

# Indonesia experiences major surge in confirmed COVID-19 cases

By Owen Howell  
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Over the past week, there has been a dramatic spike in Indonesia's confirmed coronavirus case figures. Every day since last Wednesday has witnessed over 500 new cases, with new daily records set on Thursday (973) and Saturday (949). The number of nationwide infections now stands at 23,165 with 1,418 deaths.

This surge has taken place amid a widespread mass exodus from the major cities to the countryside, drawn out over the past two months. This has resulted in formerly isolated rural areas now becoming COVID-19 hotspots.

Confronted with financial ruin and potential starvation in the cities, Indonesian workers have fled *en masse*, since partial lockdown measures were first adopted in April, to live with their relatives in the country, where subsistence agriculture still prevails. Another driving force has been Idul Fitri, a religious holiday marking the end of Ramadan. Traditionally, Idul Fitri is celebrated by the congregation of families across the country, resulting in an annual mass exodus, or *mudik*.

Even though tens of millions were expected to return home to the countryside, posing the risk of a catastrophic transmission of the virus, the Widodo administration refused for weeks to implement transport restrictions. When a “*mudik* ban” was finally announced on April 21, it consisted of little more than a government recommendation to stay at home. By this time, hundreds of thousands in Java alone had already migrated from the cities, which had become centres of viral infection.

In only eight days in late March, for example, more than 14,000 passengers travelled on almost 900 buses from capital city Jakarta to Wonogiri regency in Central Java. Similar numbers journeyed to West Java over the same period.

Even as recently as mid-May, Soekarno-Hatta Airport in Jakarta was thronged with travellers desperate to catch a flight home, as public transportation was allowed to

resume 50 percent of its capacity. Throughout the last two weeks, thousands have been passing daily through the port of Merak, the main gateway between Java and Sumatra islands.

The government's mixed messages and sheer indifference to the danger of the virus have found their reflection in scenes emerging from the Indonesian press of overcrowded markets and shopping malls during Idul Fitri, which took place last weekend.

Markets and retail stores were permitted to remain open through the holiday season. The annual shopping rush is a huge source of revenue for businesses through the sale of clothes, gifts, and souvenirs. In early April, investment minister Luhut Pandjaitan admitted at a press conference that economic considerations had played a central role in the decision not to close non-essential businesses for the holiday, despite the enormous danger to public health.

More broadly, the government's delayed, ineffective and negligent response to the coronavirus pandemic has been characterised by a persistent prioritisation of the security of the stock market and financial sector over the safety of the working and rural masses.

However, there is a deeper fear in ruling circles over the economic impact of the pandemic: mass opposition from the working class. Significantly, the government's COVID-19 task force is dominated by ex-generals, most of whom served during the military dictatorship under Suharto (1967-98). Their primary concern has been that the economic crisis flowing from a full lockdown could trigger social unrest, in a country where social tensions had already been rising previously.

The frustration and astonishment felt by large sections of Indonesian workers towards the government's incompetence was captured in the Twitter hashtag #IndonesiaTerserah (“Whatever, Indonesia”), which went viral on May 16. It served as a platform for discussion on the lack of physical distancing measures.

The government is trying to deflect attention from its own negligence by blaming the surge in case numbers onto ordinary workers and peasants. Commenting on the figures, National COVID-19 task force spokesman Achmad Yurianto: “This illustrates people’s discipline in obeying health protocols in fighting the outbreak.”

Local media outlets routinely condemn the population for not adhering to non-existent “health protocols,” while praising the Widodo administration’s supposed endeavours to ensure public safety. President Widodo’s decision to spend the holiday at his lavish Bogor Palace in West Java was absurdly portrayed by his spokesperson Angkie Yudistia as “part of the President’s commitment to physical distancing and reducing the potential for COVID-19 transmission.”

In fact, the government’s pandemic response acquired an openly criminal element two weeks ago when it urged all workers under the age of 45 to return to work, as part of its aim for a full reopening by late July.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the reopening plan, still under development, seeks to have shopping centres resume limited operations on June 8, followed by schools. Restaurants, bars, cafes, and gyms would be allowed to begin opening on July 6, before lifting restrictions on travel and public worship. The government has set up a team to gauge which cities should relax their meagre lockdown measures first.

Such reckless policies are being discussed every day in Widodo’s cabinet, in the midst of a worldwide abandonment by governments of any attempt to contain the virus, even as it sweeps through the population at a horrifying rate.

Epidemiologists and health experts suspect the number of coronavirus deaths is far higher than the official toll. A Reuters report noted that the March burial figure for Jakarta cemeteries was the highest since such data began being collected a decade ago. “I’m struggling to find another reason than unreported COVID-19 deaths,” said Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan.

The grim increase in deaths throughout the country is putting immense strain on gravediggers to cope with the influx of corpses without being infected themselves. At least 2,107 people have been buried under COVID-19 safety protocols in the epicentre of Jakarta alone, nearly double the reported national toll. Other cities have also seen unusually high burial figures in recent months.

The country’s limited testing capabilities—around 220,000 tests for a population of over 273 million—have made it impossible to gauge the true rate of infection.

What is known is that the virus has spread to all 34 of Indonesia’s provinces. Probable cases at hospitals stand at over 32,000 patients, and more than 250,000 people are under surveillance for suspected infection, according to the *Jakarta Globe*.

A premature reopening could push Indonesia’s underfunded and ill-prepared health care infrastructure over the edge. As of earlier this month, due to the inadequate supply of protective equipment at hospitals, at least 55 medical workers had died from the virus, including 38 doctors and 17 nurses.

Strikes by hospital workers are evidently occurring in many areas, but are rarely reported. Last week, the *Jakarta Post* wrote that as many as 109 medical workers at a hospital in South Sumatra were dismissed on Thursday for holding a five-day strike against unsafe working conditions. The workers lacked personal protective equipment (PPE) and were being paid just \$US50 per month, without any of the promised government incentives.

The pandemic has had a devastating impact in the social position of the working class. The Indonesian Chamber of Commerce has estimated that more than six million workers have been laid off. A survey taken last month, according to the *Economist*, revealed that a quarter of the population could no longer fulfil their basic daily needs without borrowing money.

The government has allocated vast sums of money to prop up the corporate sector, but little or nothing for working people. Last week, Widodo conceded that only a quarter of urban workers whose livelihoods were damaged by the crisis have received belated and minuscule social aid.

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