

Indonesia passes 100,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases

By Owen Howell
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Even as Indonesia passed the milestone of 100,000 confirmed coronavirus cases on Monday, the Widodo administration is pushing ahead with a large-scale reopening of businesses across the country, endangering the lives of millions of workers and their families. Faced with an ever-growing threat of recession, the Indonesian ruling elite is desperate to keep the economy afloat regardless of the consequences for working people.

Last week, the government announced the formation of the Committee for COVID-19 Mitigation and National Economic Recovery, a team designed to replace the current coronavirus taskforce. It is being headed by Minister for State-Owned Enterprises Erick Thohir.

The team was established with the stated aim of “balancing” the government’s health and economic responses to the pandemic, “in the sense that both be managed under the auspices of a single institution for maximum coordination,” Economic Minister Airlangga Hartanto told the press.

The decision has come under criticism from epidemiologists and commentators for the domination of the team’s membership by corporate representatives that will further prioritise economic recovery over containment of the virus.

The principal economic problem confronting Indonesia has been financing the budget deficit needed to respond to the massive global downturn. The fiscal response has amounted to \$US47.6 billion, largely in the form of stimulus packages to prop up big business, with scarce reserves for health and social welfare.

Such spending, however, has proven inadequate, with Bank Indonesia predicting an economic contraction of between 4 and 4.8 percent in the second quarter. The Finance Ministry, meanwhile, expects the budget

deficit to reach 6.3 percent and the economy to shrink by 0.4 percent this year.

The World Bank offered a much less optimistic projection, suggesting output could contract by as much as 3.5 per cent in 2020 and only see a partial recovery in 2021—in other words, remaining around 8 per cent below what it otherwise would have been but for the pandemic.

For Indonesia, an emerging economy that has steadily expanded by about 5 percent a year over the recent period, this would be a disaster. In preparation, the government is increasingly hoping to revive tourism. Investment Minister Luhut Pandjaitan is frantically arranging to reopen major tourist destinations like Bali, Yogyakarta, and Banyuwangi.

Bali, which contributes to more than half of the nation’s tourism revenues, has seen the number of coronavirus cases more than double to 3,219 since businesses opened again for residents on July 9. Borders will open for domestic tourists this Friday, and for international tourists on September 11.

As infection rates surge, even in remote sections of the archipelago, the government decided to cancel its daily COVID-19 media briefings, arousing suspicions that it is seeking to under-report or conceal case numbers from the public.

Through January and February, the government publicly denied it had discovered any cases, concealing data in an attempt to “avoid panic.” When the first cases were announced in early March, top government officials began to downplay the risk posed by the virus, floating a myriad of unscientific cures such as daily prayers, a local rice dish, and a eucalyptus necklace, among others.

The virus was allowed to spread rapidly from province to province, before partial lockdown measures

were implemented in late March in Jakarta, the virus epicentre. Infection rates continued to surge during the “lockdown,” partially due to the lack of travel restrictions around the Idul Fitri religious holiday. Eager to resume unhindered production, the government commenced its economic reopening late last month, leading to a dramatic rise in infections and deaths.

As of yesterday, the country had 102,051 recorded cases and 4,901 deaths, figures which vastly underestimate the real scale of the spread. Indonesia has witnessed over 1,000 new infections daily for 36 consecutive days.

Many deaths are likely going undetected, as both East Java and Jakarta have reported sharp rises in burial rates over the past four months. Suspected COVID-19 deaths—i.e. of patients who were not able to be tested—are not counted in the official death toll.

The health sector, which is both underfunded and underequipped, has been particularly devastated. According to local paper *Warta Kota*, the Indonesian Doctors Association (IDI) has estimated that six out of every 100 deaths were medical workers—the worst mortality rate among health workers in Southeast Asia. At least 70 health workers are believed to have died from COVID-19.

In the absence of significant government funding, a token medical equipment package, worth \$US1.4 million, was delivered last week by the Australian government. This will be swiftly exhausted by a healthcare system on the brink of collapse.

Jakarta’s medical infrastructure is now overflowing due to the recent influx of patients. “In some instances, we pick up patients from their homes, we bring them to the hospital, and the hospital is already full,” Iwan Kurniawan, head of the capital city’s ambulance division, explained to VICE Asia.

Indonesia is still ranked among the lowest countries in the world for coronavirus testing. Despite a renewed effort to expand capacity, the country has only performed 5,178 tests per million people. The extreme shortage of testing equipment, together with the lack of any contact tracing regime, has resulted in widespread undetected viral transmission, spiralling out of control across all 34 provinces.

Testing is largely confined to Java, Indonesia’s most populous island. The country operates 269 polymerase

chain reaction (PCR) testing laboratories, half of which are located in Java. Jakarta, with its dozens of ministry-run laboratories, state universities, and private hospitals, accounts for 30 percent of the total samples tested nationwide.

The regional disparity in testing is nowhere more apparent than in Papua province. Balitbangkes, the largest PCR laboratory in Papua, had no choice but to stop accepting new samples from Saturday, as it lacks the required reagent and single-use equipment. Papua, a growing hotspot for the virus, has recorded 2,720 cases, yet none of its 10 labs are currently accepting new samples.

PCR machines are spread across the country, but populous provinces like Riau, North Maluku, North Kalimantan, and Southeast Sulawesi only operate one lab each, while Jambi, Bengkulu, Central Kalimantan, Gorontalo, and Maluku each have just two.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended a minimum case detection benchmark of one test per 1,000 population per week to be able to define a region’s positivity rate. But the WHO’s latest situation report on Indonesia showed that, throughout the country, only Jakarta had met this benchmark.

Nasser, an expert staffer on the old COVID-19 taskforce, offered the following excuse to the *Jakarta Post*: “Everything is so sudden and new, so there wasn’t really any time to prepare the labs well.” In reality, the healthcare system has been subject to decades of cuts and austerity measures, leaving it totally unprepared to deal with the requirements of a pandemic.

Moreover, the pandemic has had an equally devastating impact on the social position of the working class. The Indonesian Chamber of Commerce has estimated that more than six million workers have been laid off, as companies struggled to survive through the partial “lockdown.” The worsening social crisis will undoubtedly lead to mounting unrest among workers and peasants.

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