Indonesian authorities announce limited restrictions, despite the alarming spread of COVID-19

Owen Howell
14 April 2020

While still refusing to impose a full lockdown, the Indonesian government introduced further social restrictions last week, in a bid to stem the spread of COVID-19.

An order was signed on Tuesday enabling the closure of schools and all non-essential workplaces in Jakarta, the nation's epicentre of the virus outbreak. Apart from the commercial shutdown, a ban on public gatherings of more than five people was announced, as well as increased police patrols to enforce compliance with physical distancing.

The new restrictions, however, did not include a ban on domestic travel, even though there is the prospect of a mass exodus from major cities.

On Sunday Indonesia reported its largest daily jump in coronavirus cases and fatalities, with 399 new infections and 46 more deaths. This brings the total to 4,241 confirmed cases and 373 deaths, the highest death toll in Asia outside China. Greater Jakarta, the capital's metropolitan area, is the source of two-thirds of all reported cases and deaths throughout the country.

The high death rate of roughly 8.9 percent, together with the country's limited testing capacity, indicates that the real numbers are likely to be much greater. The current figures are based on only 16,500 tests, in a country of over 273 million people. Indonesia has climbed from zero confirmed cases to 1,200 in less than a month, and over 100 deaths.

Many cases and deaths are likely going undetected as Jakarta experienced a 40 percent rise in funerals in March. Nearly 4,400 burials occurred throughout the month, according to a Reuters review of statistics from the city's Department of Parks and Cemeteries. It will never be known for certain how many of these were coronavirus victims.

Hospital staff and undertakers in Jakarta have taken special precautions with the bodies of 438 people they suspect died from COVID-19 between March 6 and April 2, according to the governor's office.

In preparation for an expected wave of deaths over the coming weeks, local administrations are escalating construction of burial plots across their communities. Coffin makers in Jakarta have been ordered by provincial authorities to drastically increase their output.

The enormous scale of the crisis in Indonesia is a direct result of the government's criminal neglect when the virus outbreak first emerged over two months ago. The *Jakarta Post* revealed in a series of articles that the national and provincial governments knew about a surge of pneumonia-related cases in January, but kept the facts hidden from the public.

Anies Baswedan, governor of Jakarta, reflected later on the government policy to conceal the truth, saying in a radio interview: "We never told the media. I got the data every two days and the numbers went up daily. I knew then we must have [coronavirus] cases."

The government only announced the first cases on March 2. Shortly after the announcement, President Joko Widodo was compelled to admit that authorities had withheld information from the public to "avoid panic."

Following the first reported cases, government officials pursued a campaign of trivialising the deadly nature of the virus by spreading false information.

The home affairs minister suggested people could avoid contracting the virus by eating bean sprouts and broccoli. Widodo himself promoted drinking *jamu*, a traditional herbal drink. As recently as last Friday, Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Pandjaitan, urged people not to worry about the pandemic, referring to unsubstantiated claims that coronavirus cannot survive in tropical climates.

The lack of government efforts to seriously educate the public on the danger of the virus has forced general practitioners and medical students to travel through poor neighbourhoods, providing much needed information on social distancing and personal protection for those who still have to work.

In the meantime, a deficit in hospital beds, medical staff

© World Socialist Web Site

and intensive care facilities has raised concerns the coronavirus crisis could push Indonesia's health system to the brink.

Indonesia had fewer than four doctors and 12 hospital beds for every 10,000 people, according to World Health Organization (WHO) data from 2017. Moreover, it is estimated to have less than three intensive care beds per 100,000 people.

At least 24 doctors working with coronavirus patients were confirmed dead by the Indonesian Medical Association on Monday. This shocking discovery meant that the death toll among doctors has doubled since last week.

Medical workers, in city hospitals and rural centres alike, have no alternative but to wear cheap plastic raincoats due to the shortage of protective gear and hazmat suits.

Andreas Harsono of Human Rights Watch related the experience of a nurse at the Cilandak Clinic in South Jakarta. She told him that the nurses have been divided into teams of three, but each team has only one hazmat suit. The other two workers were advised to use aprons for protection, and to wash their uniforms after each use.

Rural areas, in particular, will struggle to cope with the accelerating community transmission of the virus due to their depleted and poorly-equipped health facilities. According to news website *Liputan 6*, only 132 hospitals throughout the vast archipelago have the capacity to care for COVID-19 patients. In some provinces, such as the densely populated Sulawesi Tenggara, only one hospital is equipped to deal with the virus. At least 10 provinces, including Maluku and Papua, lack coronavirus facilities altogether.

The partial shutdown of Jakarta is predicted to send 2.5 million laid-off workers back home to the countryside.

In an interview with *Bloomberg* last week, Juharno, a manual labourer living in Jakarta, said he planned to return to his hometown in West Java with his wife and child. "I will be out of work soon with no income. Back in my village, I won't at least have to worry about food as it's the harvest time… I don't want to wait and then be told later that I am not eligible [for cash payments]. I have no income and still got a family to feed," he said.

In an attempt to appease the anger of 5.2 million low-wage and informal workers who have lost their jobs, the government has promised meagre cash benefits of up to $US62 for the next four months.

Already many workers are leaving the cities. But in May the annual tradition of *mudik*, a mass migration of Muslims from cities to their ancestral villages during the festival of Idul Fitri, will involve tens of millions across the nation. With an estimated 33.4 million people moving to the country this year, the *mudik* could drastically worsen the spread of COVID-19 across Indonesia.

Last weekend, a report published by a team of experts from the University of Indonesia warned that as many as 240,000 people could die from the virus by the end of the month.

The Widodo administration announced last week that the *mudik* would nevertheless proceed, as the purchase of gifts and souvenirs is a huge source of revenue for businesses. Minister Luhut Pandjaitan admitted at a press conference that economic considerations had played a central role in the policy, despite the huge risks the migration poses to the lives of millions of workers and peasants.

The government's refusal to implement stricter lockdown measures is motivated by its concern over the pandemic's impact on economic activity. Indonesia's growth rate is expected to drop by half to 2.3 percent this year as a result. The financial crisis triggered by the virus has battered the country's currency, stocks and bonds.

In mid-March, the government's initial indifference to the coronavirus and its effect on public health rapidly changed into a panicked attempt to rescue the failing economy. This resulted in a stimulus package, which included corporate tax cuts and the removal of the budget deficit cap. Channel News Asia reported the amount at $US25.3 billion, with a mere $US4.5 billion allocated to funding healthcare, while the rest was aimed at propping up big business.

Such a stark prioritisation of private profit over public health underlies what has become an international trend among ruling elites: the inability of the capitalist system to meet the essential needs of working people.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site