

Thailand: Bid for Chinese New Year tourists threatens new COVID surge

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20 January 2023

Embracing the lie that COVID-19 is “mild” and “endemic,” the Thai regime is setting the stage for a new surge of the pandemic by attempting to kickstart its tourism sector by opening up to Chinese New Year tourists.

With the ending of zero-COVID in China and the opening up of its borders, some 300,000 Chinese are expected to travel to Thailand in the next three months. Several provincial areas and cities in Thailand are resuming Chinese New Year celebrations for the first time since 2020.

“It has been three years since we launched such large-scale Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations in Thailand due to the COVID-19 pandemic,” Chinese embassy charge d’affaires Yang Xin told the *China Daily*. “This year’s celebration back to normal is really encouraging.”

These comments reflect the abrupt about-face of the Chinese government, under huge international pressure, in ending its effective zero-COVID policy and embracing the murderous “let it rip” approach taken in countries around the world.

In Thailand, the true picture of daily COVID cases is masked behind a complete dismantling of testing and tracing. Official daily cases, now updated on a weekly basis, are indicating the beginnings of a case spike with the latest seven-day average of 4,166 daily cases.

Thailand’s Department of Disease Control (DDC) has declared that the arrival of Chinese tourists is “unlikely” to trigger a spike in the number of new COVID-19 infections. Large crowds, however, attend the Chinese New Year’s celebrations, likely turning them into mass spreader events.

The country’s health system, which is already under immense pressure, is assuming the worst. Deputy clerk

Suksan Kittisupakorn told the *Bangkok Post* that the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the Ministry of Public Health have prepared more than 10,000 hospital beds for new COVID-19 patients.

The tourist promotion is being driven by a flagging economy and big business demands for profit. The Thai economy has been hit hard by the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the US economic war against China. The IMF is forecasting a deceleration in growth and potentially a recession in Thailand’s major markets, the US and the European Union. Thailand’s economy is heavily dependent on export, which constitute 55 percent of GDP.

A recent World Bank report projected that Thailand’s economy will expand by 3.4 percent in 2022 and 3.6 percent in 2023—revised by 0.7 percentage points since June. This estimate is well below the economic growth for 2022 and 2023 in comparable countries, such as Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia, where projections range from 5 to 7 percent.

The Thai ruling class is pinning its hope of reviving the economy on restoring the tourist sector, which constituted a fifth of Thailand’s GDP prior to the pandemic. A revival of tourism, which is labour-intensive, could also boost private consumption, adding to economic growth.

The return of Chinese tourists is critical. Chinese tourists accounted for nearly a third of Thailand’s 40 million visitors before the onset of the pandemic, but this dropped to virtually zero after Beijing imposed its zero-COVID restrictions. After China’s borders reopened on January 8, the Thai government is estimating that 3 to 5 million Chinese tourists will return in 2023, as part of the predicted 25 million international visitors. This is almost 15 million more than in 2022.

Incoming tourists will no longer be required to

undergo COVID testing, let alone show proof of double vaccination.

“A full recovery hinges on arrivals from China, which are not expected to return en masse in the first half of 2023,” Suksit Suvunditkul, president of the Thai Hotels Association Southern Chapter, told Bloomberg.

A key part of returning to “normal” economic activity is lulling the Thai population into a false sense of security. A recent comment in the *Bangkok Post*, headlined “Making Peace with Covid,” is typical. Along with casting doubts on the safety of vaccines and promoting quack remedies such as green chiretta (a traditional herb), it completely downplayed the health impact of the virus.

“I think we can finally celebrate the New Year with peace of mind,” said Dr Thiravat Hemachudha, chief of the Thai Red Cross’s Emerging Infectious Diseases Health Science Centre, claiming the public was now “largely immune” to the virus. “The symptoms will be less severe as the virus becomes more easily transmissible in the future,” he added.

These statements fly in the face of repeated infections of the global population and reported by the WSWS, which confirm that repeat infections result in steadily worse health outcomes for patients, including the risk of death, hospitalization and Long COVID. The prospect of “living with the virus” also poses the inevitability of new variants which further increase the danger of infection and death.

A report by the Institute for Health Metrics & Evaluation (IHME) estimated that, as of December 12, 77 percent of the Thai population in Thailand had been infected at least once, and that a surge was expected to begin in January following Chinese New Year’s celebrations. Daily infections were modelled to rise to 328,400 by January 29, 2023.

The government’s policies are setting the working class on a collision course with the capitalist system. While increased tourist numbers might provide a limited boost to businesses, it will do little or nothing to improve the living conditions of workers and the rural poor. Indeed, while a modest increase is projected for the urban economy, the rural economy lags behind. At the same time, working people face greater risks of serious illness and death with the spread of COVID.

According to the World Bank, poverty is projected to rise to 6.6 percent in 2022 from 6.3 percent in 2021.

Much of the rise is bound up with the phasing out of COVID-19 relief measures as well as rising inflation. The minimum wage was increased in October by 5 percent—well below the official inflation rate of more than 7 percent.

Even those earning above the minimum wage are struggling to make ends meet. The Thai Chamber of Commerce University’s Center for Economic and Business Forecasting warned that household debt in Thailand will likely rise to around 89.3 percent of GDP or 14.97 trillion baht by the end of 2022, the highest rate in 16 years.

The deepening social and economic crisis in Thailand will inevitably fuel rising social tensions and outbreaks of the class struggle, as is increasingly the case around the world.



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