COVID surge in Singapore despite 80 percent vaccination

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Singapore, which has been regarded as a model in combatting COVID-19, has been compelled to tighten public health restrictions amid a surge of cases and deaths related to the highly infectious Delta variant of the virus.

The government had begun lifting restrictions, having adopted a "living with COVID" policy based on the fact that more than 80 percent of the city's population is fully vaccinated. As new cases rapidly multiplied, however, health authorities have been forced to reverse course.

Yesterday, the number of cases set a new daily record of 2,236 by noon, with five more deaths. Of those, 2,226 were local cases, comprising 1,711 in the community and 515 among migrant workers living in dormitories. Since the pandemic began, Singapore has had 91,775 cases overall and a death toll of 85.

The latest surge has taken place over the past month, from just 32 cases on August 20 to a daily figure of more than 1,000 by September 19. The daily case numbers have more than doubled over the past 10 days and are predicted to rise to more than 6,000. As of yesterday, the death toll for September was 30—a record monthly figure and over a third of all COVID deaths.

Health authorities were at pains to play down the significance of the latest outbreak, pointing out that the majority of cases were asymptomatic and mild. The five people who died were elderly and had underlying conditions, but no details were provided.

Nevertheless, 1,325 COVID-19 patients were in hospital. While most were described as being well, 209 required oxygen supplementation and 30 were in critical condition in an intensive care unit (ICU).

The new restrictions came into force on Monday and are due to remain in place until October 4. Working from home is now required for those who can do so. Previously, the restrictions had been loosened to allow businesses to return up to half of their employees to workplaces.

Gatherings in restaurants or other social settings have been reduced from a maximum of five to two people for those who are vaccinated, and limited to one a day. Primary school and special education students will continue to learn from home until at least October 7.

The health ministry is also widening the availability of rapid antigen testing and access to vaccine booster shots. The vaccines most widely used in Singapore have been Pfizer or Moderna, whose efficacy is known to wane significantly over time. From October 4, people aged 50 to 59 will be able to get a vaccine booster, currently only available for those over 60.

Speaking of the new restrictions, Trade Minister Gan Kim Yong, one of the co-chairs of a virus taskforce, told the media: "While doing so may not reduce the number of daily new infections immediately, it will allow us to slow down the speed of increase and avoid overtaxing our healthcare workers."

The government was clearly responding to growing public concern about the pandemic. According to a Bloomberg article, the surge in cases "has begun to stir anxiety in Singapore. Residents are airing grievances over not being able to reach the health ministry quickly to discuss their concerns and fretted over the long lag between testing positive for COVID-19 and getting sent to a recovery facility."

The trade minister indicated that the government is under pressure from businesses to open up, saying: "This was a very difficult decision for us as we know that this would affect many businesses and people."

The government has promised handouts to business worth $S650 million ($US478 million) for various sectors hit by the pandemic restrictions, including

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restaurants and food stalls, retail and cinemas. Taxi and private hire car drivers will receive financial assistance. Tenants of state-owned commercial properties will have a two-week rental waiver, with an equivalent cash payout to private tenants.

Among those hardest hit, however, are hundreds of thousands of foreign workers who live in crowded purpose-built dormitories. Last year, these dormitories experienced some of the worst outbreaks. Foreign workers received little or no assistance. A quarter of the new cases yesterday were in dormitories, even though workers living there make up only about 5 percent of the city's population.

Proponents of the criminal policy of herd immunity have seized on Singapore as an example to push for "opening up" and "living with Covid" once high vaccination rates have been achieved.

In late June, Anthony Bergin, an analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, argued that Singapore, with its high vaccination rates, low case numbers and easing of restrictions, offered a model for Australian governments to end lockdowns—a policy stridently demanded by big business.

"The Singapore approach is appropriate, strong and versatile," Bergin declared. "The goal should be to ensure everyone is fully vaccinated, with boosters as required, with a vaccine variant that works against whatever virus variant is 'cock of the walk' at the time. This is the familiar ground we see with seasonal variation in the flu vaccine. Then carry on as normal."

The US-based business-oriented website CNBC cited proponents of "herd immunity" in Singapore who argued that the current COVID surge might even be beneficial as most cases were mild. "For these people, infection will not have any short-term or long-term consequence to their health, but may additionally trigger a natural immune response which reduces the chance of subsequent infection," Teo Yik-Ying of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health said.

In reality, the surge in Singapore is further evidence that only a strategy of eradication, which requires not only vaccination but stringent public health restrictions, can prevent the spread of the coronavirus. COVID-19 is not like the flu and is continuing to evolve into potentially more deadly and transmissible variants, which may or may not respond to vaccines.

The advocates of "opening up" simply dismiss the tragic consequences of their policy. In Singapore, while the numbers of daily cases and deaths remain low compared to the United States, Europe, Brazil or India, they have been rising rapidly over the past month, with no indication of being brought under control in the near future.

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