

Government reopening campaign leads to COVID-19 surge in Indonesia

By Owen Howell
2 September 2020

Indonesia's COVID-19 case numbers are continuing to surge as new daily records were reached on three consecutive days late last week. Saturday witnessed a spike of 3,308 confirmed cases bringing the national positivity rate—the percentage of positive results from all tests—up to more than 15 percent.

Over 2,000 cases have been detected every day for the past week. The virus's death toll, by far the highest in South East Asia, has risen to nearly 100 fatalities a day, suggesting that infection rates are considerably higher than official figures. In total, data from the health ministry has confirmed 174,796 cases and 7,417 deaths nationwide.

The government believes the recent spike is related to the lifting of mobility limits across the capital city, Jakarta, during public celebrations of Independence Day on August 17 and Islamic New Year on August 20. Jakarta, the country's initial virus epicentre, saw a record increase on Sunday of 1,114 infections.

Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan claimed in an online discussion broadcast last Monday via YouTube that the spread of COVID-19 in the capital is "relatively under control." He presented no evidence, however, to substantiate this vague assertion.

In reality, the rapid spread of the pandemic in Jakarta and across the country is the outcome of the government's disastrous efforts to reopen the economy, which began in early June. Governor Anies himself has been at the forefront of this back-to-work drive, with utter disregard for the deaths and illnesses that it is resulting in.

On Friday, the Jakarta administration extended partial social restriction measures for the fifth time, to be effective until September 10. The move demonstrates the Indonesian ruling elite's resistance to imposing a full-scale lockdown, which would necessarily involve a

halt to production in most industry sectors.

The reopening of businesses throughout the archipelago has created the conditions for new clusters to emerge. The latest spike has consisted largely of workplace transmissions.

In the Cikarang industrial zone of Bekasi in West Java, at least 88 workers at a factory belonging to automotive spare part manufacturer PT Nippon Oilseal Kogyu tested positive for COVID-19 last week. The company has closed some of its units as a result, according to [kompas.com](#).

Bekasi's many industrial plants, located outside Jakarta, have recently emerged as new viral hotspots. Over the past two weeks, the local administration announced 242 new cases at an LG Electronics factory, as well as 71 infections at a Suzuki motorcycle plant in the same area.

The city of Depok in West Java experienced a spate of clusters in offices. Local coronavirus taskforce spokesperson Dadang Wihana told *Tempo* last week that many of those who have been infected: "[W]ork at offices, such as banks and hospitals. New clusters at such offices created new family clusters in Depok."

The city administration revealed previously that around 60 percent of its residents commute daily to nearby Jakarta for work. Jakarta itself has reported at least 90 office clusters since early June.

The reopening of schools has accompanied the government's frenzied drive to send workers back on the job. For example, Sragen regency in Central Java is planning to reopen 63 elementary and junior high schools in 20 districts on Monday, despite a surge of 89 new cases within the small area over the last two weeks.

Paediatricians and teachers have openly criticised the reckless and premature reopening, and have called for

schools to focus on distanced learning to prevent children from contracting the disease. Education Minister Nadiem Makarim has dismissed these concerns, describing his government's decision as "bold" but necessary.

The Federation of Indonesian Teachers Associations (FSGI) has received reports of at least 180 teachers and students testing positive. In addition, the Indonesian Pediatricians Association (IDAI) found 60 children have died from the virus, while over 6,000 aged 6 to 17 have contracted the coronavirus.

The government expanded a school reopening policy early last month for schools in COVID-19 "yellow zones," or supposed moderate-risk areas. When a previous policy in early July allowing schools in "green zones" (low-risk areas) to reopen was in force, the FSGI discovered 79 regions had violated the guidelines. Local authorities have been herding children to school and forcing parents to resume work, even when it defies the nominal official directives.

The true scale of transmission through workplaces and schools has likely not been recorded due to extremely low levels of testing. Indonesia has so far performed over 2.2 million tests, in a population of over 273 million. In other words, only 8,118 tests per million people have been conducted, placing the country's testing rate (ranked 162nd) among the lowest in the world. By comparison, Singapore has performed 312,870 tests per million people.

Health experts have expressed growing concern over the country's low testing capacity, urging authorities to adopt an aggressive testing regime, large-scale contact tracing and isolation for those with confirmed infections. Professor Wiku Adisasmito, chair of the national taskforce, admitted that "Indonesia can only achieve 35.6 percent of the World Health Organisation standard."

The *Sydney Morning Herald* recently contacted two leading epidemiologists, Pandu Riono and Dicky Budiman, who both estimated the actual number of cases was now more than one million people. If this were true, Indonesia would rank at number four for infections in the world.

Indonesia's understaffed and under-equipped healthcare system remains under pressure.

The Indonesian Medical Association (IDI) revealed on Monday that at least 100 doctors have died from the

virus. Among them are distinguished and well-known professionals from Airlangga University's School of Medicine and Soetomo Hospital in Surabaya, East Java.

IDI Chairman Daeng Fiqih said the association was attempting to coordinate with the national taskforce to ensure the availability of protective equipment in hospitals and health facilities so as to prevent more deaths among health workers. He also urged hospitals to create a work schedule based on preventing fatigue which has made workers more vulnerable to the virus.

The current number of active cases, 41,420, is pushing the medical system to its limits. Last week, IDI spokesperson Halik Malik told the Anadolu Agency that deaths among doctors have increased significantly over the last two months. The majority of the victims were between 28 and 39 years old.

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