closed-door briefing that trade volume between North Korea and China in the first quarter declined 55% from a year earlier.

In March, the bilateral trade volume suffered a 91% drop, lawmakers cited the agency as saying. North took intense action to avoid an outbreak by closing its borders in January and quarantining thousands of people. It still contends it has had no cases of infection, though many outsiders doubt that.

A South Korean lawmaker who discussed the spy agency's findings earlier this week said the National Intelligence Service cannot rule out an outbreak in the North. But the agency concluded skyrocketing food prices and panic-buying in Pyongyang and a reduction in Kim Jong Un's public appearances this year were evidence of the impact, the lawmaker said.

South Korea reported 12 fresh cases of the new coronavirus, its first increase above 10 in five days. Figures by the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention brought national totals to 10,822 cases and 256 deaths.

Three of the new cases were detected in the hardest-hit city of Daegu, and three were passengers screened at airports. As its caseload has slowed, South Korea has relaxed social distancing guidelines, allowing sports to resume and preparing to reopen schools.

South Korea's professional soccer league will begin its new season on Friday, following Tuesday's baseball openers. Still, health officials warning of new infections urged people to reconsider visiting their elderly parents on Friday, which is national parents' day, and over the weekend.

China announced one new virus case, a local infection in Jilin province, and 16 new cases of people who are not

showing symptoms. Just 260 people remain hospitalized and 890 are in isolation as suspected cases or for having tested positive but without showing symptoms.

China has reported 4,633 deaths among 82,886 cases. Also, China's football teams will temporarily cut players' pay to help teams manage losses. The head of China's football association, Chen Xuyuan, also told state broadcaster CCTV that matches would resume on a staggered schedule but gave no dates. The United Nations is appealing to governments, companies and billionaires to contribute to a \$6.7 billion appeal to fight the coronavirus pandemic in vulnerable countries.

U.N. humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock warns that a failure to help could lead to a hunger pandemic, famine, riots and more conflict. Lowcock said there is already evidence of incomes plummeting and jobs disappearing, food supplies falling and prices soaring, and children missing vaccinations and meals and the peak of the pandemic isn't expected to hit the world's poorest countries for three to six months.

- AP