

# East Timor's coronavirus pandemic worsens

Patrick O'Connor  
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East Timor has seen a significant increase in daily coronavirus infection rates, with the impoverished South East Asian country last month recording an official seven-day average of between 100 and 200 over the past four weeks.

This is the highest registered in the country during the pandemic. East Timor has an official tally of 7,310 infections since the beginning of the pandemic, but 2,396 of these occurred between May 19 and June 1.

The real rate of infection spread is almost certainly significantly higher than these numbers. Throughout the country, contact tracing is virtually non-existent. Testing remains limited, especially outside of the capital, Dili. Within the capital, positive tests as a proportion of the total carried out were nearly 17 percent in mid-May, indicating widespread undetected transmission.

Lockdown restrictions, initially affecting the capital Dili, were imposed in early March and remain in place. They have been undermined, however, by a series of government decisions aimed at bolstering its political position and promoting business activity.

Timor's President Francisco Guterres and Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak have imposed a series of restrictions on movement and on social and recreational activities—but there are a number of dangerous exemptions, most notably by allowing the Catholic Church to continue to hold indoor ceremonies.

This has been absurdly defended on the grounds that the Church can help “educate” the population about the coronavirus threat. In other words, people are gathering in large numbers in enclosed places, supposedly to be informed that the most dangerous thing to do amid the pandemic is to gather in large numbers in enclosed places. The government's decision sacrifices public health to the obscurantist priorities of the Catholic Church, which is a powerful institution in the country.

Other government decisions also threaten to create

super-spreader events. Some food has been distributed to alleviate the threat of mass hunger caused by the worsening economic crisis. But this has been done in disorganised ways, with distribution centres featuring little social distancing and proper use of personal protective equipment.

There are few restrictions on economic activity. The main shopping complex in Dili was briefly closed during the initial wave of infections, but is now open, allowing large numbers of people to shop in enclosed spaces.

A lack of basic social infrastructure is hampering health efforts in numerous ways. At Dili's busiest market, Taibessi Market, a single hand-washing station has been broken and disused for months.

East Timor is among the most impoverished countries in the world and the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic has worsened the conditions of the working class and rural poor. The government is protecting an \$18 billion sovereign wealth fund, generated by the country's oil and gas exports, while taking only the most limited measures to compensate people for lost jobs and incomes.

Many residents in Dili are still dealing with the devastating consequences of floods in March and April. The flooding triggered by Cyclone Seroja was the worst natural disaster in Timor's history—41 people were killed, 27,000 homes were washed away, and 22 roads and 11 bridges were destroyed. Many affected families are still waiting for promised public assistance.

The government's failure to provide adequate social and economic support during lockdown conditions has undermined the public health response.

After restrictions were first imposed on March 8, including on travel from and to Dili and the regions, university students in the capital reported going hungry after being unable to receive assistance, including food, from their families in the countryside. Bags of rice were

delivered by university administrators, but this was not enough for students.

On April 2, the beginning of the Easter weekend, hundreds of students and other Dili residents responded to a fake alert on social media suggesting the government was lifting travel restrictions, and gathered in close contact with one another at the city's three main exit points.

"We have to travel to the municipalities," Feliciano Mota, one of those who fled the capital, told the Timorese agency *Tatoli*. "We can't handle living conditions here in Dili."

It is likely that this event contributed to the spread of COVID-19 throughout East Timor, with all 13 of the country's municipalities registering infections.

Also undermining the public health response is the ongoing political crisis in the country. In early 2020, former president and prime minister Xanana Gusmão had been on the verge of returning to office. The global coronavirus pandemic coincided, however, with a political shift that saw Gusmão's erstwhile allies join Taur Matan Ruak's coalition government that includes the Fretilin party.

Gusmão has since mounted a Trump-Bolsonaro type misinformation campaign, suggesting that COVID-19 is no worse than the flu and that restrictions are unnecessary and illegitimate. His reckless, anti-scientific statements have spread confusion. Many people are ignoring public health advice on face masks, hand washing, and social distancing.

Vaccines are only slowly being made available. The primary responsibility for this lies with Australian imperialism. The Liberal-National government in Canberra has responded with utter indifference to the danger posed by COVID-19 to the people of East Timor, and the wider South Pacific and South-East Asian region. Timor has received just 60,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from Australia, while an additional 24,000 doses have come from the World Health Organization's COVAX programme.

The limited Australian donation was largely driven not by humanitarian concerns but by geo-political ones. It followed the Chinese government's announcement that it will send 100,000 doses of its Sinovac vaccine.

Numerous articles in the Australian media and foreign policy outlets have sought to portray China's vaccine donations to the region as a sinister plot aimed

at undermining Australian hegemony. The *Age* last month quoted former Australian diplomat Ian Kemish who declared that Canberra needed "to be careful about a Chinese attempt to opportunistically seek to gain influence in our near neighbour."

Australian imperialism's exploitation of its impoverished neighbour's oil and gas reserves, and neglect of the Timorese people's basic needs, now threaten a humanitarian disaster. If COVID-19 infections continue to spiral higher, East Timor's piecemeal healthcare system—there are just 3,300 essential medical personnel in the country of 1.3 million people—will quickly collapse.



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