

Philippines overwhelmed by COVID-19 onslaught

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8 October 2021

Southeast Asia, home to more than 650 million people, has reportedly experienced the worst COVID-19 outbreak in the world in recent months. The Delta variant has devastated countries which have failed to contain the more contagious strain, amid delayed and chaotic vaccination rollouts.

The region's disaster has been compounded by the near-collapse of chronically underfunded healthcare systems and widespread losses of jobs and incomes. Popular disaffection is rising as millions of people, mostly impoverished, suffer the worsening impact on lives and livelihoods of the failure of capitalist governments, locally and around the globe, to protect them from COVID-19.

Bloomberg's Covid Resilience Ranking for September listed Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam in the bottom five countries worst hit. The Philippines fell to last place following a sharp decline over the course of 2021.

The monthly snapshot—a pointer to where finance capital sees the virus being handled the most effectively and with the least social and economic upheaval—ranks 53 major economies on 12 data points related to virus containment, “the economy” and “opening up.”

On October 6 the Philippines recorded 9,847 new cases with a 7-day average running at 12,455. Total cases have risen to over 2.6 million, with 115,328 active cases and a death toll of 38,937. Most of the deaths occurred during a spike in March–April, followed by the latest surge beginning in July.

At its peak in mid-September, the 7-day average was running at 21,000 cases and 400 deaths. The death total is second-worst in Southeast Asia after Indonesia, which has registered 142,600 dead among a population of 273.5 million.

The Philippines last month had the second-worst

positive test rate in Bloomberg's rankings, at 27 percent—only above Mexico. The government is however only testing the sickest patients for COVID and there are likely high levels of undetected community infections.

According to the Philippine News Agency on October 5, the country has a total of just 77,410,640 doses. Fewer than 22 million people are fully vaccinated, in a population of 110 million. Spokesman Harry Roque stated the government was “not surprised” that the Philippines and other Southeast Asian nations landed at the bottom the Bloomberg list, as richer countries get more vaccines.

Attempting to shift blame from his own government, authoritarian President Rodrigo Duterte previously threatened to arrest people who do not get a vaccine. Limited access to vaccines, however, has been compounded by official inefficiency, callousness and neglect. Chaos overtook vaccination sites in Manila in August as thousands of people tried to receive a shot before a partial two-week lockdown. Rumours had spread that unvaccinated people would not be allowed to claim government aid or go outside.

The WSWS last April characterised Duterte's response from the outset as a “militarized police operation,” aimed not at ending the transmission of the virus, but at suppressing social opposition. The government channelled over \$US19 billion in public funds towards paying off state debt to major investors instead of implementing proper public health measures.

In spite of a long running lockdown in March–April 2020, workers were kept on the job in unsafe factories and offices, continuing to pump out profits for capitalist corporations. Workers in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries, export processing zones, banking, financing, and mining were exempted from lockdowns

and forced to work throughout the pandemic.

Duterte has used the pandemic to boost the role of the military in line with his brutal authoritarian agenda. In April last year, he declared he would order the police and military to shoot dead anyone “who creates trouble” during lockdowns. The warning came after residents in Quezon City staged a protest along a highway near their shanty houses, declaring they had not received any food packs and other relief supplies since the lockdown began two weeks earlier. After they refused to disperse, police broke up the protest and made arrests.

Government handling of the pandemic has further been hampered by a 1991 law that made city, town and village leaders responsible for the health system. Village-level health teams often follow rules set by mayors or chieftains, resulting in a fragmented response. Tracing and testing remain slow with local officials in charge. The goal of inoculating all adults, or 70 percent of the population, this year is unlikely to be met.

The pandemic has exposed the under-staffing and dire working conditions in the health sector, particularly for nurses. Hospitals are understaffed and low on beds, forcing patients to queue. Nurse-to-patient ratios are at a low of 12.6 nurses per 10,000 people.

Al Jazeera reported that in April 2020, just a month into the first outbreak, nurses and hospital staff were resorting to using rubbish bags and motorcycle helmets as protective gear. A video went viral on social media, prompting an outpouring of donations from citizens. The health department’s 2020 budget was cut by 10 billion Philippine pesos (\$US197m), with Duterte calling health workers heroes who would be “lucky to die for their country.”

Before the pandemic, one in five was living in extreme poverty. Government policies have worsened inequality. As of last February, 4.2 million people over the age of fifteen were unemployed, while 7.9 million were underemployed or worked reduced hours. Many are 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.

A grass-roots movement of community pantries has sprung up on the streets to provide food and other assistance. Some marginally better off sections of the

population have spontaneously organised to provide aid to those who are enduring harsh food shortages. Meanwhile, according to *Forbes*, 17 billionaires have increased their combined wealth to over \$US45.6 billion.

The crisis has developed into a widespread social disaster in densely populated, impoverished communities such as San Roque, where families live in one or two-room dwellings and share bathrooms with neighbours. The lack of running water, access to nutritious food and dilapidated housing in poor communities makes hand washing, maintaining good nutrition, and self-quarantine virtually impossible.

Short-lived lockdowns were re-imposed in March and again in August on Manila’s National Capital Region and surrounding provinces, home to 14 million people. While curfews and checkpoints on working-class and poor neighbourhoods were set up, workers were again kept working in BPO industries, export processing, banking, factories and offices. This did not stop Philippine shares falling by 3.5 percent on the stock exchange in early August.

Under a new “localised” lockdown introduced in Manila on September 13, the government eased movement restrictions and allowed fully-vaccinated people more public access. Restaurants and beauty salons have been reopened, public transport is operational, and limited in-person classes will soon resume, though with vaccination so low that raises the risk of further transmission. Although borders are closed to most foreigners, migrant workers can return, straining inadequate quarantine facilities.

Like other countries throughout Southeast Asia, the Philippines is under enormous pressure to “open up” its economy and force the impoverished masses to “learn to live with the virus.” Bloomberg commends the action taken by European countries now leading its Resilience Ranking, linking improved vaccination rates to a program of “normalisation,” that is, the homicidal policy of “herd immunity.”



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