

Indonesia records over 1,000 COVID-19 cases every day for three weeks

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Indonesia is becoming the new COVID-19 epicentre in East Asia. Over the past three weeks, more than 1,000 new cases were recorded every day. If the current trend continues, within the next two weeks the country's official figures will surpass those of China, where the virus first broke out in January.

During the same period, the death toll similarly climbed, with between 30 and 90 fatalities confirmed each day. The numbers currently stand at 75,699 infections and 3,606 deaths.

Last Thursday, a new record was reached with 2,657 cases in one day. The spike was due to the discovery of a large cluster at a military academy in Bandung, West Java. Army Chief of Staff General Andika Perkasa revealed on Saturday there were 1,280 confirmed cases at the school. Of these, 991 were army cadets, while the rest were staff and their families. The vast majority showed no symptoms.

Moreover, the 2,657 cases were discovered from testing only 12,554 people, suggesting an infection rate of over 20 percent.

Indonesia's testing rate, despite a mild expansion of capacity over the past month, remains among the lowest in the world. Ranked 162nd, according to website Worldometer, it conducts only 3,789 tests per million people. In the fourth-most populous country in the world, with over 273 million people, this is highly dangerous.

The dramatic rise in figures partly corresponds to increased testing, but the government's aggressive back-to-work policy has accelerated the spread of the virus across the nation's 6,000 inhabited islands. Overcrowded urban centres have become viral hotbeds, since the large-scale reopening of workplaces, restaurants, and public transport began early last month.

In response to Thursday's spike, President Joko

Widodo labelled the situation a "red signal" but blamed the spread of the virus on the behaviour of the population. He claimed that transmission would rise if the public did not cooperate with prevention measures.

The government is seeking to divert popular attention from its own track record of mixed messages and blatant misinformation about the virus. COVID-19 taskforce spokesman Achmad Yurianto said the term "new normal," widely used by the government to justify the return to work, had created complacency among people.

Since the start of the pandemic, politicians, religious leaders and other authority figures have either trivialised the virus or touted quack cures, undermining efforts by health professionals to provide clear information to the public. This has resulted in confusion and even indifference among masses of workers and peasants.

Government ministers have variously advocated bean sprouts and broccoli to avoid contracting the virus. Widodo himself promoted drinking *jamu*, a traditional herbal drink. Others asserted that the coronavirus cannot survive in tropical climates.

Agriculture Minister Syahrul Yasin Limpo was condemned last week by experts for claiming a necklace made from eucalyptus could help prevent transmission. The necklaces have been developed by the government and will be mass-produced in August.

In February, Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto, a military doctor and radiologist, attributed the country's lack of COVID-19 cases to religious prayer. After the first confirmed cases in March, however, Widodo admitted that the government was aware of coronavirus infections in Indonesia as early as January, but concealed data to "avoid panic."

National coronavirus watchdog Kawal COVID-19

showed that, as of Thursday, there were at least 7,360 deaths among suspected COVID-19 patients. These deaths were not counted in the official death toll. As many provincial governments do not release such data, the real number is undoubtedly much higher.

The severe shortage of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests has led to the proliferation of rapid antibody tests, which are known to produce false negatives. But even these cheaper testing kits—at a price ceiling of \$US10.49, set by the Health Ministry—are unaffordable for large sections of workers. *Kompas* reported last week that private hospitals in Central Java were ignoring regulations and charging up to \$US35 per test kit.

While East Java has replaced Jakarta as the country's epicentre, the capital is witnessing a resurgence after lockdown measures were abandoned. Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan announced on Sunday that the city had recorded 404 new cases, its highest one-day spike since the outbreak began. He said the city's positivity rate had doubled overnight to 10.5 percent, while 66 percent of new cases detected since June were asymptomatic. This indicates that the spread has gone far beyond the official statistics.

Jakarta has officially recorded 658 deaths, but the probable number of deaths reached 2,152 last Monday, according to data from *corona.jakarta.go.id*. Citing an increase in the city's burials, Governor Anies told the *Sydney Morning Herald* he believed an extra 3,000 Jakartans died from the virus in March and April alone, when the official toll was 414.

In addition to the military academy in Bandung, clusters are appearing across West Java province. A factory in Cikarang city's industrial zone, run by consumer goods giant PT Unilever Indonesia, was forced to close its tea-based beverages plant on June 26 after workers confirmed positive. In a workplace of just 265 employees, 21 had contracted the virus.

Throughout the reopening, the government taskforce has downplayed the transmission through factories, offices and other workplaces, relying on the state's chronic lack of testing.

In his daily briefings, spokesman Yuriyanto has heralded many of the country's 34 provinces as "green zones," with no or minimal infection rates. On June 29, he said 13 provinces had reported zero case in a single day. These provinces, however, have the lowest testing

rates, some as low as 94 tests per million people.

Professor Pandu Riono, an epidemiologist at the University of Indonesia, urged the government to double or triple the rate of PCR tests and abandon rapid tests altogether. He said that if the required funding is not quickly invested in testing and healthcare, the pandemic could soon accelerate to 4,000 new cases a day.

From the beginning, the Widodo administration's priority has been to address the pandemic's economic impact, at the expense of public health. The pro-business interests driving the country's early reopening are evident in the government's plans to restart the tourism industry, a huge source of corporate revenue.

The Tourism and Creative Economy Ministry will soon publish a handbook to guide the sector on how to do business in the "new normal era." Investment Minister Luhut Pandjaitan last week promoted the development of "tourism villages" around Lake Toba on Sumatra island, reassuring executives and investors that "the pandemic is not an obstacle for us to go ahead."

Authorities on the resort island of Bali began lifting limits last Thursday, allowing residents and tourists to resume public activities. The island will open to domestic arrivals on July 31 and foreign arrivals in September.

Dr I Gusti Agung Ngurah Anom, chairman of Indonesia Doctors Association in Bali's capital Denpasar, expressed concern over the resumption of flights, referring to the island's rising case numbers and already overwhelmed healthcare facilities. Balinese medical staff continue to work flat out, without removing protective clothing during eight-hour shifts. "We almost don't have time to drink or to pee, some wear Pampers [nappies]," Dr Ngurah said.



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