

Myanmar sees major coronavirus outbreak after a month of zero cases

By Owen Howell
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Within the space of a month, a coronavirus outbreak in Myanmar's western state of Rakhine has erupted and quickly spread across the entire country. Confirmed infections have increased tenfold, while the death toll has climbed more than six times. Despite the imposition of lockdowns, the virus threatens to spiral out of control.

Surrounded by nations afflicted with the pandemic, Myanmar fared relatively well between March and August, with cases limited to 374 and six deaths. Its first new case in a month was reported on August 16, as a cluster emerged in Sittwe, the state capital of Rakhine. Ever since, new infections have doubled every week.

Official figures now stand at 3,636 cases and 39 deaths. These numbers no doubt underestimate the actual extent of the spread, as smaller clusters are being found daily throughout the country. Only the diminutive state of Kayah is reportedly free from the disease.

Major cities have recorded sharp increases in infection rates over the past two weeks. In Mandalay, cases grew from six to 96. The national capital Nay Pyi Taw, where the most severe restrictions have been imposed, has witnessed a growth from two to 34 cases, including several government officials.

The virus epicentre is the commercial hub Yangon, a densely populated city of over 7 million people. Cases jumped from 236 to 1730 in just two weeks. The city's hospitals are overwhelmed in a nation with one of the world's poorest healthcare systems. In response to the sudden influx, city authorities are struggling to provide extra facilities, creating two tented hospitals with hundreds of more beds.

The government's health ministry has been inconsistent in its announcements of new data, failing

to reveal where cases were found until days later. When two patients died on September 7, for instance, the government waited more than 24 hours to inform the public.

Partial lockdowns were already implemented in 29 of Yangon's 44 townships, when the government last Friday announced a ban on all travel out of the city. Public transport, including domestic flights and long-distance bus routes, ground to a halt nationwide, and will remain closed until October 1.

Neighbours China and Thailand are both intensifying security on shared borders to curb the spread. While the Thai military has begun tightening border restrictions and sending back Myanmar nationals, China recently detected two new coronavirus cases in the Yunnan city of Ruili, separated from Myanmar by a shallow river.

Rakhine state, which accounts for nearly a quarter of total cases, has been under semi-lockdown since August 26. Measures include the temporary closure of businesses and night-time curfews across Sittwe, and in the townships of Kyaukphyu, Mrauk-U, Taunggok, and Thandwe.

Myanmar's leader, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, has called for a "union spirit" among Rakhine residents to fight the pandemic, promising sufficient food and financial assistance. The government, however, continues to block internet networks throughout Rakhine as part of its ongoing campaign of state repression waged against the Rohingya minority.

In addition, medical access to areas affected by military offensives has been limited, allegedly for security reasons, therefore undermining any effective COVID-19 response. In April, when the virus first appeared in Myanmar, a vehicle from the World Health Organisation (WHO) transporting swab samples came under fire, killing the driver.

Since 2017, the Myanmar armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, have engaged in brutal operations in Rakhine to terrorise the mostly Muslim Rohingya population. This has forced over 700,000 to flee to Bangladesh where they live in squalid refugee camps.

The spread of a highly contagious virus has provided the country's military-dominated regime with the opportunity to further stoke racial and communal tensions. This is aimed at diverting social anger away from the government and inciting hatred against the Rohingya.

State media outlets have promoted smears claiming that the Rohingya brought the virus to Myanmar from Bangladesh. Local outlet the *Voice* ran a racist cartoon labelling the Rohingya as "illegal interlopers." One of the numerous government-run newspapers published a list of the names of travellers who had recently returned to Yangon from Rakhine, demanding they turn themselves in to face legal punishment.

One Rakhine official revealed the private details of a Rohingya COVID-19 patient on his Facebook account, posting photos of the man's home along with its address.

Far from distancing herself from such blatant attacks on democratic rights, Suu Kyi has threatened to imprison returnees from Bangladesh, as well as "severely punish" immigrants and anyone harbouring them. Whereas she previously encouraged returnees from Thailand into Mon and Kayin states to seek medical care and quarantine facilities, there was a dramatic shift in policy when cases were first reported in Rakhine in June.

The military, meanwhile, has ramped up its assaults on the largely poor rural population of Rakhine. On September 3, the Tatmadaw swept through two villages in Kyauktaw township at night, firing indiscriminately and setting houses alight. Local media reported that 166 homes had been razed and two men shot dead.

Thousands of villagers fled their homes, while patients at overcrowded quarantine centres were forced to leave due to the shooting, facilitating potential community transmission. One resident who witnessed the attacks told Al Jazeera: "I am not worried about the virus. I am only worried about the Tatmadaw attacking our village again."

Military raids in Rakhine have displaced hundreds of thousands of people since late 2018 and have only

escalated amid the pandemic. Suu Kyi has repeatedly claimed these are conflicts between national armed forces and Rohingya separatist groups. In doing so, she continues to fulfil her role as a crass apologist for a conscious policy of ethnic cleansing by the military.

The coronavirus resurgence comes as Myanmar prepares for national elections in November. Opposition parties, citing apparent concern for the safety of voters during the pandemic, are beginning to call for polls to be delayed. Political tensions are mounting, as a postponement of two months poses the risk of a constitutional crisis and even the invocation of a state of emergency.

The social impact of the pandemic is also deepening. With economic growth predicted to slow to just 1.8 percent this year, the Asian Development Bank has warned that Myanmar's manufacturing sector and ability to attract foreign investment will be hit hard by global demand and supply shocks.

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