

South Korea tightens Seoul curbs after record death toll

21 December 2020



A man is swabbed for coronavirus at a testing facility in Seoul

South Korea banned gatherings of more than four people in the capital and surrounding areas Monday as the country recorded its highest daily coronavirus death toll since the epidemic began.

While South Korea has suffered relatively lightly compared to other nations, officials said a surge in infections had left hospitals in the capital region with a chronic shortage of intensive care beds.

The country reported 926 new [coronavirus](#) cases Monday, and the death toll was now at 698 after 24 people died in the past 24 hours—a record high since the emergence of the epidemic.

South Korea had previously been held up as a model of how to combat the virus, with the public largely following social distancing and other rules.

But a resurgence centred on the capital and surrounding areas has seen daily cases climb to over 1,000 several times in the past week, and acting mayor Seo Jung-hyup said there were only four empty beds left in intensive care units in Seoul.

At least two Seoul residents died of the disease while waiting to be hospitalised this month, according to city authorities.

Starting from Wednesday, Seoul and surrounding regions—home to half the country's 52 million people—will ban most gatherings of five people or more for about two weeks, officials said.

The order applies to both indoors and outdoors, Seo said, adding the situation requires "extreme self-control, sacrifice, and patience".

"If we do not tackle the explosive number of cases, what New York and London had to endure—empty streets and city lockdowns—can also happen in Seoul," he said.

The latest spike came despite the government's tightening of social distancing rules in the area earlier this month.

South Korea endured one of the worst early COVID-19 outbreaks outside mainland China, but brought it broadly under control with an intensive "trace, test and treat" approach.

The new measures are the strictest imposed in the country since the start of the epidemic, although the central government has yet to raise the nationwide alert level to the highest.

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APA citation: South Korea tightens Seoul curbs after record death toll (2020, December 21) retrieved 2 February 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-south-korea-tightens-seoul-curbs.html>

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