

Thai government introduces lockdowns amid criticisms of its pandemic response

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Within just a month, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Thailand has leapt from a few dozen to over 2,000, prompting the military-backed government to introduce more stringent social isolation measures.

On Friday, police and soldiers began to enforce an indefinite curfew, lasting each night from 10:00 p.m. until 4:00 a.m. Curfew exemptions are made only for essential staff, including health workers, those involved in transporting medical supplies, and postal staff.

Police, army and other security forces have set up 923 checkpoints around the country. Curfew violators can be punished with up to two years in prison and a fine of \$US1,200.

Earlier that day, the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand declared a temporary ban on all incoming flights, to be effective until Monday.

Since March 1, growing numbers of Thai citizens have returned after being infected abroad. A large portion of the infections originated at a Muslim convention in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Authorities have placed in quarantine nearly 2,000 people who came into contact with those infected with the virus.

A nationwide state of emergency was invoked last week until April 30, which could be extended if conditions worsen. On Monday, another 51 cases and three deaths were recorded, in one of the sharpest spikes in recent weeks. The national total currently stands at 2,258 confirmed infections, with 27 fatalities. Cases have been detected in 66 of the country's 76 provinces.

Government responses have focused on the gradual implementation of a lockdown ever since a huge spike of 188 new cases was reported on March 22. As explained in the *Bangkok Post*, the majority of those infections were connected to a previous cluster of cases

from the Lumpinee Boxing Stadium in Bangkok.

Following this sharp rise, soaring by a rate of 33 percent daily, the government ramped up social distancing and urged the public to stay at home. Bangkok residents who had planned to return to their home villages and towns in the country were advised to stay in the city. All provincial governors have been ordered to closely monitor people who return from the capital.

Over the past two weeks the government has shut down schools, shopping malls and entertainment venues. Bangkok's popular markets are closed, along with the city's parks.

The latest measures are a belated step-up from previous coronavirus regulations. The government has come under constant criticism from medical experts for its slow response to the crisis. Some medical experts have condemned its limited 6-hour curfew as inadequate. Authorities failed to introduce a rigorous testing regime as recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Despite being the first country outside China to report a case of the novel coronavirus nearly three months ago, testing rates in Thailand have been among the lowest in South-East Asia. Hospitals quickly became overwhelmed with frightened visitors seeking coronavirus tests after the sharp rise in late March. The current demand for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests means that kits are in short supply in the major city hospitals, and virtually non-existent in rural health centres.

The WHO has stressed the importance of testing since the coronavirus first appeared in Wuhan, particularly with regards to historically oppressed regions of the world with less developed health systems.

“What we really need to focus on is finding those who are sick, those who have the virus, and isolate them, find their contacts and isolate them,” Dr Mike Ryan said in an interview with the BBC this week. “If we don’t put in place the strong public health measures now, when those movement restrictions and lockdowns are lifted, the danger is the disease will jump back up.”

Of the 51 new cases on Monday, at least 13 were health workers, who are imperilled by an insufficient supply of protective equipment. The *Pattaya Mail* reported at the beginning of the week that Thailand’s state pharmaceutical enterprise is expecting 400,000 sets of N95 masks and 400,000 sets of protective suits to arrive from China over the coming days. Estimates suggest, however, that this supply will likely be exhausted in less than a month.

Thailand’s first field hospital for coronavirus patients is now in operation. The high demand for field hospitals has already led to a student dormitory at Thammasat University’s campus in Rangsit being transformed into a 308-bed facility.

As the number of cases is predicted to rise when testing increases, the immediate construction of more field hospitals will become a dire necessity, in order to relieve the pressure on under-funded healthcare facilities in cities and rural towns across the country.

The working class and the poor have been hardest hit. Social distancing is an impossible task in the densely populated neighbourhoods of Bangkok and other major cities.

Khlong Toey, Bangkok’s largest slum community, is home to around 100,000 people. Under conditions where makeshift houses are squeezed between narrow passages, and sometimes one or several families live together in a single room, the transmission of the virus could reach disastrous levels.

The impact of the virus is underscoring Thailand’s massive levels of social inequality. A Credit Suisse report last year named the country the most unequal in the world, with the richest 1 percent of the population owning 66.9 percent of the nation’s wealth.

The shutdown of factories has left tens of thousands of migrant labourers from Myanmar and Cambodia out of work. With the Thai government only offering limited assistance and denying them welfare due to their migrant status, many are afraid they will be unable to pay daily expenses and care for their families.

Government measures are focused on propping-up the economy so that profits continue to flow to the largest corporations and the transnational conglomerates that have a base in the country. On March 10, the government unveiled a stimulus package worth \$US12.7 billion, which includes tax deductions and cash handouts for businesses.

An article from the *Economist* this week nevertheless revealed that the Bank of Thailand expects the economy to shrink by 5.3 percent this year, the sharpest contraction in 22 years.

Almost 22 million people have registered for miserly government grants to those unemployed or whose work is otherwise impacted by the pandemic.

Workers in the tourism sector, which accounts for as much as 14 to 18 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), face a catastrophe. Millions of others confront the imminent prospect of being laid off.

The Thai government is a military junta that came to power by staging a coup in 2014 and has stayed in office by rigging the national election in 2019.

Amid the deepening crisis, it has desperately sought to deflect mounting social and political opposition. The government has sought to stoke anti-Chinese xenophobia and has also blamed the rapid spread of the virus on white tourists and expatriates.

Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul has, on numerous occasions, accused Westerners of being “dirty” and refusing to wear face masks. According to the *Thaiger*, a Phuket newspaper, he wrote on his Twitter account: “This is the reason our country is being infected all around. We should be more careful of the *farang* [i.e. Westerners] than Asians.” The tweet was deleted only hours later after being widely condemned.

The promotion of nationalism is a clear sign that the government fears widespread anger over its handling of the crisis. The prominence of the military in enforcing necessary social distancing and lockdown measures is a warning of preparations to repress mass opposition from the working class and the poor.



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