Indonesian government declares “national emergency” after downplaying coronavirus threat

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After weeks of government denials that the coronavirus had even reached Indonesia, and weeks more of official claims that adequate screening measures were in place, the country of 270 million people faces a health disaster unprecedented in scale.

At a press conference on Tuesday, Achmad Yurianto, the government’s spokesperson for COVID-19 affairs, announced 114 new infections and 14 new deaths. That brings the official total, which dramatically understates the extent of the spread, to 1,677 confirmed infections and 157 deaths. The virus has been detected in 32 of the country’s 34 provinces.

President Joko Widodo then declared a national public health emergency to be imposed until May 29.

Earlier in the day, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said the government would ban all arrivals and transits by foreign nationals in Indonesia. The country is bracing for a wave of Indonesian workers returning from Malaysia, which recently declared a national lockdown.

With the highest death rate in South-East Asia, at almost 9 percent, current numbers suggest that more people in Indonesia are dying from the virus than have recovered. The figures also suggest that only those who are seriously-ill are receiving treatment and appearing in the official statistics.

Over 80 percent of the 1,528 confirmed cases detected are on Java. This indicates the development of clusters on the densely populated island, but likely also reflects the fact that testing has largely been limited to the country’s major cities.

Over the weekend, a report published by a team from the University of Indonesia warned that the coronavirus pandemic would result in a death toll greater than that of the devastating Aceh tsunami in 2004, which killed more than 167,000 people.

The report warned that without substantial government intervention, 240,000 people could die by the end of this month. Even with a “moderate intervention” by the authorities, 48,000 may perish in April. A “high-intensity intervention” could lower the fatalities to 12,000.

On Friday, the government acknowledged that as many as 700,000 people may already have come into contact with the virus. Achmad Yurianto, an Essex University professor of applied mathematics, said that up to half the population, or 135 million people, could be infected by mid-May.

Government measures, including limitations on mass gatherings and calls for people to practice social distancing, combined with a criminal lack of testing, have drawn heavy criticism from medical experts.

The critics have repeatedly spoken of the urgent need to impose obligatory social distancing, close down schools and workplaces, ban travel between provinces and limit public transport services. Their pleas, however, have thus far fallen on deaf ears.

“What we feared most is that our health system cannot cope with the pandemic,” Iwan Ariawan, a biostatistics lecturer at the University of Indonesia, told the *Jakarta Globe*. “In this regard, the number of our hospitals, hospital beds, ICUs [intensive care units], ventilators, and isolation rooms, would not be adequate if we do not implement the proper intervention.”

Warnings issued by the Indonesian Doctors’ Association, which has urged the government for weeks to provide more funds for healthcare, have taken on an increasingly desperate tone. Its spokesperson Halik Malik said last Friday: “The government’s plans are in tatters and they appear to be avoiding a lockdown. Our health system is not as strong as [in] other countries.”

Images on social media of doctors and medical workers

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threatening to go on strike have been widely shared. At least eight doctors have died of the virus. In a tweet that soon became viral, the brother-in-law of one of the deceased doctors attacked the government's handling of the crisis, saying: "The limited amount of protective equipment is hard to forgive."

Indonesia had fewer than four doctors for every 10,000 people, according to World Health Organization data from 2017.

There was speculation in the local media on Sunday that the capital's metropolitan area, Greater Jakarta, deemed to be the epicentre of COVID-19 within the country, was likely to close its borders for travel. The Transportation Ministry, having curtailed some services, is reportedly discussing further restrictions on public transport in Greater Jakarta.

On Monday, however, Widodo again rejected calls for a lockdown of Jakarta. The decision is motivated solely by concern for corporate profit interests, including those of major transnational corporations with operations in the city. It means that the city's almost ten million workers, many of whom live and work in densely-populated areas, are imperilled by unchecked community transmissions.

While some workers, including in office-based and professional sectors, have been able to work from home, this has not been an option for the vast majority, who are employed in industries that rely on workers being on site. The extreme shortage of protective equipment, in a situation where the virus is known to have been spreading undetected for at least a month, has meant that workers must risk their lives on the job.

Economic instability in the major cities and fears of contracting the virus are forcing thousands, many unemployed or evicted from their dwellings, to return to their hometowns in the countryside. This mass exodus to the country, known as *mudik*, will be particularly widespread during the religious holiday period of Idul Fitri in late May. It could greatly accelerate the spread of the disease.

This year's Idul Fitri season was expected to see around 20 million city dwellers travel to towns and villages. Jodi Mahardi, spokesperson for the Coordinating Maritime Affairs and Investment Ministry, told the *Jakarta Post* last Thursday that a national ban on the *mudik* was being "seriously considered" by the government, but none has been announced.

Rural areas in Central Java province are witnessing an abrupt surge of incoming traffic, as tens of thousands of Jakarta residents continue to arrive by bus. Provincial governors across Java have announced their intention to monitor *mudik* travellers and prioritise them as the first to undergo COVID-19 tests, once more testing kits arrive from China.

At Tuesday's press conference, Widodo announced a new regulation that "gives financial authorities the power to take extraordinary steps to ensure public health, save the national economy and the financial system."

The regulation would waive a cap on a maximum budget deficit for three years. A stimulus package of $US24.9 billion, which includes significant corporate tax cuts and handouts, will widen the 2020 budget deficit to as much as 5.07 percent of gross domestic product, the largest in more than a decade.

Last year, Widodo introduced a series of pro-business policies, including the privatisation of water supplies, bills slashing regulations over corporate control of land and natural resources, and the further neutering of the state's anti-corruption body. His administration's agenda was met with opposition in the form of mass student protests across the country last September.

The increased presence of military figures and Suharto-era generals in the national cabinet, announced in October, was a clear expression of the Indonesian ruling elite's fear of further social upheavals.

Now, confronted with this pandemic, Widodo's cabinet has given permission to the national police to "take proportionate law enforcement steps." The president warned at the press conference: "We are preparing the option of martial law under abnormal circumstances. We are prepared to take such a measure, but not under the current circumstances of course."

His statements are a warning that growing anger over the government's grossly negligent response to the pandemic will be met with state violence and repression.

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