

# Thailand risks 50,000 daily cases after Songkran Festival super-spreader

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Last Thursday, the Thai Public Health Ministry forecast a surge of 50,000 cases following the opening of the annual Songkran festival the previous day. This acknowledgement is all the more damning, given that the government is in the process of officially declaring COVID-19 to be “endemic”—a code word for letting it rip through the population.

The Public Health Ministry report estimates that the daily number of patients suffering lung inflammation could reach 3,000, with about 900 requiring ventilation and as many as 150 dying each day. These numbers could almost double, it stated, if current health precautions were only sparingly implemented.

The Songkran festival, which marks the Thai New Year, risks worsening the spread of COVID as large numbers of people travel and take part in social gatherings. Of particular concern are the dangers to unvaccinated sections of the population, including both the elderly and children.

Dr. Sumanee Wacharasint, director of the Bureau of Risk Communication and Health Behaviour Development, reported last Wednesday that only 34.6 percent of the population has received their booster shot, including 37.2 percent of the elderly.

For the 5–11 age group, less than 50 percent were reported to have received their first vaccine dose and less than 2 percent their second.

Only seven of the 77 provinces have achieved a 70 percent target of booster shots for the elderly, including Samut Prakan, Nonthaburi, Maha Sarakham, Nan, Phuket, Lamphun and Chainat.

The Royal College of Physicians, the Preventive Medicine Association of Thailand, the Thai Society of Critical Care Medicine, the Thoracic Society of Thailand and the Infectious Disease Association of Thailand are all urging the population to get booster

shots ahead of the expected surge in infections.

The government is doing the opposite. It is lulling people into a false sense of security by announcing the implementation by July of its unscientific program of declaring COVID-19 “endemic,” along with the dismantling of COVID public health restrictions.

Daily cases are currently at all-time highs with 26,081 cases reported last Thursday morning along with 91 deaths. The Worldometer ranks Thailand 10th in terms of cases, while the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) classifies it as “very high” risk.

As is the case internationally, the daily cases and deaths are greatly underestimated. Cases are already nearing 50,000 daily after one incorporates the RAT results that are left out of official totals. On April 3 for example, the Public Health Ministry reported 24,892 cases, but there were also 15,972 positive RAT results, raising the total to 40,864.

Thailand’s Rural Doctor Society (RDS) recently reported that on March 30 positive RAT results found by the organisation in just three provinces were higher than the official total of RAT-detected infections nationwide.

The country’s Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) reported a positive RAT tally of 16,079, yet RDS found the total for provinces of Chon Buri, Songkla and Change Rai was 16,484 cases—with 8,323, 4,839 and 3,322 cases respectively.

“We, the front-line healthcare workers, are working hard as we aim to bring the number of new infections down by containing the spread of the virus as well as we can,” an RDS Facebook statement declared.

However, it continued, “making up an ideal figure just isn’t the way to go... Reporting the actual number of new infections will instead help raise public awareness about the outbreak situation.”

Like its counterparts internationally, the Thai military-backed regime is determined to “open up” to the revive the economy and boost profits.

In the wake of the Delta outbreak last year, the Finance Ministry in January projected economic growth for 2022 of 3.5–4.5 percent, based on an improvement in the global pandemic situation. This rosy outlook made the false assumption that the Omicron variant was “mild” and would usher in a return to normality.

Instead, Thailand is now in the grip of a larger Omicron wave with increasing deaths and infections. New dangers are emerging with the arrival of variants, including reports of the recent Omicron XE, first seen in Britain in January. Omicron XE is 10 percent more transmissible than BA.2 and 43 percent more transmissible than the original Omicron (B.1.1.529), according to the UK Health Services Agency (UKHSA).

The government is desperate to revive its flagging tourism industry, which represented 20 percent of GDP prior to the pandemic. Only 427,000 foreigners visited Thailand in 2021, compared to a regular annual average of 40 million.

On April 1, the government scrapped the need for international travellers to undertake a pre-departure PCR test. It discussed plans Friday to replace PCR tests for arrivals with the less accurate Rapid Antigen (RAT) tests and institute shorter quarantine times. CCSA announced it would postpone such measures until May, pending the impact of the Songkran festival on infection rates.

The economic crisis is being exacerbated by the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine that has led to higher energy and food prices. Being a net importer of oil, the country faces increased risks of a trade and account deficit with rising operating costs for its manufacturing sector.

The official inflation rate rose in February to 5.28 percent, its highest in 13 years and well outside the central bank’s maximum target of 3 percent. In a bid to keep the economy on life support the bank has retained its key interest rate at an historic low of 0.5 percent.

The value of the national currency, the baht, is also falling as international investors flock to the US currency.

Government growth estimates are being questioned.

Kasikorn Research Center (K-Research) recently lowered its growth projection from 3.7 percent to 2.5 percent. The World Bank has also revised the country’s annual growth from 3.9 percent to 2.9 percent.



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