

# Indonesian government allows COVID cases to skyrocket

Robert Campion  
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The highly infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus, which is spreading rapidly around the globe, is fuelling an unprecedented surge of cases among the more than 270 million people in Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country.

For weeks, the refusal of President Joko Widodo's administration to introduce the necessary safety measures—with Widodo saying he did not want to “kill the economy”—has created the conditions for a catastrophe on the scale of that witnessed in India this year.

Over the past fortnight, records of transmission have been broken numerous times. The Indonesian Health Ministry recorded 25,830 new COVID-19 cases on Friday, a fresh record, bringing the total tally to 2,228,938, with the death toll rising by 539 to 59,534.

Health experts are unanimous in saying these numbers are a significant underestimation, with some epidemiologists in Indonesian universities reporting up to five times the official statistics. For the entire course of the pandemic, the share of cases returning positive has hovered around 20 percent, one of the worst reported results in the world.

The impact of the Delta variant is most pronounced, but not limited to, the heavily populated island of Java and the tourist destination of Bali, which has suffered a quadrupling of cases in the past two weeks. Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan reported that 87 percent of recorded cases in the city were due to the Delta variant.

According to the Eijkman Institute for Molecular Biology (LBM), cases also have been discovered in Sumatra, Sulawesi and Kalimantan.

All the signs are pointing to a calamity because the government is still rejecting complete lockdowns and other safety measures. The Delta variant is widely considered to be 60 percent more contagious than the

previous Alpha variant originating in the United Kingdom, and around four times more likely to cause hospitalisation.

Hospitals are reaching full capacity across Java, with the capital Jakarta recording a bed occupancy rate of 93 percent this week. With isolation rooms overwhelmed, makeshift tents have been erected in carparks to deal with the overflow of patients.

Many people are being turned away and forced to self-isolate in their homes, so deaths outside of hospitals are becoming more common, and families are having to bury their own loved ones. A video that went viral on social media earlier this week showed a 64-year-old man left to die outside his front door in North Jakarta waiting for an ambulance that took 12 hours to arrive. He had reportedly tested positive for the virus two weeks earlier.

Oxygen tanks—in high demand not just for hospitals but families in self-isolation—are in critically low supply in Java. The price for a tank has roughly tripled in price in some of the hardest hit areas, from \$66 to \$185. The health ministry claims this situation is temporary and is scrambling for all government agencies, including police, to redistribute tanks to the hardest-hit areas. Suppliers have made a belated commitment to shift their production from industrial to medical use.

At a press conference, Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin sought to blame the oxygen tank shortage on an electricity supply interruption that halted factory production in Central Java.

As elsewhere internationally, the working class and poor are the hardest-hit by the government's pro-business program and its failure to take the necessary safety measures.

Dr Dicky Budiman, an epidemiologist now based in

Australia, said: “The problem in Indonesia is that testing rates are very low because only people who present themselves at hospitals with symptoms receive free tests. Everyone else has to pay.

“Based on the current reproduction rate in Indonesia that has climbed from 1.19 in January to 1.4 in June, I estimated there at least 200,000 new cases in the country today. But if I compare that with modelling by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in Seattle, it is much higher, about 350,000 new infections per day. That’s as high as India before the peak.”

It is no coincidence that Indonesia, which has seen disastrously low testing and contact tracing as well as the avoidance of lockdowns at all cost, is one of the most unequal countries on the planet, with four billionaires owning as much wealth as the poorest 100 million people.

Widodo’s administration has pinned all hopes on a vaccination rollout that is now behind schedule. The government promised to inoculate 181.5 million people by next January with China’s Sinovac vaccine but has reached just 7.5 percent of this target. Health experts have stated that it could take up to three years to reach the government’s target.

Health measures belatedly announced by the government this week were of a limited character, stopping short of a full shutdown. As of Saturday, almost all of Java will be in a partial lockdown along with only the most populated areas of Bali.

The restrictions include all non-essential workers to work from home and the reintroduction of distance learning for schools. Shopping centres, houses of worship, leisure centres and parks will be shut, and restaurants have been restricted to takeaway and deliveries. Weddings are still running with a limit of 30 people in attendance.

Those industries allowed to run at 100 percent capacity include those relating to health, security and energy, while financial services are reduced to 50 percent. The measures are currently set to run until July 20.

The inadequate nature of the restrictions is underscored by the official aim, which is to halve the current number of daily virus cases to below 10,000.

“If the government is half-hearted it will just remain the same,” Defriman Djafri, an epidemiologist at Andalas University in Padang on Sumatra island, said.

What was needed, he insisted, was two weeks in total lockdown, no outside activities and no contact, with people ordered to stay at home.

Up until now, Widodo has resisted introducing any measures that might affect corporate profits. News of even the limited curbs wiped out earlier gains on Indonesia’s main stock index.

The crisis in Indonesia is part of an international resurgence of COVID-19 cases, due to the refusal of capitalist governments everywhere to take the measures necessary to prevent the emergence of new mutations.

Infections are surging throughout Southeast Asia, including in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. There is also a rise in Africa, with nine out of 14 African countries experiencing a resurgence. South Africa’s cases have doubled in the past week.



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