

# Indonesian COVID infections surge past two million

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Indonesia's daily cases reached a record high on Monday as the country passed the mark of two million cases since the pandemic began.

There were 14,536 infections recorded on Monday, mostly centered in the most populous island of Java, where the capital city of Jakarta is located. High case numbers, however, were also registered in Aceh, Riau Islands and Central Kalimantan. Monday's infection tally is more than double the typical daily figure at the start of June.

According to the COVID tracking website *worldometers*, there have been 2,018,113 cases and 55,291 deaths in Indonesia, the highest figures in South East Asia, and third in all of Asia behind India and Iran.

A major reason behind the increased spread has been the emergence of the Delta variant, first recorded in India, which has now spread to over 74 countries worldwide. Scientists have stated that the variant, which is driving an international resurgence of the pandemic, is likely twice as infectious as the initial coronavirus.

According to epidemiologist, Dicky Budiman, from Australia's Griffith University: "This Delta variant nearly meets the criteria to be a super-variant as it is very conteconomagious, it can clinically worsen the patient's condition, and it can reduce the efficacy of antibodies, which means that vaccinated people can be infected, as well as COVID-19 survivors."

Budiman warned there is a "big probability" that Indonesia may face a similar situation as in India, where, at its height, an outbreak of Delta was resulting in up to 400,000 cases per day and thousands of deaths.

Indonesian health officials report that Delta is now the dominant strain in the densely populated areas of Jakarta, as well as Central and East Java.

The rise in cases has also been reflected in an

increase in hospital occupancy rates, which shot up from 45 percent in Jakarta over a week ago to 90 percent, according to government data. In the central Java district of Kudus, bed occupancy rates also exceeded 90 percent last week. There have been reports of sick people forming queues lining the corridors outside the hospitals.

The *South China Morning Post* stated on Monday that the intensive care ward at Persahabatan hospital in Jakarta is now full, and the emergency ward too overwhelmed to accept new patients. Indonesian lung specialist Erlina Burhan added that supplies of oxygen tubes are dangerously low, and that doctors are begging for beds to be made available for sick relatives.

According to Reuters, hundreds of health care workers have also contracted the virus. The number of health employees dying from the virus has reportedly dropped from the highs of 158 in January to 13 in May, according to independent research group LaporCOVID-19. It states that this is a product of the vaccination of workers in the sector, which began early this year.

Large scale infections of doctors and nurses, however, are compromising the ability of major hospitals to treat those requiring urgent care. Laura Navika Yamani, an epidemiologist from Airlangga University in Surabaya, East Java, stated: "We need to brace for a collapse in our health system, if we don't take the necessary precautions."

The positivity rate, indicating the percentage of all tests that return with a confirmation of infection, is at the shocking level of 41.1 percent. This value, far higher than the level advised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) of 5 percent, indicates that the virus is running rampant and many cases are not being identified.

“With increased transmission due to variants of concern, urgent action is needed to contain the situation in many provinces,” the WHO warned Thursday last week.

The Indonesian government, however, like many of its counterparts internationally, has rejected calls for a comprehensive lockdown to contain the spread.

Instead, 29 “red zones” have been announced, where two-week partial lockdowns have been instituted. Restaurants, cafes and malls are limited to 25 percent capacity and religious activities at houses of worship have also been suspended.

Offices outside the red zone areas have also been instructed to operate at 50 percent capacity.

The governor of Jakarta, Anies Baswedan, has resisted demands for a full lockdown, opting for the closure of non-essential businesses at 8 p.m. Curfews have been imposed between the hours of 9 p.m. and 4 a.m. in 10 locations including Gunawarman and Senopati roads in the central business district.

Speaking on the spread of the virus, Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Pandjaitan attempted to blame it on the population itself for participating in last month’s celebration of the Islamic holiday of Ramadan, when millions visited their hometowns in spite of a government ban.

In a virtual conference, Pandjaitan stated: “It’s all our fault. The government went all out to remind us to stay at home, not to mudik [travel to your hometown ], but we still went ahead. This is the consequence.”

This is a cynical attempt to deflect from the government’s own responsibility. It has consistently sought to downplay the extent of the coronavirus crisis, in order to justify the refusal to implement full lockdown measures when required. This has inevitably undermined the hastily-announced, and partial restrictions that the government has occasionally introduced, when it has been threatened with an explosion of the pandemic and a collapse of the health system.

The circulation of the Delta variant in the world’s fourth-most populous country poses the risk of further mutations, including those that may limit the efficacy of vaccinations.

Speaking outside a vaccination centre near Jakarta, President Joko Widodo called for the acceleration of vaccination efforts last week. “We need vaccination

acceleration in order to achieve communal immunity, which we hope can stop the COVID-19 spread,” he said. Widodo said that local governments and cabinet ministers should work to increase vaccinations next month to one million each day.

The inoculation campaign, largely using Sinovac’s CoronaVac vaccine, which is the least effective against the Delta variant, has been consistently behind schedule. The government has aimed for 181 million of its 270 million population to be vaccinated by March 2022, but currently only 11.8 million are fully vaccinated.

Whilst Bali plans to have fully vaccinated 3 million of its 4.36 million population by the end of this month, so far only 1.9 million residents have received their first dose. In Riau, population 6.83 million, a little more than 490,000 have received their first jab.

Along with the risk that it is posing to the health and lives of ordinary people, the expanding coronavirus crisis is intensifying the social hardships facing workers and the poor. Reports prior to the pandemic consistently recorded rising social inequality. In 2017, Oxfam ranked Indonesia the sixth-most unequal country in the world. In a country of some 264 million people, the four richest individuals have a combined wealth greater than the poorest 100 million.



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