First Omicron cases detected in Indonesia

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23 December 2021

Last week Indonesia officially recorded its first cases of the new Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, which has quickly spread into Southeast Asia. The variant was finally discovered after two weeks in which the Indonesian government refused to impose urgent public health measures to prevent the arrival and spread of Omicron.

The Health Ministry has so far reported three infections of Omicron, all linked to overseas travellers. Spokesperson Siti Nadia Tarmizi told local magazine *Tempo* this week that the ministry had traced 250 close contacts of the three confirmed cases, of which 10 people tested positive for COVID-19. Genome sequencing is underway to determine whether it is the Omicron variant.

The first case was detected on December 15. The victim had no recent history of overseas travel and was a cleaning worker at the Wisma Atlet emergency hospital in Jakarta's Kemayoran district, a facility created in March 2020 to treat COVID-19 patients and quarantine Indonesians returning from abroad.

The worker reportedly contracted Omicron from a citizen returning from Nigeria on November 27, who was being quarantined at Wisma Atlet.

The following day, the government announced an additional five suspected cases, including three Chinese nationals at a hospital in Manado, North Sulawesi, and two Indonesians who had returned from South America and Britain. The latter two were confirmed as Omicron cases on Friday, after authorities completed genome sequencing. Both were also being quarantined at the Wisma Atlet hospital.

The Health Ministry was able to identify the five individuals and the first case using a specific type of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test that can detect the S-gene target failure (SGTF), which is one of the identifiers of the Omicron mutations.

The Omicron variant, after emerging in South Africa last month, has recently been reported in a number of Indonesia's neighbours, including Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. The World Health Organisation (WHO) categorised the highly transmissible and vaccine-resistant strain as a "variant of concern" and a "very high risk" nearly a month ago, warning world governments that Omicron cases could double every one and a half to three days.

Despite the evident danger, no serious health measures were implemented. Instead, the Indonesian government made a conscious decision to continue its reopening plans, through a "vaccine-only" strategy, and force the population to "live with the virus."

President Joko Widodo said in a livestreamed address last week that the arrival of Omicron was "inevitable," and warned the public against becoming complacent as restrictions are relaxed.

Widodo reiterated false claims that Omicron is "mild" and that vaccines offer effective protection. "It's important to be on alert but we should not panic because so far, Omicron has not shown any characteristics that could endanger patients, especially those who have been vaccinated," he said.

He went on to address the population: "Even though the domestic situation is close to normal, don't slack off implementing health protocols." In fact, not only is the situation far from normal, but if anyone is guilty of disregarding public safety, it is Widodo's government.

Limited mobility restrictions on public activities, introduced on November 29, remain the only measures to slow transmission. Planned stricter measures were scrapped two weeks ago. The government response is largely confined to impotent public appeals. Widodo has asked people and state officials to temporarily refrain from travelling abroad, while Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin called for mask wearing and physical distancing.

Despite recent travel bans on some African countries,

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as many as 3,000 people have continued to enter Indonesia every day over the past month, according to *Kompas*.

Investment Minister Luhut Pandjaitan, who leads the official COVID-19 response in Java and Bali, revealed on Monday that the government had prepared "contingency measures" to be implemented only if certain unstated conditions regarding Omicron's spread are present. But until then, the current inadequate restrictions will stand, only to be further relaxed at the soonest opportunity.

After the announcement of the first case, Luhut pointed to the corporate-financial preoccupations underlying the government's pandemic policy: "The development of the Omicron variant will be the key to economic recovery in 2022. If Omicron were to result in significant hospitalisation and the current vaccines were to lose their potency, the recovery would be slower than expected."

Hostile to any tightening of restrictions, Indonesia's financial elite is raising concerns that any retreat from the reopening agenda will severely impact economic activity, especially consumer spending over the end-of-year holiday period.

Josua Pardede, chief economist at Bank Permata, predicted Omicron would have a limited effect on fourth-quarter GDP growth, confident that the government will continue eliminating social restrictions over the holidays. "Omicron can be a threat [economically] if not mitigated by the government," he said.

Rully Arya Wisnubroto, a senior analyst at state-owned Bank Mandiri, told the *Jakarta Post*, "We see that uncertainty is still high, [but] the probability of continued economic growth is still quite [high]." Bank Mandiri projects GDP to grow 5 to 5.5 percent next year, in line with targets outlined in the state budget.

The hope that Indonesia's economy, which suffered a major contraction last year, will return to pre-pandemic conditions in 2022 is based on the expectation that the government's reckless and homicidal reopening plans will proceed unhindered.

Responding to recent talk of reimposing lockdown measures, Gilbert Simanjuntak, from Jakarta's Regional Legislative Council and a member of Widodo's PDI-P party, hailed the "herd immunity" policies of the UK and Brazilian governments. He also asserted, like Widodo, that the spread of Omicron was inevitable.

By contrast, medical experts have criticised the lack of public health barriers against Omicron, which has ravaged countries with relatively higher vaccine coverage, including the US, the UK, and elsewhere in Europe. Only 38 percent of the Indonesian population is double vaccinated, with Health Minister Budi calling it unlikely Indonesia will meet its target of 50 percent before the year ends.

Dicky Budiman, an Indonesian epidemiologist at Griffith University in Australia, described Omicron as a "clear threat" to Indonesia's healthcare system. He noted that, as viral transmission still occurs across the country, Indonesia "is not truly safe and has not escaped the crisis yet."

He added, "Furthermore, Indonesia is not a country that has isolated itself over the past month before [the first Omicron case] was found, and the genomic surveillance remains limited." He has called for a drastic expansion of the national contact tracing program to track the variant's spread, with at least 2 to 5 percent of all positive cases each month to be examined for Omicron.

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