New COVID-19 variant in Vietnam highlights global danger

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Vietnam's government reported last Saturday that a highly-infectious new COVID-19 strain, a hybrid between the Indian and UK variants, is responsible for a sudden rapid spread of the disease across many parts of the country.

Until recently, Vietnam was regarded as successful, in avoiding the global pandemic, as were other countries in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia and Thailand, which also are now suffering serious outbreaks.

Vietnam's announcement highlights the reality that no country is "safe" from the worldwide resurgence of the virus. New, more transmissible and deadly mutations, which may not be effectively curtailed by existing vaccines, have been able to emerge because governments around the world have repeatedly prioritised corporate profit over public health and lives.

The rush to satisfy the demands of big business, by prematurely lifting public health restrictions and fully reopening workplaces, combined with inadequate vaccination programs and quarantine facilities, has created the conditions for millions more people to die, or suffer severe illness in coming months.

Vietnam's Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long told an online media conference on Saturday that the new hybrid strain had taken the number of variants active in Vietnam to eight. The previous seven were B.1.222, B.1.619, D614G, B.1.1.7—the variant first identified in the UK—B.1.351, A.23.1 and B.1.617.2—the one detected in India.

Long said recent outbreaks had seen the virus spreading quickly in the air, particularly in narrow, unventilated spaces. "The new variant is very dangerous," he said. Laboratory cultures of the variant showed the virus replicated itself very quickly, possibly explaining why many new cases had appeared in a short period of time in 30 of the country's 63 municipalities and provinces.

More than half of the 6,396 COVID-19 cases reported in Vietnam, since the pandemic began, have been found in the past month, according to Johns Hopkins University. So far, there have been 47 deaths—12 of them during May.

Industrial workers are being worst affected. Most of the new transmissions were found in Bac Ninh and Bac Giang, two provinces with numerous industrial zones, where hundreds of thousands of people work for major companies, including Samsung, Canon and Luxshare, a partner in assembling Apple products. One company in Bac Giang discovered that one fifth of its 4,800 workers had tested positive for the virus.

In Ho Chi Minh City, the country's largest metropolis and home to 13 million, the city administration is now planning to test all residents, setting a target of 100,000 tests a day, but that will take weeks.

Vietnam's government has since ordered a nationwide ban on all religious events, while keeping factories open. In major cities, authorities have prohibited large gatherings, and closed public parks and non-essential businesses, including restaurants, bars, clubs and spas.

Like many poorer countries, Vietnam is struggling to secure vaccines from the international pharmaceutical giants. The government so far has vaccinated only 1 million of its 96 million people with AstraZeneca shots. Last week, it signed a deal with Pfizer for 30 million doses, which will not be delivered until the third and fourth quarters of this year.

The government is also in talks with Moderna, while seeking to secure 10 million vaccine doses under the World Health Organisation-backed COVAX cost-sharing scheme. It is negotiating as well with Russia to produce the Sputnik V vaccine and working on a home-grown vaccine.

An even worse disaster is already underway in Malaysia. It managed to avoid the worst of the pandemic last year, but suffered a second wave in January-February, and has been hit by more infectious variants over the past month. In May alone, more than 1,200 deaths were recorded, compared with 471 during the whole of 2020.

Its authorities reported 9,020 new cases on Saturday, the fifth straight day of record infections, taking the total past 550,000. The number of daily new confirmed cases, per million people in Malaysia, passed the equivalent figure in India a month ago.

The number of daily fatalities has also grown, with a

record 98 on May 29, and the toll approaching 2,800. The numbers of patients in intensive care and on ventilators have hit record highs.

According to media reports, some hospitals in Malaysia's worst-affected areas have run out of mortuary space. At least two have brought in refrigerated goods containers to store the bodies of COVID-19 patients.

After long opposing calls for a national lockdown, saying the country could not afford it, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin performed a partial U-turn last Friday, ordering the shutdown of "non-essential" businesses for at least two weeks, from June 1. In a show of military force, the government will deploy 70,000 troops to enforce the lockdown.

Muhyiddin has placed Malaysia under a state of emergency since January, supposedly to curb the spread of the virus, suspending parliament and essentially putting an end to political activities. However, the inoculation rollout has been slow. About 1.7 million of the country's 32 million people had received at least one dose of a vaccine by last Thursday.

During the lockdown, millions of workers will be kept on the job in Malaysia's manufacturing sector, with 60 percent workforce capacity, despite the rising danger.

An "essential services" list covers factories producing electrical goods and electronics, oil, gas and petrochemicals, chemical products and personal protective equipment, including rubber gloves. Also on the list are food and beverages, aerospace, packaging and printing, health and medical care, personal care and cleaning supplies, as well as banking, palm oil and rubber plantations, agriculture, fishery and livestock.

People in neighbouring Thailand are experiencing a deadly third wave, with the most severe concentrations in factories, construction camps housing migrant workers, densely populated slums and the prisons. More than 2,000 cases were detected at a single factory in Phetchaburi, southwest of Bangkok, more than half of whom were migrant workers from Myanmar.

Thailand too was depicted as a coronavirus success story for most of last year, recording just under 7,000 cases and 60 deaths as 2020 drew to a close. But since April 1, the country has recorded more than 150,000 cases.

The military-backed government officially reported 4,528 new COVID-19 cases and 24 fatalities last Sunday, taking the national death toll to 1,012.

Health authorities say there are currently around 46,000 people with the coronavirus, including 400 on ventilators. Hospitals have been overwhelmed. In one publicised case, Kunlasub Watthanaphol, a well-known video gamer, died on April 23, after repeatedly pleading unsuccessfully via the government's hotlines and social media for help.

With a prison population estimated at over 307,000—three times larger than the official capacity—the prisons are dangerously overcrowded. On May 17, prisoners made up more than 70 percent of the 9,635 new cases reported nationally that day. At one prison in Chiang Mai, 61 percent of inmates tested positive.

The full scale of the prison catastrophe only came to light after several student activists, involved in anti-government protests last year, and detained on charges of insulting the king, revealed they had tested positive to the virus.

Authorities have belatedly imposed limited restrictions. In Bangkok, schools, entertainment venues, bars, cinemas, gyms, pools, and parks are closed, while office workers are being urged to work from home.

Of Thailand's population of 66 million, only about 2 million people have received a first vaccination dose and 1 million have received both doses.

The inoculation level is similar in Indonesia, the region's most populous country, where infections are soaring too and hospitalisations in isolation beds increased by 14.2 percent to 23,488, between May 20 and May 26.

As of last Friday, according to Our World in Data, the vaccination rates in Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia were less than half of those in India, which remains an epicentre of the worldwide COVID-19 disaster.

The virus mutations and spread across Southeast Asia underscore the global character of the public health emergency and the necessity for workers everywhere to unify their struggles, across national borders, and take control out of the hands of the ruling capitalist classes that have allowed this calamity to intensify worldwide.

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