DJIA 23756.87 1.57% ▲ S&P 500 2814.81 1.93% ▲ Nasdaq 8406.58 2.61% ▲ U.S. 10 Yr 25/32 Yield 0.733% ▲ Crude Oil 21.39 4.55% ▼

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COVID-19 Lessons from South Korea

By Andrew Restuccia

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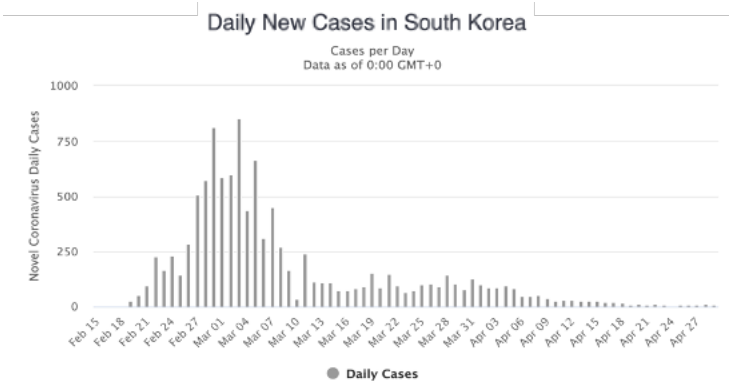
Once an epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea has emerged as a sign of hope and a model to emulate.

How things unfolded from there, unfortunately for the US and UK, has been strikingly different.The country of 50 million appears to have greatly slowed its epidemic; it reported only 14 new cases today, down from 1,016 at its peak on 01 March. To compare, the UK is reporting around 4,000 new cases a day, and the US is reporting between 20,000 to 30,000. But while numbers in South Korea have fallen, in the US and UK they have been rising exponentially (around 20,000 new cases a day a week ago, about 8,000 new cases the month before that). South Korea, the US and the UK all reported their first Covid-19 cases around the same time: on January 20, January 21, and January 31, respectively.



Between 19 January and 18 February, South Korea had recorded a total of 30 cases and no deaths. That slow increase in infections soon changed – 18 February was the day it recorded its 31st case. Within 10 days, there were more than 2,300 cases.

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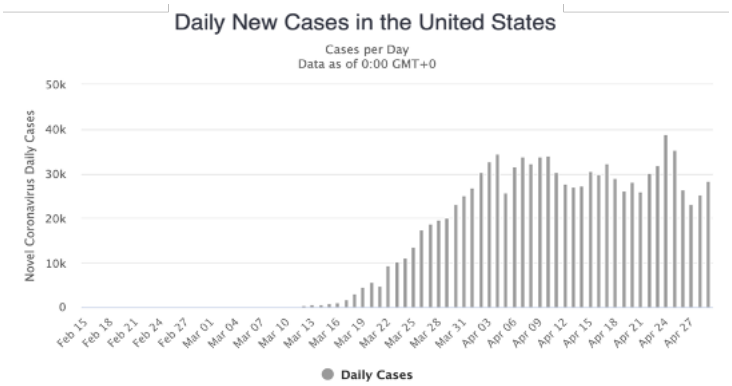

South Korea's response can largely be attributed to the lessons learned from MERS. In 2015, South Korea experienced a sudden and unexpected outbreak of MERS – Middle East Respiratory Syndrome--which is also caused by a coronavirus. It was the largest MERS outbreak outside of the Middle East, and led to 185 confirmed cases in South Korea.

The first South Korean patient, a 68-year-old man returning from the Middle East, was diagnosed with MERS nine days after he sought medical treatment. He was treated at three health facilities before he was diagnosed. The virus had infected 186 and killed 36, including patients hospitalized for other ailments, visitors, and hospital staff. The South Korean government at the time was criticized for downplaying the significance of the virus.

South Korea's caseload has been slowing recently, compared with early March when it recorded hundreds of new cases every day. South Korea reported 14 additional cases of the coronavirus over the past 24 hours, a continued downward trend in new infections in the country. The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a statement Sunday the additional cases increased the country's total to 10,752.

It says 8,854 of patients have since recovered and been released from quarantine. The center says that South Korea's death toll from the coronavirus increased by three to 244.

The initial spike in infections was originally credited to "Patient 31" who was what is known as a super-spreader – someone who passes the infection on to a larger number of people. In the days before her diagnosis, Patient 31 came in contact with hundreds of people, enabling the virus to act as fuel for an outbreak.

Regardless, South Korea has kept mortality rates to just over one percent, among the lowest in the world. As of March 30, South Korea was listed as having 9,661 cases and 158 deaths. Tragically in the US and Italy, deaths are approaching 60,000. Additionally, South Korea managed to keep businesses open and avoided an economic crisis unlike the U.S.

The country's success may hold lessons for other countries—and also a warning: Even after driving case numbers down, the country is braced for a resurgence.

Seoul has proven effective in shipping out COVID-19 diagnostic tests

so far, but to make the most out of its current position – both for itself and the world – will require further cooperation with other governments and keeping the virus in check.

The United States in particular is turning to South Korea to bring approximately 750,000 coronavirus tests to the US, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. FEMA awarded contracts to manufacturers in South Korea last week to provide approximately 750,000 tests, according to a FEMA spokesperson and federal records.