

COVID-19 surges in Thailand, amid mounting Omicron cases

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With Omicron cases growing, the pro-business policy response of Thailand's military-backed regime is opening the door for a fourth, even larger wave of coronavirus in the country.

Thailand reported 5,775 new cases on Thursday, almost 1.5 times the previous day, and 7,526 cases on Friday, the highest number since early November and more than double the number on January 1. There has been a reported total of over 2.2 million infections and 21,750 coronavirus-related fatalities since the beginning of the pandemic.

Cases are reported in the majority of the eastern provinces as well as major cities and popular tourist destinations such as the capital Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya City. A total of 2,338 Omicron cases were recorded on Wednesday. In the last surge, a maximum of 32,418 daily cases was officially reached.

The first cases of Omicron entered through the quarantine-free "test and go" program that allows double-vaccinated, foreign arrivals to freely enter the country after presenting two negative PCR test results; one before departure and one upon arrival. The government is desperate to revive tourism, which is a major source of foreign currency and has virtually collapsed during the pandemic.

The probability of two false negatives from PCR tests, as has happened in the case of some arrivals into Thailand, was estimated at between 1 and 9 percent according to a study by the *Journal of Virology*. Approximately 350,000 travellers have used the "test and go" program since it began in November. A suspension of quarantine-free travel was belatedly imposed on December 22 and will continue until late January.

Despite health warnings about the dangers posed by positive Omicron cases, the government eased

restrictions ahead of the New Year celebrations to appease sections of big business, which branded the reintroduction of restrictions a "huge overreaction."

The government also downplayed the risks. "Omicron is now clearly spreading rapidly but it's not really severe," Dr Supakit Sirilak, director-general of the Department of Medical Sciences (DMS), said last week—an opinion not shared by the majority of the scientific community.

Instead of controlling the spread, the government is imposing the homicidal, unscientific program of "living with the virus" on workers and rural toilers. Its chief concern is to avoid lockdowns and their impact on an already fragile economy.

The country's Health Ministry raised the COVID alert level from 3 to 4 on Thursday—a shift that merely discourages activities such as dining out, the consumption of alcohol in restaurants, leaving the house, using public transport and travelling abroad.

While state employees have been told to work from home for two weeks after New Year's celebrations to reduce the risks of infection, schools and workplaces are to remain open.

Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul announced that while the higher alert level will bring "more limitations on activities... the government will try to avoid a lockdown to the best of our ability," he said.

This was echoed by the mayor of Pattaya City, a popular tourist destination, who on Tuesday stridently opposed any lockdown, despite a rapid increase of cases since Christmas due to the Omicron variant.

"[Omicron] is rapidly becoming a prominent strain in the Banglamung and Pattaya area," stated Chonburi Provincial health official Dr Wichai Tanasophon told Associated Press on Sunday. "More than 80 percent of the Covid-19 Omicron variant infections were found

out of recent samples.”

“We are already having issues due to the steeply rising number of patients, finding hospitals for them.” Dr Wichai added.

Nationally, the government is urging the population to get double vaccinated and book for their booster shot after three months. Just 69.1 percent of the estimated 72 million people living in the country have received two doses, and only 10.9 percent have received booster shots.

The vaccine-only response, designed to avoid any curbs on corporate profits, has demonstrated itself internationally to be an abject failure. While the Thai government abdicates responsibility for bringing the pandemic under control, blame for the spread of Omicron is being imposed on individuals.

Large fines are being threatened on those who fail to report positive test results to public health officials (20,000 baht or \$US595) or refuse to quarantine or get treatments (40,000 baht and 2 years jail). Those quarantining can apply for limited government assistance.

Sumanee Watcharasin, a spokeswoman for the country’s coronavirus taskforce, warned this week that if regular testing and mask wearing were not followed, cases would reach the “tens of thousands in the next two weeks.”

Last week, in response to growing concerns over the efficacy of cloth masks, Dr Supakit was cited by the *Bangkok Post* as claiming that all face masks were capable of shielding people from Omicron. “Wearing them properly is even more important now,” he said.

As has been reported by leading aerosol experts and presented on the WSWS’s Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, surgical and cloth masks are inadequate to deal with the airborne transmission of COVID.

Studies on surgical masks from 2020 have shown that less than 56 percent of virus particles are stopped during inhalation. Less than 42 percent of exhaled breath is filtered by the mask, placing those around the wearer at risk. Cloth masks are worse in that they have no electrostatic charge in order to “trap” the virus particles and essentially act as a sieve.

Along with the unscientific attitude to mask wearing, the government is still encouraging the disinfecting of surfaces, a largely token measure given that

COVID-19’s primary mode of transmission is through aerosols.

Authorities were due to deliberate yesterday on measures to slow the spread of infections, according to Permanent Secretary of Public Health Kiattiphum Wongrajit. The limited measures under consideration include shutting down high-risk areas and limiting large gatherings, a ban on alcohol sales in restaurants, working from home and limiting inter-provincial travel.

This morning, the Public Health Ministry announced another large jump in the daily case number to 9,508 and 14 more fatalities during the previous 24 hours.



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