

Indonesia passes 50,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases

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Amid a new surge in coronavirus infections and deaths, Indonesia has passed the grim milestone of 50,000 confirmed cases. The spike in infection rates has come after the government's first steps towards reopening the economy earlier this month.

The past three weeks have witnessed more than 1,000 new COVID-19 cases almost every day. Yesterday 1,240 infections were recorded, bringing the total to 51,427 cases, with 2,683 deaths. Indonesia has now surpassed Singapore as having the highest number of cases in South East Asia. The death toll remains the highest in East Asia, outside of China.

Achmad Yurianto, spokesman for the nation's COVID-19 task force, claimed that the sudden climb in official figures aligns with the country's increased testing capacity, which is now averaging close to the government's target of 20,000 tests a day.

It must be noted, however, that Indonesia's coronavirus testing rate is among the lowest in the world. Since the outbreak of the virus, it has performed just 731,781 tests in a country of over 273 million, or 2.7 tests per million people. Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, is ranked 164th in the world for its testing.

There is every indication that the real extent of the spread is significantly greater than official records suggest. The severe lack of testing across the archipelago nation has been accompanied by a proportionally high percentage of positive tests. On June 18, for example, 1,331 new infections were confirmed from testing just 10,381 people—an infection rate of nearly 13 percent.

Beginning early this month, the government pursued its plans to reopen businesses, abandoning any attempts to eradicate or even contain the virus, and placing millions of workers and their families at risk of infection and possible death. Offices, restaurants, and shopping centres have reopened, while public transportation has also resumed services. Other restrictions are expected to be

gradually lifted through July.

Prior to this, in mid-May the government began to urge workers under the age of 45 to return to work, even though a dramatic surge in cases had been reported.

The overriding concern of the Widodo administration has been to prop up the struggling banks and transnational corporations, while reserving a pittance for the health sector and welfare payments. It has refused to make the necessary investments in public health infrastructure, mass testing, contact tracing, or adequate lockdown measures. Now it is enacting a criminal policy of reopening the economy under conditions where the virus is spreading through the population.

From the outset, the Indonesian ruling class acted with utter neglect and indifference for the potentially devastating impact of the virus on workers and peasants.

Both national and provincial governments knew about a surge of pneumonia-related cases in January, shortly after the virus emerged in China, but kept the facts hidden from the public. The first two cases were announced as late as March 2. Soon afterwards, President Joko Widodo admitted that authorities had withheld information from the public to “avoid panic.”

In May, the government failed to implement significant social restrictions during the Idul Fitri religious holiday, which involves a mass exodus of city residents to the countryside. The lack of a swift travel ban allowed millions to migrate from viral hotspots—major cities such as Surabaya, Medan, Makassar, Banjarmasin, and the capital Jakarta (the country's COVID-19 epicentre)—to rural areas, resulting in a disastrous spread throughout towns and village communities.

In addition, the decision not to close non-essential businesses over the holiday period—an annual source of business revenue—revealed the government's profit-driven calculations. Scenes emerged of overcrowded markets and bustling shopping strips, during which no

physical distancing measures were imposed.

The coronavirus has now spread to all of Indonesia's 34 provinces. It took 60 days before the country had more than 10,000 confirmed cases, but the same increment was reached in only 21, 16, 10, and then nine days when the total crossed 50,000.

East Java, home to around 39 million people, has replaced Jakarta this week as the new virus epicentre. Yesterday the province reported 356 new cases, bringing its total to 10,901 cases, topping Jakarta's tally of 10,796.

On Wednesday, East Java Governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa pointed to the province's high positivity rate as an indicator that figures would continue to climb over the coming weeks. "The chance for probable cases to become positive in East Java is above 40 percent," she said, according to the *Jakarta Globe*.

Many deaths are likely going undetected, as both East Java and Jakarta have reported sharp rises in the number of funerals over the past four months. A Reuters report noted that the March burial figure for Jakarta cemeteries, which was up by 40 percent, was the highest since such data began being collected a decade ago. It will never be known for certain how many of these fatalities were coronavirus victims, but the majority were held under COVID-19 burial procedures.

In a recent visit to East Java, President Widodo ordered the provincial administration to decrease the transmission rate within two weeks. "I demand integrated and serious controls from all institutions in the region... so we can handle and lower the number of confirmed cases... within two weeks," Widodo told the press in Surabaya.

Any effort, however, to resolve the health crisis, in East Java or elsewhere, must involve an enormous expenditure in new health infrastructure and therefore cuts across the business interests that the Widodo administration represents.

Indonesia's under-resourced healthcare system is unable to cope with the new surge in infections. The chronic shortage of medical and protective equipment and facilities has meant that proper hospital care is denied to many COVID-19 cases or suspected cases who are admitted. In many cases, patients are sent home because there are simply not enough beds. In East Java, the number of ICU beds and isolation rooms in hospitals is estimated to be less than half the number of the province's active cases.

Capacity to provide treatment is far lower in poorer areas. Less than 10 percent of the nation's physicians practice in rural communities, where 45 percent of

Indonesia's population live, according to a 2018 study in the *Lancet*.

Shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) have been widely reported, with doctors in some regional areas ordered to wear plastic rain jackets. A photo of a specialist from Makassar, Dr Bernadette Albertine Francisca, wearing a flimsy rain jacket, went viral after she died from coronavirus in March.

The toll on medical workers is assuming ever greater dimensions. At least 110 nurses in East Java alone have tested positive. In an Australian Broadcasting Corporation article Thursday, the Indonesian Doctors Association confirmed that 68 doctors and nurses have died from the virus. Deputy Chairman Adib Khumaidi said the COVID-19 mortality rate for health workers in Indonesia, after this new surge, would become the highest in Southeast Asia, and perhaps even the world.

The scale of the economic crisis has seen countless hospitals cut pay for thousands of medical workers, even as they work longer hours in increasingly dangerous conditions. The Doctors Association also revealed that some have died from exhaustion due to overwork.

The pandemic's global economic impact is expected to cause Indonesia's economy to contract by 0.3 percent this year, the International Monetary Fund has forecast. National Development Planning Minister Suharso Monoarfa told a parliament hearing this week that up to 5.5 million workers, mostly in the informal sector, may permanently lose their jobs. Further, he said the poverty rate was expected to rise more than a point to 10.2 percent.



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