

Mass COVID-19 deaths continue in Indonesia

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Indonesia persists as the epicentre of COVID-19 infections in Asia and, in terms of deaths, of the world.

There were 1,180 official deaths confirmed in Indonesia on Tuesday, taking the overall death toll past 120,000. The past 31 days has witnessed over 47,000 deaths and more than half of the total deaths from the pandemic have occurred in the last two months.

The number of daily cases has fallen from the July highs of 50,000 to 20,741, attributed to a drop in figures on the heavily populated islands of Java and Bali. The latter was devastated over the past month with hospitals overwhelmed and gravediggers unable to work fast enough to cope with the bodies.

On Tuesday, the island of Bali recorded 888 new infections as well as 48 deaths—the first time in three weeks that new cases fell below a thousand.

In the capital Jakarta, daily active cases per have dropped from 100,000 in mid-July to below 15,000 as of last week. New cases have dropped from 10,000 per day to 2,500. Bed occupancy for referral hospitals has likewise dropped to 33 percent and ICU occupancy to 59 percent.

Out of a population of roughly 10 million, a vaccination campaign in the devastated capital has resulted in 5,437,338 people fully vaccinated and 2,697,619 partially vaccinated as of Wednesday.

Even though 40 to 50 people continue to die each day, the fall in case numbers has led to authorities junking the “red zone” status of many in the city districts and declaring the disaster over.

Currently, the partial lockdown measures which began on July 3 are extended for another week. Shopping centres in 21 cities on Java are allowed a maximum capacity of 50 percent between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m.

Chief investment minister Luhut Binsar Panjaitan, who has overseen the medical disaster, stated, “On one hand, it [the lifting of restrictions] indicates a rapid

economic recovery but on the other hand it brings a serious risk of another surge in new cases in the next two or three weeks.”

Meanwhile, the virus continues to spread throughout the archipelago in Sumatra, Sulawesi, the southernmost province of East Nusa Tenggara and even the far-flung Riau islands.

As of August 6, new infections in areas outside Java and Bali accounted for 54 percent of the national total, up from 44 percent at the start of the month and 34 percent on July 25.

All of these provinces are dangerously behind Jakarta in terms of vaccination. The health infrastructure is ill-equipped to deal with major outbreaks, and lacks accurate reporting and contact tracing. Vaccination rates are approximately 15 percent in East Kalimantan, on the island of Borneo. In East Nusa Tenggara, it stands at just 11 percent.

Poverty with multigenerational families living in cramped quarters, poor nutrition and lacking information exacerbates the dangers of contracting the disease, particularly for children. Since July, 100 children have died each week from the disease according to the Indonesian Paediatric Society (IDAI).

“People said that children are not affected and that children cannot die. But right now, we have a lot of children dying,” said Dr Aman Bhakti Pulungan, head of the IDAI in an interview to Reuters on Monday.

“Inequality is one of the problems. Inequality in treatment because not every place has a paediatric or neonatal intensive care unit.”

Dr Mario Nara spoke from Sikka, East Nusa Tenggara, which contains high rates of malnutrition and child mortality.

“Some are asthmatic... some are malnourished... others have heart problems, or other disabilities. They may have hydrocephalus [fluid in cavities of the brain], cerebral palsy and most of them are stunted,” he said.

“A condition like stunting or malnutrition will impact the child’s immune system. If they get an infection, it is likely to hit them harder.”

In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Fansca Titaheluw the acting director at Provita Hospital in Jayapura, the capital of Papua province in eastern Indonesia, reported three COVID-19 patients and a baby in intensive care had recently died due to oxygen shortages.

“If the outbreak caused by the Delta variant continues, and there is no change in attitude from the community, Jayapura will be in chaos,” he said.

On the island of Batam, Marlyan Marzzaman told the *New York Times* that when she was diagnosed with the disease in July her doctor told her to isolate at home. This led to the infection of her otherwise-healthy four-year-old Daniel, who developed a fever within days.

The hospital, having reached full capacity could not treat him in time. It lacked oxygen, ICUs for children and staff. The child died. “I am very, very disappointed,” Marlyan said. “When I asked for help there was no response. They really don’t value life.”

On Monday, President Joko Widodo emphasized in his State of the Nation address the need to always balance health and the economy, by means of avoiding a complete lockdown “[We must] find the best combination of interests between public health and economic interests because the virus is always changing and mutating. Thus, the handling must change according to the challenges faced,” he said.

Widodo also stressed the need to continue to implement the government’s pro-business “job creation” law passed last year amid mass protests by workers and labour groups. It constitutes an economic offensive against the social position of the working class with the slashing of real incomes, the removal of limits of the length of contract work as well as the scrapping of mandatory leave for childbirth, marriage or bereavement.

“The pandemic has indeed significantly slowed down our economic growth,” the president said. “But it must not hinder the process of structural reforms of our economy.”

Like governments around the world, Widodo’s administration is putting the corporate profits and the business interests of the wealthy before the health and lives of working people, with tragic consequences.



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