

COVID catastrophe fuels unrest in Southeast Asia

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Popular disaffection is rising across Southeast Asia as millions of people, mostly impoverished, suffer the worsening impact on lives and livelihoods of the failure of capitalist governments throughout the region and worldwide to protect society from COVID-19.

Home to more than 650 million people, Southeast Asia has become an epicentre of the global Delta surge that has resulted from the corporate profit-driven policies by which governments have refused to impose, or prematurely lifted, safety restrictions, allowing more virulent mutant strains to spin out of control.

Across the region, the disaster has been compounded by the near-collapse of chronically underfunded health care systems, lack of access to vaccines and widespread losses of jobs and incomes.

One of the most severely affected countries, **Indonesia**, last week passed a damning milestone—100,000 officially confirmed COVID-19 deaths.

Just days earlier, President Joko Widodo eased restrictions on July 29, allowing small businesses and some shopping malls to reopen. To appease the financial elite, Widodo lifted the already limited lockdowns, even in the worst-hit areas, such as Jakarta and Bali, despite warnings by health experts that this would lead to a resurgence of infections.

Virologists also warned of the potential for new variants to emerge, which has occurred when the virus has been allowed to run rampant in countries with large populations. “The decision doesn’t seem to be related to the pandemic, but to economics,” Pandu Riono, an epidemiologist at the University of Indonesia, told Reuters.

It took 14 months for Indonesia to exceed the 50,000-death mark at the end of May, and just over nine weeks to double it. Despite a fall from July’s peak of more than 57,000 new daily infections, the Health Ministry is still recording more than 1,700 new deaths of COVID-19 every day.

As in other countries, these figures are believed to be a substantial undercount. Low testing rates and a lack of contact tracing means many thousands of deaths are going unrecorded.

Since the beginning of June, more than 2,800 people have died at home, according to LaporCOVID-19, a non-government virus data group. Some of those deaths were counted in official

figures but others were not.

“They were rejected by the hospitals, so they went back home and did the self-isolation at home with limited access to medicine, no oxygen and no monitoring from doctors until they died,” Ahmad Arif, one of LaporCOVID-19’s founders, told Associated Press (AP).

The World Health Organisation said hospitals remained in need of isolation rooms, oxygen supplies, medical and personal protective equipment, as well as mobile field hospitals and body bags. Indonesia’s vaccination rate remains at less than 8 percent.

The world’s fourth most populous country has now recorded more than 3.6 million COVID-19 cases since March 2020. An immense social crisis is developing. East Java’s child protection agency revealed last week that 5,082 children in that province alone had lost one or both parents to the virus. Some estimates suggest that figure nationally could be as high as 35,000.

About 30 percent of Indonesia’s 277 million people are officially regarded as living in poverty as a result of the pandemic, soaring from less than 10 percent in 2019.

In **Thailand**, facing a rising tide of opposition to its calamitous pandemic response, the military regime of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha is trying to use emergency decrees to outlaw dissent.

Last week, as the country’s confirmed infections and deaths hit record highs, the regime moved to block online reports that may “instigate fear,” even if true. Alleged offenders could be jailed for up to two years.

The health ministry said the new cases had exceeded 20,000 per day for the first time, with deaths nearing 200 daily. By last Wednesday, total cases had reached 672,385 and 5,503 deaths.

The public healthcare system is breaking down. As hospitals filled up, the authorities scrambled to set up ad hoc isolation wards in airport terminals, warehouses and decommissioned railway carriages. One hospital resorted to renting freight containers to store dead bodies after its morgue ran out of room.

Only about 6.5 percent of Thailand’s 70 million people were fully vaccinated as of Thursday. In recent weeks, protests have demanded Prayuth’s resignation. In July, police used rubber

bullets, tear gas and water cannon against demonstrators in Bangkok.

The regime last week tightened partial containment measures in the capital Bangkok and several high-risk provinces, and said the rules were likely to remain in place until the end of August.

There is a political crisis in **Malaysia**, which reported 20,889 new COVID-19 cases last Friday, breaking its record for daily infections for a third consecutive day. The cumulative total number of infections now stands at 1,224,595, according to the health ministry.

This figure is also far below the reality. Deputy health director-general Chong Chee Kheong said 80 percent of COVID-19 cases who were “brought in dead” were never diagnosed with the disease. Out of the 1,000 deaths reported weekly, about 80 to 100 were “brought in dead” and the number of such cases had been rising over the past few weeks.

Thousands of contract doctors staged a walkout on July 23, demanding permanent postings and better pay. “Almost 150 medical staff have resigned this year because they are fatigued with the current system,” a doctor told Reuters at a protest in the capital Kuala Lumpur. The doctors said an offer by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to extend their contracts did not go far enough.

Facing growing unrest, the government last week said it would no longer use the number of recorded daily infections as a metric to ease safety curbs for states once they entered the second phase of a “national recovery plan.”

Muhyiddin has refused to quit, despite losing the support of some members of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the biggest bloc in his unstable ruling alliance, and faces a no-confidence vote in parliament next month.

The Delta variant is also ravaging **Myanmar**. Daily cases, taken as an average over seven days, have risen from around 5,000 to 6,000 over the past month, and deaths have reached about 350 a day, but limited testing indicates that this is a gross underestimate. The share of tests that return positive results has exceeded 35 percent since mid-July, which suggests widespread, uncontrolled transmission.

Officially, just over 7,500 people have died from COVID-19 since the February 1 military coup, but few people are treated at public hospitals, so the real death toll is unknown. In recent weeks funeral homes and crematoriums have been overwhelmed.

The inability of many people to work safely, coupled with a shortage of oxygen, medicine and a properly functioning hospital system, is fuelling the health crisis. Exacerbating it is the arrest of more than 150 doctors and nurses, who have been at the forefront of a civil disobedience movement. Another 600 medics are estimated to have stopped working after the junta issued warrants for their arrests.

After having contained the virus for much of the pandemic, **Vietnam** is facing its worst outbreak, with Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding provinces accounting for most new infections.

The government reported 8,324 new infections last Friday, up from 7,244 cases on Thursday, taking the pandemic total above 193,000. It reported 296 additional coronavirus deaths on the same day, raising the country’s death toll to 3,016.

Only 820,000 people have been fully vaccinated, or less than 1 percent of the country’s 98 million population, according to official data.

About a third of Vietnam’s 63 cities and provinces are under coronavirus restrictions. The capital Hanoi will extend them until August 22, its health ministry said last Friday, warning of new clusters of infections detected in the city of more than 8 million people.

In the **Philippines**, cases are now averaging about 8,000 a day, with deaths rising to around 200 a day. Chaos overtook several COVID-19 vaccination sites in Manila last Thursday as thousands of people tried to receive a shot before the capital headed back into a partial lockdown for two weeks.

With around 1.6 million COVID-19 cases and more than 28,000 deaths, the country has the second-worst record in Southeast Asia after Indonesia. Just 9.3 percent of the 110 million population have been fully vaccinated. In an attempt to divert blame from his government, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte has threatened to arrest people who do not get a vaccine.

Many people are out of work, unable to buy food and other essential items to survive, but the government has offered only paltry support payments of \$US20 to \$80 per fortnight to low-income households.

The utter indifference and nationalist program of governments in the imperialist centres has been epitomised by the Australian government’s offer of limited assistance to neighbouring Indonesia. Canberra has promised just 2.5 million vaccine doses and \$A12 million worth of ventilators, oxygen cylinders and testing kits. During the past five years, Australia’s development budget to Indonesia has more than halved, from around \$600 million in 2014–15 to less than \$300 million this year.

The catastrophe throughout Southeast Asia underlines the worldwide character of the public health crisis and the necessity for workers everywhere to unify their struggles, across national borders, and take control out of the hands of the ruling capitalist classes that have allowed this disaster to spread worldwide.



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