

Even as death toll climbs, Indonesian government urges workers under 45 to resume work

By Owen Howell
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Indonesia's official coronavirus taskforce declared on Tuesday that workers under the age of 45 will be permitted to return to work over the coming weeks.

The decision followed an announcement two weeks earlier, that President Joko Widodo's government wants to begin relaxing social restrictions and reopen the country's borders and nonessential businesses by July. The statements follow moves by governments around the world for premature returns to work.

As Channel News Asia reported, Indonesian Disaster Mitigation Agency chief Doni Monardo told a press briefing at the Merdeka Palace in Jakarta: "Why we are suggesting heads of companies prioritise relatively young workers is due to the fact that those aged 60 and above have the highest mortality rate."

Doni referred to data showing that the over-60 age group made up 45 percent of deaths in Indonesia, while the 46–59 age group accounted for 40 percent. "If we can protect both vulnerable groups, it means that we can protect 85 percent of our citizens," he said.

Doni cited the comparatively low death rate—15 percent—of the below 45 age group, which comprises the vast majority of the population, as a justification for sending them back to work: "The young population under 45-years-old are physically healthy and they have high mobility. If they are exposed [to the coronavirus], they might not get sick because they show no symptoms."

These assertions were put forward as the findings of experts, despite the well-known fact that young people may be asymptomatic carriers of the virus, who bear the risk of unknowingly passing it on to the more vulnerable or elderly. This sort of reasoning is based, not on a scientific and rational approach to

understanding and containing the virus, but purely on economic considerations.

The Widodo administration has been relentlessly pushing to kick start the Indonesian economy by whatever means necessary and, as its recent announcements have made clearer, is willing to place the lives of millions in danger to resume the production of corporate profits.

Economic growth has slowed down to 2.97 percent in the first quarter of the year, well below the median 4 percent predicted by most analysts. A senior government official told the *Asia Times* that the decision to force workers back on the job was "based more on economic calculations than on the health aspect."

Epidemiologists across the country have warned that a return to work would dramatically increase the potential for transmission of the virus and put the entire population, regardless of age, at extreme risk of physical debilitation or death.

The Indonesian government's declarations have been made even as the coronavirus continues to ravage the densely-populated island nation. Contrary to national health ministry claims, the virus is showing no signs of abatement.

Last Tuesday, Indonesia's COVID-19 death toll passed the 1,000 mark. The announcement of a return to work was made after a record spike in daily cases, with 533 new infections last Saturday. A new record high was set on Wednesday with 639 new cases, amid a sharp rise in the official numbers. The total now stands at 17,514 cases and 1,148 deaths.

Indonesia recorded its first two cases on March 2, even though the virus was known by authorities to be

spreading throughout the country since late January. Its fatality rate has since overtaken all other countries in East and Southeast Asia, apart from China.

Most importantly, the official death toll only includes deaths from positive cases confirmed by specimen tests using the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) method at laboratories. Deaths from probable cases are not included, despite the significant rise in burials under COVID-19 funeral procedures. Health experts have suggested the actual toll could be four times greater than the official government figure.

The number of persons under surveillance for suspected infection has grown to more than 250,000 people, according to the *Jakarta Globe*. Probable cases in hospitals have increased to over 32,000 patients.

Indonesia's limited testing capacity, one of the lowest in the world, has meant, however, that after two months only 187,965 people have been tested, in a country of 273 million people. In other words, it has conducted around 688 tests per million people, compared with 64,977 per million in Spain.

Such a low rate is due to the chronic lack of testing equipment, the delayed results of PCR tests, and the government's refusal to invest in a rigorous mass testing regime.

The underfunded and depleted healthcare system was already overwhelmed at the outset of the pandemic. Indonesia is estimated to have fewer than four doctors and 12 hospital beds per 10,000 people, and less than three intensive care beds per 100,000 people.

Despite the limited knowledge on the true extent of the spread, President Widodo is urging workers to resume their jobs and said that the lockdown measures could be relaxed by the end of May. "Until the discovery of an effective vaccine, we must live in peace with the coronavirus for some time to come," he told a press conference.

The new policy is being falsely portrayed as an effort to prevent further lay-offs and assist the millions of unemployed workers during the pandemic. As of April 13, at least 2.8 million people had lost their jobs, according to data from the Workers Social Security Agency. More than half were furloughed and placed on unpaid leave.

The Indonesian government's coronavirus response has consisted primarily of gigantic stimulus packages aimed at supporting big business with a pittance

reserved for healthcare and token social welfare investments.

Many frustrated workers are unable to access government social aid, which is hampered by data problems. According to the government's worst-case estimates, up to 5.2 million more people could lose their jobs and 3.8 million fall into poverty during the pandemic.

In Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, the virus has infected 5,774 people and killed 460 so far. The megacity, which is home to over 10 million people, has scores of dangerously overcrowded neighbourhoods known as *kampung*s where workers and their families live in cramped, adjoined houses or informal settlements with shared toilets. Physical distancing is all but impossible in these areas.

Indonesia's Agrarian and Spatial Planning Ministry said in 2019 that at least 118 of the 267 sub-districts in Jakarta had slums. Jakarta health agency officials are aware that the virus has begun to infect the impoverished workers in *kampung*s, such as Kebon Kacang, Johar Baru, and Kemayoran, which have contributed heavily to the city's confirmed cases tally.

Residents of these poor urban districts, as well as the rural masses in the countryside, are being tested for the virus through the rapid antibody method, which is known to produce false negatives, while the more accurate PCR tests are largely reserved for patients at major Jakarta hospitals.

Around 32 percent of Jakarta's workers are in the informal sector, earning an average of \$US168 per month. Thousands are not only at risk of losing their incomes but also their homes, with about 27 percent of Jakartans struggling to pay rent amid the city's surging housing prices and general cost of living.

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