

Indonesian government scraps planned COVID-19 restrictions despite risk of Omicron spread

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As the new Omicron variant spreads through the Asia-Pacific region, Indonesia is proceeding with its pro-corporate reopening agenda and rapidly dispensing with any public health measures to control the virus.

Last Monday, President Joko Widodo's government reversed its previous decision to impose more stringent "Level 3" social restrictions over the year-end holiday period. The plans were originally prompted by concerns that the variant may have already arrived, and that increased travel would cause an infection spike of the Delta variant, which is still circulating throughout the archipelago.

Chief Investment Minister Luhut Pandjaitan, who oversees the country's coronavirus taskforce, announced that the limited "Level 2" measures currently in place will continue over the holidays, only to be removed at the earliest possible date. Introduced on November 29, after the emergence of Omicron was publicised, they include minimal mobility restrictions on shopping centres, restaurants, parks, and public transport.

The holidays are expected to see tens of millions of Indonesians travelling from major cities to their hometowns. Movement on important toll roads will be limited, although domestic flights have opened for the vaccinated. Non-essential workplaces and schools will remain open.

Travel bans were initially imposed for anyone travelling from 10 southern African countries—where the Omicron variant was first discovered—over the past two weeks. However, the variant has since been detected in countries in the region, including Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan.

Under pressure from medical experts, the quarantine period for international arrivals was extended from 3 to 7 days, and then to 10 days. Minister Luhut informed a

press conference that Widodo ordered this extension, adding that it "will be evaluated every now and then as we understand and continue digging more information about this new variant."

Senior ministers further confirmed that all public health measures in place will be reviewed every two weeks from now, according to Reuters.

In another reversal, the government junked its earlier calls for schools to cancel their year-end break and for workers not to take leave from December 24 to January 2. It is also allowing Indonesians to travel to Saudi Arabia later this month for *umrah*, a religious pilgrimage, even though Omicron has been detected in the gulf country.

Any remaining nationwide movement restrictions were also ended last Monday, while those affecting Java and Bali had ended a week earlier. Meanwhile, Indonesia has commenced a policy of quarantine-free "vaccinated travel lanes" aimed at restarting flights with neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore.

As the government pursues its strategy of "living with the virus," officials are falsely claiming that the inadequate mitigation measures are sufficient to deal with a potential Omicron outbreak.

Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin said authorities were working to enhance their COVID-19 surveillance to detect and contain Omicron early on. At a press conference on the resumption of air travel, Novie Riyanto from the Transportation Ministry remarked, "We have to prevent the third wave."

The government's reckless moves are part of a global drive by financial elites to resume full economic activity, whatever the cost in lives. In reality, the decision to relax restrictions contradicts advice from medical experts on the highly infectious Omicron strain.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has classified

the highly-mutated Omicron a “high risk,” warning on Wednesday that it “could have a major impact on the course of the pandemic.”

While the Indonesian financial press reiterates the unsubstantiated and reckless claims of ruling classes everywhere that Omicron is “milder” than Delta, epidemiologists have urged world governments to take drastic preventative measures. Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO’s technical lead on COVID-19, emphasised this week that it is “too early to conclude” that Omicron is less lethal.

So far only 37 percent of Indonesia’s 273 million population is fully vaccinated, with just 53 percent of the elderly having received one dose alone. The country’s chaotic and delayed vaccine rollout has been further undermined by the spread of misinformation and quack cures by government, media, and religious figures throughout the pandemic, generating much confusion and distrust.

Economic Affairs Minister Airlangga Hartarto has asked regional authorities to accelerate the vaccination program, so as to vaccinate 70 percent of the population by the end of this year. The target was quickly condemned as unrealistic by health experts. Indonesia began mass vaccinations in January this year.

Testing rates remain extremely low (208,581 tests per million people), placing it at 146th in the world. Additionally, the alarming lack of whole-genome sequencing (WGS)—a crucial tool in tracking COVID-19’s mutation development—makes it possible for Omicron to spread undetected. Indonesia has gathered a meagre 8,906 WGS samples, whereas South Africa, for example, has taken 23,000 samples out of its much smaller 60 million population.

The chronically underfunded and understaffed health care system remains as unprepared now as during previous surges. The WHO said hospitals still lacked critical resources like isolation rooms, oxygen supplies, medical and personal protective equipment, as well as mobile field hospitals and body bags.

Indonesia’s Delta outbreak from July to September saw the country become the world’s COVID-19 epicentre. The catastrophic surge was facilitated by government efforts to reopen even as the Delta variant ravaged the population. Epidemiologist Dr. Pandu Riono said at the time, “The decision doesn’t seem to be related to the pandemic, but to economics.”

At the peak of the outbreak, over 700 children died at a rate of 100 per week, with children accounting for one in

eight infections. Shockingly, over 150 children died during the week of July 12 alone, with half of these under the age of five.

It took 14 months for Indonesia to exceed the 50,000-death mark at the end of May, and only nine weeks to reach 100,000. Daily cases averaged at 40,000 in July, but had dropped to 400 by December—a fact authorities used to declare the pandemic over.

In total, official figures stand at over 4.2 million cases and 143,929 deaths, although these are considered vast underestimates. According to LaporCOVID-19, a virus data group, during the first two months of the Delta outbreak, nearly 3,000 deaths occurred in homes, some of which were counted in official figures while others were not.

The social consequences of the pandemic have devastated large sections of Indonesia’s working class. About 30 percent of the population are officially regarded as living in poverty, soaring from less than 10 percent in 2019.

The Widodo government’s pandemic response is characterised by an ever-greater desperation to restart international tourism, a substantial part of Indonesia’s GDP. In 2019, the tourism sector attracted \$US63.6 billion. From November 2, tax incentives have been provided to tourism-related corporations and businesses whose revenues were impacted by travel restrictions.

As with other countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is now facing enormous pressure from the imperialist powers and manufacturing conglomerates to follow their lead, reopen borders, and repair global supply chains heading into 2022, regardless of the dangers posed by Omicron.



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