

COVID-19 breaks out in Taiwan, with daily case numbers above 100

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Amid the continuing global pandemic, a new wave of COVID-19 infections has broken out in Taiwan. The Taiwan Pandemic Control Centre announced on May 23 that there were 287 new cases, 284 local cases and three imported cases in Taiwan. Six people have died. This is the ninth day that there have been more than 100 new cases.

With this sudden outbreak, Taiwan is again shrouded in anxiety about the potential dangers. Amid an ongoing public debate, the government is yet to implement a full lock-down to contain its spread.

According to Taiwanese media reports, the outbreak has been traced to infections that took place in a quarantine hotel at the end of April. Some crew members from a China Airlines cargo plane returning to Taiwan were infected—at least one with the British strain, according to the Taiwan Pandemic Control Centre.

The crew members were quarantined in a hotel near the airport, but the hotel did not comply with the epidemic prevention regulations. As result, cross-infection took place between the crew members and hotel employees, which then spread to their families. Now, Taiwan is experiencing cases in which the infection source is unknown.

On May 15, Taiwan added 180 local cases and another five imported cases—a daily record of confirmed cases. Taiwan’s Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-Chung told a press conference on May 15 that the new cases were mainly concentrated in the greater Taipei area, including 89 cases in Taipei City and 75 cases in New Taipei City. The patients were between five and eighty years old.

Taiwan Prime Minister Su Tsen-chang announced the need for “larger, stronger and more timely” measures to control the outbreak. At present, Taipei City and

New Taipei City have been upgraded to the third level of restrictions—the second highest level. Gatherings of more than five people indoors and 10 people outdoors are prohibited. All entertainment venues and gyms in Taiwan are closed, and religious venues must halt their activities.

The government’s limited response has provoked public criticism, with accusations that the authorities are trying to avoid any impact on the economy by avoiding the imposition of a complete lock-down. Health minister Chen Shih-Chung has defended the government’s actions with the absurd claim that further restrictions would lead to “epidemic prevention fatigue.”

Cases have continued to escalate. Taiwan announced on May 17 that 333 new local cases had been detected in a single day—a new daily record. The government reacted by suspending the arrival of foreign tourists and flights to Taiwan from May 19 until June 18. Schools in Taipei City and New Taipei City are closed until May 28.

Over the past year, the Taiwanese government has been boasting of its lack of COVID-19 cases, holding the island up as “a model for epidemic prevention.” With US backing, it argued on the basis of this record that it should be represented at World Health Organisation meetings—a move that Beijing rejected as a breach of the One-China policy that treats Taiwan as part of China.

Despite the resurgence of the pandemic globally, Taipei continued to ease restrictions, leading to what is now a dangerous outbreak. Some health experts have criticised the lack of facilities to carry out large-scale testing. Chen Yi-min, a Taiwanese epidemiologist, accused the government of not wanting to conduct large-scale testing as the current situation was already

difficult to handle.

Su Ih-jen, the former director of the Centre for Disease Control, said that the most effective way to prevent the epidemic was vaccination, but the country had insufficient vaccines and a “golden opportunity” to protect the population had been missed.

Taiwan opened its vaccination program on March 22, but its uptake has been slow, in part because of the incessant government propaganda that Taiwan was a “safe country.” Although doctors and medical experts have stressed the importance of vaccination, the government has largely ignored that issue. To date, the vaccination rate in Taiwan is less than 1 percent—one of the lowest in a relatively developed country.

The outbreak in Taiwan—an island nation—demonstrates that there is no “safe country” while the pandemic continues to rage globally. Concerned by the latest outbreak, many people have begun to seek vaccinations but are facing a shortage. A doctor told the media that clinics are already full and vaccinations will not be available in Taipei City until June.

Taiwan is completely dependent on imports for vaccines, but with European and American countries scrambling to stock up vaccines Taiwan’s access is very limited.

Vaccine supplies are also restricted as a result of tensions between China and Taiwan, further fuelled by Washington’s increasingly aggressive confrontation with Beijing. On May 17, the Taiwan Affairs Office of China offered to provide vaccine assistance, but the offer was immediately rejected by the Taiwanese Mainland Affairs Council which declared that the Chinese government did not have to “pretend to be kind.”

Over the past year, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which favours greater independence from Beijing, has joined the US and its allies in denigrating China’s offers of vaccine assistance as “vaccine diplomacy” designed to further China’s interests. The accusation is entirely hypocritical coming from Washington which always used its foreign aid to advance its political and strategic ends.

The government’s attitude has been criticized by opposition parties, including the Kuomintang, which favours closer relations with China. Chang Hsien-yao, former deputy director of the Taiwan Mainland Affairs

Council, told the media that geopolitical factors should not come into consideration when dealing with pandemics and vaccines.

Despite the criticism, the government is maintaining its hostile attitude to Beijing. Chen Zong-yan, Taiwan’s Deputy Minister of the Interior, accused the Chinese government of spreading false news about the Taiwan pandemic.

Lee Chun-yi, Deputy Secretary-General of the Office of the President of Taiwan, branded calls on social media for large-scale testing, temporary quarantine hospitals, lock-down and the use of Chinese vaccines as part of Beijing’s psychological warfare. The purpose, he claimed, was to “intensify internal conflicts in Taiwan, reduce Taiwan’s productive forces, and hit the economy and stock market.”

Faced with the increasing case numbers and an unresolved vaccine shortage the Taiwanese government is attempting to divert public attention from its own inadequate response by trying to shift the blame to China and accusing its critics of being part of Beijing’s psychological warfare.



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