

Indonesia becomes new COVID epicentre as infections and deaths skyrocket

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Following months of skyrocketing daily cases and deaths, Indonesia overtook all other countries this week to become the new global epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic.

On Wednesday, the official number of infections rose above 50,000 for the first time to 54,517, along with almost a thousand deaths. On the same day, India recorded fewer than 42,000 daily cases, far below the height of more than 400,000 infections in May. Brazil's daily tally dropped to below 53,000 on Thursday, as Indonesia continued to climb to 56,757 cases.

The situation in Indonesia is starkly similar to that of India in April–May, when it was devastated by the highly-infectious Delta variant. In that period, India reported roughly 29 cases per 100,000 people, which Indonesia is swiftly approaching with 20 per 100,000, according to official figures. Indonesia's vaccination rate is estimated to be 5.8 percent, whereas India's was 3.3 percent in early May.

Taking into account the far lower levels of testing and contact tracing, it is highly likely that Indonesia has already outstripped the infection rates at the height of India's outbreak. Disagreements between health experts over the true number of cases are not focused on the accuracy of official statistics, which are widely dismissed, but rather on how many times greater the real infection tally is.

Indonesian epidemiologist Dicky Budiman stated that the number of daily cases could already be over 100,000, a figure he warned could double by the end of the month and lead to a death toll of 2,000 per day.

Official figures show that more than 90,000 of the country's 120,000 hospital beds for COVID-19 patients are occupied. Cases of the Delta variant are concentrated in the islands of Java and Bali, but it is

also spreading in the islands of Sumatra, Kalimantan and West Papua, which are unequipped to deal with a major outbreak.

Bed occupancy in the province of Lampung in Sumatra reached 86 percent on Monday, 85 percent in East Kalimantan and 79 percent in West Papua.

It is likely, however, that these figures substantially understate the extent of the crisis. There are widespread reports of hospitals overflowing—with some constructing makeshift emergency COVID wards in car parks and outdoor areas, and others turning patients away. An untold number of people are perishing in their homes for lack of treatment, while in some areas, gravediggers are working through the night because of the high death toll.

Many health workers, particularly on the remote islands, have not even had their first dose of a vaccine. The government is now scrambling to reach its vaccine target of inoculating more than 181 million of its population of 270 million by March 2022.

The outbreak in the world's fourth most populous country, with cases of the Delta strain spreading, portends dire consequences elsewhere. Surges are also being recorded in Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam, while South Korea and Taiwan are also experiencing a resurgence.

So long as the virus is allowed to spread anywhere it threatens the whole world, not only with further sickness and death but the possibility of more virulent mutations. The massive growth of cases is an indictment of the global capitalist system, which at every stage of the pandemic has subordinated human lives to the interests of profit.

The Indonesian administration of President Joko Widodo has responded to COVID-19 along the same criminally-negligent lines as his counterparts around

the world. Far more resources over the past year have been devoted to propping up big business than the health sector.

When the virus first hit Indonesia in January–February last year, the government initially denied there were any cases, in order to “avoid panic.” When the level of deaths became undeniable later in 2020, the government continued to downplay the risks, with some of its prominent representatives promoted unscientific remedies such as praying, supposed “wonder drugs” like ivermectin and even eucalyptus necklaces.

With a daily positivity rate well above the World Health Organisation guidelines of 5 percent, Widodo brushed off the “commotion” that the government was placing the economy over public health. He stated in October that compared to other countries with similar populations, Indonesia was much better at handling COVID-19. The high positivity rate, however, demonstrated that the real number of infections was far higher than the official numbers.

An indication of just how widespread the virus already was in this period has been provided by a recently published study involving the Jakarta Provincial Health Office, the University of Indonesia, the Eijkman Institute for Molecular Biology and staff from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It found that by March this year, nearly half of all residents in Jakarta had likely contracted COVID-19, or more than 12 times the official tally.

The figure was based on testing for coronavirus antibodies, which can last for 5 to 7 months after infection, in the blood of around 5,000 people between the dates of March 15 to March 31. The results showed that 44.5 percent had the antibodies. If extrapolated to Jakarta’s population, that would indicate that 4.7 million of the city’s 10.6 million people had potentially caught the virus.

In the early days of the latest surge, the government continued to downplay the severity of the situation, despite clear warnings from epidemiologists. Even last Monday, the senior minister in charge of Indonesia’s pandemic response, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, claimed that the outbreak was “under control,” with the government preparing for a “worst case scenario” of 40,000 to 50,000 cases a day.

In light of the latest figures, Pandjaitan abruptly reversed his position, declaring at a press conference on Thursday: “Now, I ask that we understand that the Delta variant is a variant that cannot be controlled.” He also substantially revised the “worst-case” scenario,” stating: “If we’re talking about 60,000 [infections per day] or slightly more than that, we’re okay. We are hoping not for 100,000, but even if we get there, we are preparing for that.”

The government has blamed the outbreak on workers, accusing them of “indiscipline” and of not following limited stay-at-home orders. Millions, however, have no possibility of isolating, because they are forced to work just to put food on the table.

The government has also refused to implement a complete lockdown. Instead, designated “red zones” on Java and Bali were belatedly introduced on July 3, leaving milder restrictions in place throughout the archipelago.

“Emergency social restrictions are still inadequate,” stated University of Indonesia epidemiology expert Pandu Riono. “They should be twice as stringent since we are facing the Delta variant, which is two times more contagious.

“I predict the outbreak will increase continuously in July as we are not able yet to prevent the spread of infections,” he warned.



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