Indonesia engulfed in “India-type” second wave

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In Indonesia, the world’s fourth most populous country, a humanitarian disaster is unfolding similar to what occurred in India in late May. While it is being fuelled by the more virulent Delta strain, the surge in cases is taking place primarily because of the government’s lack of preventative measures—in line with the demands of big business.

Official daily deaths on Wednesday—following a string of broken records in the weeks prior—crossed the 1,000 mark for the first time with 1,040 deaths, up from 728 a day earlier. This is seven times what was recorded less than a month ago.

Total daily cases also hit a new record of 34,379, up from 31,189 on Tuesday. The total number of COVID-19 cases is now 2,379,397 and the death toll is 62,908. Owing to the lack of testing and a 1-in-5 positivity rate, health experts are almost certain that the real daily tallies are of orders of magnitude higher.

Only 6 percent of the population of 270 million is fully vaccinated, a rate similar to other oppressed countries which are in dire need of vaccines. According to the World Health Organisation, many health workers—including 6,000 in Aceh and 5,000 in Papua—have not even had their first dose.

With the country utterly exposed, there is a great danger that the current strain could mutate, threatening to upend vaccination efforts not just for Indonesia but internationally.

Epidemiologists have been scathing in their assessment of the government, which has deliberately fostered a climate of what some have called “herd stupidity,” whether through downplaying the risks associated with the pandemic, refusing to institute lockdowns, inconsistent health advice and the promotion of quack remedies.

Last May, hundreds of thousands travelled across the country for the Muslim Ramadan celebrations. The government made half-hearted restrictions on participations in the Eid celebrations, while allowing free rein for people to visit tourist attractions.

The absence of compensation for workers has also hampered lockdown efforts, as workers are forced to choose between working and starvation. Of the roughly 120 million working in Indonesia, 70 million earn their livelihoods in the “informal” sector living a hand-to-mouth existence. As a result, many are driven by desperation to defy lockdown measures.

In the city of Semarang, authorities have reportedly fired water hoses at shops that refused to close. Jakarta governor, Anies Baswedan, ordered dozens of offices to be sealed on Tuesday after some employers ignored work-from-home orders.

Epidemiologist Dicky Budiman, who has worked many years to prepare Indonesia’s health system, predicts a shocking 300,000 to 500,000 cases a day by August, citing the failure of the government to impose preventative measures early enough.

Restrictions on movement were instituted just last Saturday for the hardest hit islands of Java and Bali, but stopped short of full lockdowns as they were only imposed in designated “emergency zones.” As of yesterday, the measures were expanded to cover areas on all islands, mostly on Sumatra.

The restrictions are set to continue until July 20 and include the closure of shopping malls, houses of worship and leisure centres including parks. Non-essential sectors designated as those that are not energy, health or security, have been given 75 percent work-from-home requirements. Financial sectors are working at 50 percent capacity.

The impact of the Delta variant has been hardest on the island of Java, where over 150 million Indonesians

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reside in an area approximately half the size of New Zealand.

Hospitals have been inundated with the sick. Almost all have occupancy rates at full capacity, including the major intensive care wards at Cengkareng Hospital in the west of Jakarta, Bekasi City Hospital in West Java and all hospitals in Surabaya, the second biggest city.

More than a dozen facilities in Surabaya reportedly turned away patients because they could not handle the influx. “We’re overwhelmed,” said a hospital spokeswoman in an interview with SBS. “Many of our health workers have collapsed from exhaustion and some are also infected. We trying to get volunteers to help out.”

Oxygen tanks have dried up in some areas, prompting the government to urge national suppliers to divert 90 percent of their production to medical needs. On Tuesday, Jakarta reported that 10,000 oxygen concentrators were to be shipped from nearby Singapore. The government is also asking China for assistance.

Daily burials in the capital are up 10-fold since May, with 392 burials on Saturday, overwhelming the cemetery workers involved.

Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan stated in a video conference: “According to our data, the Delta variant made up 90 percent of new transmissions in Jakarta.”

He added that authorities were preparing for much higher daily cases. “The number of daily cases can still increase to 40,000 or more. We are taking actions to cope with all possible scenarios in terms of medical supplies, oxygen and hospital capacity.”

In other islands, officials have cited “significant increases” in daily infections and active cases. The occupancy rates for hospital beds treating COVID-19 patients in Lampung, Riau Islands, West Sumatra, East Kalimantan and West Papua provinces have all exceeded 60 percent.

The virus is also spreading among young people. Around 250,000 children have been infected according to official data, or 12.6 percent of all cases. Of the 676 children who have died, about 50 percent were under 5 years old.

There are also long-term health problems associated with the virus, with much still unknown. Doctors have said that six to eight months after recovering from the virus, children may become weaker, experience shortness of breath, hair loss, muscle pain, and have difficulty concentrating at school.

Facing widespread anger over the government’s handling of the disease, President Joko Widodo announced an expedited vaccination program on Twitter. “Our target this month is 34 million doses, August 43.7 million, September 53 million, October 84 million, November 80.9 million, and December 71.7 million.

“With hard work, this target is not difficult as long as there is a vaccine,” he said. However, the country has so far received only 119 million shots of Sinovac, Sinopharm and AstraZeneca. More vaccines are being promised from the US, Japan and Australia.

As in other countries, the requirements of dealing with the pandemic are being deliberately ignored by the government to safeguard “the economy,” which means protecting big business and its profits. Empty promises that prosperity is “just around the corner” are a desperate and cynical ploy to deflect mounting public anger.

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