

East Timor records first confirmed coronavirus case amid floods

By Patrick O'Connor
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East Timor recorded its first confirmed COVID-19 virus case on Saturday. The south-east Asian state is among the most impoverished in the world, with only minimal healthcare facilities. If the global pandemic sweeps through the country, there could be mass casualties.

East Timor had previously been among a small group of countries without confirmed cases of coronavirus. Timor's interim health minister, Elia dos Reis Amaral, issued a statement Saturday explaining that the patient was a foreign national who had recently arrived from overseas. The person had been isolated and reportedly has only mild symptoms.

How many others are infected is unknown. The World Health Organisation (WHO) provided East Timor with 10 testing kits, which allows only 1,000 people to be tested in a country of 1.3 million people. The tests also have to be sent to Australia in order to be "validated," delaying the results.

Even before the confirmed case, social tensions within East Timor were high. On March 8, police fired tear gas to disperse a crowd of people in Tibar, west of the capital Dili, who were protesting against a quarantine site set up in their village for suspected coronavirus patients. One of those quarantined with coronavirus-like symptoms had reportedly recently returned from holidaying in Italy, one of the disease's epicentres.

Tibar is home to a large rubbish dump. Impoverished residents rake through the daily-delivered rubbish, hoping to find metal sheeting, tin cans, clothes, or other useable items. Rubbish is burned, creating acrid smoke that has created numerous health problems in the village. One woman protesting the quarantine site declared, in a video that was widely distributed on social media, that Tibar had "become a place to put

rubbish, to put [people with] HIV, tuberculosis and coronavirus."

The Timorese government has responded to the first confirmed COVID-19 case by announcing a month-long lockdown and preparing a state of emergency. The country's only land border, with the Indonesian province of West Timor, is closed to both goods and people. Schools have been shut down, with students told to take an "extraordinary holiday" that will last at least one week. Universities are closed until at least April 4. The Catholic Church also announced that mass services were suspended.

Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak said his government would make a "rapid" and "emergency" response to the confirmed case. The government, however, is mired in crisis after Ruak lost his parliamentary majority and had his proposed budget voted down in January. A rival coalition of six parliamentary groupings, led by former President and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, has sought the endorsement of Fretilin President Francisco Guterres to form a new government, but the impasse continues (see: "East Timor's coalition government collapses").

Ruak's inability to pass his budget through the parliament means that the government funding is through Timor's "duodecimal system," which each month allocates one-twelfth of the 2019 budget. Unless somehow circumvented, this restriction will mean the government will not be able to make large-scale investments in health and other emergency infrastructure in the event of a large-scale virus outbreak.

East Timor is among those countries with little capacity to respond to the coronavirus crisis. The former Portuguese colony was invaded by Indonesia and brutally occupied until 1999, when Australian

imperialism staged a military intervention on bogus “humanitarian” grounds—which was subsequently exposed by the refusal of successive Australian governments to make available to the Timorese people basic healthcare and other social services.

In 2002 the state received formal sovereignty. In the 18 years since, the Timorese ruling elite have demonstrated the bankruptcy of their claim that they could advance the social and economic interests of the working class and rural poor through the formation of a new capitalist statelet on half of a small island.

The healthcare situation in the country is dire. According to WHO statistics, annual health spending amounts to 1.5 percent of its small gross domestic product, equivalent to just \$US102 per person. Hospitals and health clinics are entirely unprepared for a coronavirus pandemic. In rural districts, health clinics often experience power failures and, according to UNICEF, up to 70 percent of village clinics have no access to running water.

Last Sunday, the operators of Bairo Pite Clinic, a non-government organisation providing free healthcare, issued an “urgent” appeal on an East Timor email group for face masks, explaining that they had run out.

The government’s inability to respond to a significant crisis was demonstrated on March 13, when monsoonal rains triggered flash floods in parts of Dili. Drain systems clogged and flooding destroyed at least 190 homes and affected another 1,500 households. One person, aged 16, was killed, reportedly after he saved a woman and her baby from drowning. Inundated residents were largely left to fend for themselves.

One Dili worker, whose family home was submerged by the flood waters, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “The government was not only unprepared for the flood but has done virtually nothing to respond to the emergency situation. During and after the flood, throughout the weekend, we saw not a single government official assisting us. Even though we were desperate for a dry and safe place to stay and sleep, clean water, food, clothing, access to a toilet, and healthcare, nothing was provided. We had to go to a friend’s place to do the washing. Most of my neighbours had to clean their clothing with dirty water, using the same river that caused the flooding.”

He added: “The first confirmed corona virus in Dili has got people in a panicked and worried situation.

With the inadequate condition of public hospitals throughout the country I fear that the spreading of the virus will be hard to contain—it could be like a wildfire. The government has no adequate facilities to quarantine coronavirus-positive patients.”

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