

East Asian countries hit by global surge of Delta variant

Benjamin Mateus
26 July 2021

In the week ending July 18, 2021, the Delta variant was detected in 13 new countries, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). In total, it has been detected in 124 countries as it continues its spread globally, becoming the dominant strain in the present phase of the pandemic. The number of reported COVID-19 cases globally is expected to exceed 200 million in the first half of August. Close to 4.2 million have perished.

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO director-general warned, “This is not just a moral outrage, it’s also epidemiologically and economically self-defeating... The pandemic is a test, and the world is failing. Nineteen months into the pandemic, and seven months since the first vaccines were approved, we are now in the early stages of another wave of infections and deaths.”

Additionally, the Alpha variant has now appeared in 180 countries, with eight more countries having detected this variant, first found in the UK. The Beta variant, first reported in South Africa, is present in 130 countries, up from 123 last week. The Gamma variant, which was detected in Brazil, has been found in 78 countries. Three more countries detected this variant last week.

Aside from the virus’s greater capacity to infect, what is driving this new global wave of infections is the relaxation of public health measures in support of spurring commerce with the large number of vulnerable people who remain susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infection due to the policy of vaccine nationalism that has severely limited access to these critical treatments.

The “two tracks” pandemic, as characterized by Dr. Ghebreyesus, is not only impacting poor nations. The East Asian countries which had implemented more robust public health measures to curb rapid community spread early in the pandemic are facing a calamitous moment. Their populations remain for the most part immunologically naïve and at great threat for infections by these more transmissible and deadly versions. The

current surges of new cases are proving a challenge to contain, and these countries lack vaccine supplies.

Taiwan, which has only fully immunized one percent of its population, and 27 percent partially, was confronted with a sudden surge of cases in mid-May that saw cases climb to a peak of 600 COVID-19 cases per day with a cumulative total of 15,600 cases. Before the explosion of cases, the death toll stood at 12. It has now risen to almost 800. Despite the comparatively small magnitude, the crude case fatality rate of 5 percent speaks to the deadliness of the contagion in an island nation where the median age is 42.5 years compared to the global median age of 29.6. The surge was blamed on the Alpha variant.

For more than 12 months preceding their first wave, Taiwan had used tracing and quarantine measures to keep the virus in check, limiting total cases to around a thousand. For the most part, commerce and social activities such as markets, dining venues, and sporting events were operating just below full capacity.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, an Indonesian cargo pilot flew out of Taiwan to Australia where he was confirmed with COVID-19. Two of his close contacts were also confirmed with the coronavirus. Prior to becoming symptomatic, they had visited mosques and various venues in Taipei and Taoyuan City. The Taiwan Centers for Disease Control traced the May outbreak to the Indonesian pilot.

A ten-week partial lockdown—closure of schools, restaurants, bars and gyms, mandatory mask wearing in all places including outdoors, and the banning of non-residents entering Taiwan—was implemented to bring the outbreak under control. This is being eased as cases have declined to the low double digits. Catch-up efforts are underway to procure COVID-19 vaccines with the aim of inoculating the population by December.

Vietnam, with a population of nearly 100 million people, does not have Taiwan’s advantage of geographic

isolation, as it shares long porous borders with China, Laos, and Cambodia. It also has one of the lowest vaccination rates in all Southeast Asia, with less than 0.5 percent of its population fully vaccinated.

However, until recently, Vietnam had some of the lowest rates of infections and deaths throughout the world. It was also the only economy in Southeast Asia, according to *The Diplomat*, to have managed a positive economic growth in 2020. With the news of the spreading infection in China in early 2020, the country rapidly moved to close off its borders and implement a rigorous public health prevention program.

Years of experience with various zoonotic viruses such as SARS and avian influenza viruses had led to the development of a strong public health leadership and effective programs that involved the implementation of rigorous quarantines and contact tracing.

In conjunction with the explosion of cases with the Delta variant in India, around mid-May, daily cases in Vietnam began to climb slowly at first, then exploding in the beginning of July with an almost vertical rise in new cases. The seven-day moving average has climbed from 339 cases per day on June 26, to 6,377 presently, a near 20-fold increase. Of the almost 100,000 cases of COVID-19, 85 percent were registered in the last 30 days. The rate of deaths is also skyrocketing, though in absolute terms the death toll remains still low at only 500.

Despite its initial success in containing infections, Vietnam is facing a “perilous moment” as the government is attempting to secure COVID-19 vaccines through direct purchases from Pfizer, Moderna, Sputnik (Russia), Taiwan and from the WHO’s COVAX facility. However, Vietnam doesn’t expect to receive shipment until the end of the year at the earliest.

Spurred by an interest in jump-starting its biotech sector during the pandemic, the country relied on developing these treatments using nationally based pharmaceuticals. Many of these vaccines still remain in phase two and three trials due to lack of cases in Vietnam needed to complete the process.

But last week, Hanoi announced a 15-day lockdown as the coronavirus has spread from the southern Mekong Delta region. All outdoor activities have been suspended. There is a ban on more than two people gathering. All non-essential businesses have been ordered closed.

South Korea has faced several waves of infections throughout the pandemic but was always able to stem the surges quickly. However, since the winter peak, it has been battling a steady daily number of new infections. In

July new cases began to climb again, reaching a peak of more than 1,500 per day.

South Korea has reported close to 200,000 cases of COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. The death toll has only recently passed the 2,000 mark. Only 13 percent of its population has been fully vaccinated, and 27 percent have received at least one dose. Despite being one of the manufacturing centers for the AstraZeneca vaccine, South Korea has maintained its commitments to export the vaccine and has not had adequate supplies for its own population. The country is currently in the process of inoculating people aged 55 to 59.

Speaking of Indonesia, which now is the epicenter of the coronavirus in East and Southeast Asia, Sean Darby of the US investment house Jefferies Group told CNBC, “The reality is that ... you’re likely to not reach full economic potential until you get to some form of herd immunity. Unfortunately, the potential for Indonesia to meet its pre-pandemic [economic] levels are probably quite low at the moment given the poor rollout of the vaccine.”

The cynicism of such comments is striking, and it applies to the entire region. Those countries that had successfully fought off the initial wave of coronavirus because they rejected the policy of herd immunity in favor of serious and sweeping public health measures, are now paying the price for not having allowed their population to be infected, since they can’t get sufficient quantities of vaccine to “catch up” with the rest of the world, where the infection is raging almost without resistance.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)