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COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: 10 Countries, 10 Responses

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COVID-19 pandemic has challenged Southeast Asia, not only directly as a health emergency, but also within the societal and economic dimensions. The disruption to supply chain, chaos due to restricted human and goods movement, and severe loss from tourism from some countries have already caused many Southeast Asian countries to decrease growth expectations for 2020.

At the onset, circa late January to end of February, the outbreak appeared manageable, as Southeast Asian countries seemed to avoid the rapid outbreaks as in South Korea and Iran. However, a drastic rise in new cases starting in mid-March have awakened all countries to the all-encompassing challenges that come with their own localized outbreaks while the number of confirmed cases grows across the region.

Facing the same enemy, each Southeast Asian state is using a different approach to curbing the spread of the virus, whether in the form of quarantines, lockdowns, border closures or travel bans, while each have introduced various economic stimulus packages to minimize the negative economic impacts.

This paper highlights some interesting points from each of the 10 Southeast Asian countries on how they have responded to COVID-19.

Table 1: COVID-19 Cases in Southeast Asia (as of 15 April 2020) ¹

Country	Total cases	confirmed	Total death	Mortality rate
Philippines	5453		349	6.40%
Indonesia	5136		469	9.13%
Malaysia	5072		83	1.63%
Singapore	3252		10	0.03%
Thailand	2643		43	1.62%
Vietnam	267		0	0
Brunei	136		1	0.07%
Cambodia	122		0	0
Myanmar	74		4	5.40%
Laos	19		0	0

Source: Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (data retrieved on 15 April 2020, 17:30 Western Indonesian Time).

Philippines

Confirmed cases and testing

Table 1 shows that the Philippines has the highest number of confirmed cases in Southeast Asia, with second highest mortality after Indonesia. The high majority of the cases are within the Metro Manila region. Health facility is a serious concern, as many hospitals are reportedly running low on Personal Protection Equipment, causing an increasing number of health workers to self-quarantine because of exposure to suspected COVID-19 cases.

Lack of testing was also widely criticised, but on 2 April the National Task Force announced that it will start conducting mass testing by 14 April. Department of Health is stepping up its case investigation and contact tracing system with Epidemiological Surveillance Units (ESU) through online system at regional, provincial, city and municipal level.

¹ It is important to underline that experts have doubted the low coronavirus counts of some Southeast Asian countries so the numbers might be misleading. See Zsombor Peter, "Experts Doubt Low Coronavirus Counts of Some Southeast Asian Countries," *VOA News*, 29 March 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/experts-doubt-low-coronavirus-counts-some-southeast-asian>

Restriction of movement

The government has been criticized for inconsistent approach to managing COVID-19.² In January and February, President Rodrigo Duterte had dismissed the threat but then made an abrupt move to impose a lockdown on the entire island of Luzon, including Metro Manila, as well as a curfew for cities in Luzon. The whole island of Luzon is put under an enhanced community quarantine or a lockdown that would restrict the movement of the population, with exceptions, within all the regions of the island. Originally announced to last until 12 April, the lockdown has since been extended to 30 April. As of 8 April, Quezon and Rizal provinces are also on lockdown.

The lockdown is enforced by the military and the police. Duterte was granted “special temporary power” by Congress, which is allowing him to implement draconian measures, which has drawn criticism due to the impact on the poor. On 1 April, Duterte ordered the police and the military to shoot protesters violating these measures.

On 16 March, it was announced that the Philippines will stop issuing visas to foreigners worldwide, while local airlines companies have cancelled all domestic and international flights until 14 April, which has since been extended to 30 April. Some exceptions for foreigners are given to spouses and children of repatriating Filipinos who had been working overseas, as well as foreign government and international organization officials accredited to the Philippines.

Economy and welfare

Several economic stimulus packages have been announced by the government. On 16 March, President Duterte announced a \$531 million stimulus, including wage subsidies, support for the tourism industry, and social security. One day after that, the government announced the entire country will be placed under a “state of calamity” for a period of six months, which will enable national and local governments to quickly access relief funds.

On March 30, the government approved a \$3.9 billion social protection program. On 7 April, a P 30.8 billion one-time grant to cities and municipalities, which will amount one month of cities and municipalities’ internal revenue allotment was also announced.

Indonesia

Confirmed cases and testing

Indonesia records the most deaths due to COVID-19 in Southeast Asia (See Table 1), and confirmed cases are rising at a very rapid rate. The Indonesian government has been widely criticised within the country, and to a certain extent by experts outside the country as well, for their response to COVID-19. Since the early spread of the pandemic in the region, the government’s response has been unclear, with inconsistent guidelines, lack of enforcement for physical distancing self-quarantines, and weak communication strategy. Previous CSIS Commentaries have made thorough criticisms to various aspects of the government’s response. See among others CSIS Commentaries DMRU No. 004 on decision making and transparency, No. 021 on the legal instruments, No. 022 on the chain of command in policy making.

2 Nick Aspinwall, “Coronavirus Lockdown Launches Manila Into Pandemonium,” *Foreign Policy*, 14 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/14/duterte-quarantine-philippines-coronavirus-lockdown-launches-manila-into-pandemonium/>

The lack of testing is one of the main criticisms towards the Indonesian government,³ including the complicated bureaucracy by the Health Ministry in bringing in test kits and equipment to read the PCR test samples. According to the data collected by Worldometer, only 36 in every million people are being tested for the coronavirus in Indonesia, making it the fourth worst in testing rate among countries with a population of 50 million or above. This makes Indonesia very low positioned in Worldometer's ranking that shows testing rates relative to the respective country, only better than Ethiopia with 16 tests for every million people, Bangladesh (18) and Nigeria (19). In comparison, the countries at the top of the ranking include South Korea with 8,996 tests for every million people and Singapore (6,666).

Experts have pointed out that the number of cases in Indonesia should be significantly higher than what is reported now, and that the official death toll is an understated figure.⁴

Restriction of movement

Since February, confusions surrounding the restriction of people's movement loom large. On 19 March it was finally announced that borders are closed to foreign visitors and citizens are prohibited from leaving the country for a month, thus until 19 April. Visa-free arrival, visa-on-arrival and free diplomatic/service visa policies are also suspended for a month. With a Permanent Staying Permit or a Temporary Staying Permit can enter Indonesia if they have a valid health certification stating that they are fit for travel issued by local health authorities in English at least seven days prior to departure.

What type of restriction should be upheld within the country is also an issue. The decentralized nature of government and health system in Indonesia complicates the country's effort to act swiftly in dealing with the spread of the virus. There were episodes that indicate the tension between the central and local governments, in particular between the central government and the local government of Jakarta, the capital city. Jakarta is the epicentre of the COVID-19 positive cases in the country, in which more than half of the confirmed cases are found as well as the number of deaths caused by the virus. A number of local leaders, including the governor of Jakarta, and the governor of the West Java province demanded the central government to allow them to implement a lockdown, either partially or fully. Reluctant at first, then the central government decided to give the two governors the authority needed to apply the stronger measures to contain the spread of the virus.

Economy and welfare

Economic consideration was a big factor in the confusion regarding border closure and regional quarantine. In the beginning, the central government seemed to be more concerned about the possible economic impact than the possible humanitarian impact of COVID-19. Thus, one of the first responses was to give incentive for the Indonesian people to travel in order to boost domestic tourism as news about the dire situation in China, South Korea and some other countries broke out. However, soon after the first confirmed case, followed by the exponential growth of the number of confirmed cases, the government started to weigh its already limited option.

Debates on whether or not the government should apply full or partial lockdown emerged and eventually the government chose the more moderate option that is to apply social distancing policy, and work/study/pray from home. However, it is difficult for the government to enforce strict social distancing policy. The chief reason is that the government had yet to announce economic assistance

3 Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, "Indonesia ranks among world's worst in coronavirus testing rate," *The Jakarta Post*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/07/indonesia-ranks-among-worlds-worst-in-coronavirus-testing-rate.html>

4 Ibid.

policy to compensate for the loss of income among the people, bearing in mind that Indonesia is a country where most of the people work in informal sectors with daily pay-check.

In addition, Ramadan the Islamic holy month is coming, and the Indonesia Muslims has the culture of exodus at the end of Ramadan, which is similar to the celebration of Chinese New Year in the Hubei province in China that proved to be a disastrous time. Such culture complicates cutting down the movement of the people. Eventually, the government announced an economic stimulus package that includes assistance to provide economic cushion to the most vulnerable group within the society, especially those who are below, on, and slightly above the poverty line. The package is worth IDR 405 trillion, and will be distributed in various forms, for example cash transfer, cash-for-work, and other forms of subsidy including electricity bill⁵.

Malaysia

Confirmed cases and testing

Up to 12 April 2020, Malaysia recorded the highest number of confirmed cases in Southeast Asia, but only within a few days it dropped to number 3 because the Philippines and Indonesia are recording new cases at a rapid pace (see Table 1).

Malaysia has been ramping up testing and contact tracing. By the fourth week of March, Malaysia doubled daily testing capacity to 7,000, before stepping that up to 16,500 by the first week of April. This is significantly higher than other Southeast Asian countries, but still lower than Singapore in terms of the number of testing relative to population.

Restriction of movement

Following initial relaxedness in responding to the outbreak, complicated by an abrupt change in government, on 16 March Malaysia closed its borders, banning all visitors into the country and barring residents from traveling overseas. Malay workers in Singapore returning to Malaysia have to undergo a swab test in Singapore and show a test certificate upon arrival without having to quarantine. However, local leaders in Johor have urged returning migrant workers to self-quarantine for 14 days.

On 18 March, Prime Minister enacted a 14-day “Movement Control Order (MCO)” on March 18, which has been extended until 14 April, by which non-essential businesses, schools, and places of worship are closed, and religious, sports, and cultural gatherings are prohibited. The Malaysian Armed Forces, using personnel and drones, have been mobilized for detection and enforcement. On 1 April, another restriction was announced, by which any travel to buy food, daily necessities, and medicine (list of essentials reduced to 10 items) has been restricted to 10 kilometres from a person's residence. Violators face penalties and up to six months of imprisonment.

Economy and welfare

Three economic stimulus packages was announced: on 27 Feb worth RM 20 billion including nationwide electricity discounts of 2 percent for industrial, commercial, and domestic users, as well as a monetary assistance scheme for employees; on 27 March worth RM 230 billion including assistance for businesses and direct cash payments for 4 million low-income households; and the last one on 6

5 See L.J. Barany, I. Simanjuntak, D.A. Widia, and Y.R. Damuri, “*Bantuan Sosial di Tengah Pandemi COVID-19: Sudahkah Menjangkau Sesuai Sasaran* (Social Assistance Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: Has it Netted the Right Target”, *CSIS Commentaries ECON-002*, 15 April 2020. Accessible at: <https://www.csis.or.id/publications/bantuan-sosial-ekonomi-di-tengah-pandemi-COVID-19-sudahkah-menjangkau-sesuai-sasaran>

April RM10 billion including wage subsidies, grants and loans for small- and medium-sized enterprises, and tax deductions.

Singapore

Confirmed cases and testing

Singapore is acknowledged a successful model in addressing COVID-19.⁶ It is praised for its early and aggressive response to the pandemic and has managed to largely contain the virus through widespread testing; comprehensive contact tracing; and mandatory, well-enforced quarantines for those testing positive and their contacts, and all returning travellers. While other Southeast Asian countries were approaching COVID-19 with relaxed attitude, Singapore were conducting a lot of testing and taken serious precautionary measures.

Singapore has also relied on its technical capabilities to develop test kits as early as January, which it is now distributing to countries in the region, and on its world-class health care system.

Restriction of movement

Despite its early success in containing the virus, Singapore has seen its cases jump in lately due to a second wave of infection along with the increase of the outbreak in the whole of Southeast Asia, leading the government to finally close schools and all non-essential businesses on for one month starting 3 April.

Previously, Singapore first barred all short-term visitors from entering Singapore on 22 March. The only non-nationals allowed in would be work permit holders in "essential sectors" such as health care. Malaysians with a Singapore work permit will continue to be allowed to work in Singapore. Public and private gatherings of any size between non-household members are banned until at least 4 May, with first offenders facing up to 6 months in jail and a \$7000 fine. Following the partial lockdown that was announced on 3 April, two days after that Singapore imposed a quarantine on dormitories housing 20,000 migrant workers, most of whom are manual laborers that live in cramped conditions.

Economy and welfare

As early as 18 February, an economic support measure called the "Unity Budget" was announced, worth \$4.4 billion of relief funding targeted for workers and businesses through co-funding of business costs and tax relief. The following month, on 26 March, Singapore unveiled a second stimulus plan, the "Resilience Budget," worth \$3.3 billion, designed to assist hard-hit sectors, self-employed individuals, and cash pay-outs depending on income. This marks the second time that Singapore has dipped into its reserves—the first time being in 2009 during the global financial crisis. Following the announcement of the partial lockdown, on 6 April, Finance Minister announced an unprecedented third round of support measures called the "Solidarity Budget" that includes one-off payments to Singaporeans, wage subsidies, and self-employed relief schemes.

Altogether, the Singaporean government's response to COVID-19 total S\$59.9 billion, which is about 12 per cent of the GDP. As of the time of writing, this is the largest stimulus package in Asia.

⁶ "Coronavirus: WHO praises Singapore's containment of COVID-19 outbreak," *The Straits Times*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/coronavirus-who-praises-singapores-containment-of-covid-19-outbreak> ; Stefania Palma, "How Singapore waged war on coronavirus," *Financial Times*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/ca4e0db0-6aaa-11ea-800d-da70cff6e4d3>

Thailand

Confirmed cases and testing

Thailand was the first country outside China to report a case of the new coronavirus, when the government confirmed the first case on 13 January. Since then, Thailand now stands in fourth place of most confirmed cases in Southeast Asia (see Table 1). Phuket, a main tourist destination, has emerged as the country's coronavirus hotspot with 170 confirmed cases as of 10 April, making the island of 400,000 or so residents with the highest infection rate per capita out of all of Thailand's 77 provinces.

The Thai government's response to the outbreak was initially based on surveillance and contact tracing. Health officials admit that Thailand needs more testing for COVID-19.⁷ Thailand has struggled to make testing widely available. It has strictly limited it to people showing strong symptoms, with paid elective testing available at hospitals.

Restriction of movement

Inconsistent policies over restriction of movement and supply shortages have led to widespread criticism and frustration on mass media and social media in Thailand,⁸ which includes indecisiveness and slowness to act, and poor communication—many official announcements were made available to the public, only to be quickly retracted or contradicted by other government units, and later changed.

As tourism is one of Thailand's most important business, it was a difficult decision to close borders. Borders remained open and foreign visitors were still allowed into the country until the third week of March, which has since been widely criticized. Borders were then closed on 22 March, and foreign visitors are no longer allowed entry. A State of Emergency decree was issued on 26 March, which will be in effect through the end of April, granting sweeping powers to the government to restrict domestic travel, ban social gatherings, and censor the media.

On 2 April, the Prime Minister announced a national curfew. This took effect the next day, when police and soldiers set up hundreds of checkpoints across Thailand to enforce an indefinite nationwide curfew, banning most people from outside in a bid to curb the spread of the new coronavirus. The curfew prohibits people from leaving their house after 10pm, but excludes people transporting medical supplies, health workers traveling to and from work, banking personnel and those handling consumer goods. The army is helping enforce the curfew and violators TBH 40,000 fine.

Economy and welfare

On 10 March, the Thai government approved a stimulus package that includes cash transfers, soft loans, and tax benefits. The package was expected to inject \$12.7 billion into the economy. On 3 April, the government announced another stimulus package, which would amount 10 percent of Thailand's GDP.

On 7 April 7, the third stimulus package was announced, worth TB 1.9 trillion to cover financial aid to workers, infrastructure and job investments, soft loans to SMEs, and also for the Corporate Bond Liquidity Stabilization Fund.

⁷ “‘Dissatisfied’ officials admit Thailand needs more COVID-19 testing,” *MSN News*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-sg/news/world/dissatisfied-officials-admit-thailand-needs-more-COVID-19-testing/ar-BB12fKjg>

⁸ See among others “Editorial: No room allowed for policy inconsistency against coronavirus,” *Bangkok Tribune*, 15 March 2020, <https://bkktribune.com/editorial-no-room-allowed-for-policy-inconsistency-against-coronavirus/>

Vietnam

Confirmed cases and testing

The Communist Party of Vietnam has shown its ability to mobilise society, enact aggressive containment and monitoring strategies, and communicate effectively with citizens, underpinned by its network of informants who surveil citizens and help enforce government restrictions. Thus, despite limited resources and a bustling border with China, Vietnam has managed to contain the pandemic relatively well, and has won praise accordingly.⁹

Restriction of movement

Some travel restrictions were made as early as in late January, followed by a local quarantine in mid-February. Starting in late March, tougher restrictions were gradually introduced. On 31 March, cross-border activities of individuals at main and secondary border gates and trails in border areas with Cambodia and Laos were suspended. From April 9, all travellers to Ho Chi Minh City, arriving by train, bus, or plane, will be tested upon arrival. Those who test positive will be quarantined at public facilities.

Starting on 1 April, a 15-day national lockdown took place, during which public gatherings of 20 or more people are banned, and non-essential public services are suspended. Those in public places are required to wear face masks.

Economy and welfare

On 3 March, Prime Minister announced a VND 30 Trillion fiscal package from the central contingency budget. The package includes tax breaks, delayed tax payments, and government spending on infrastructure in an effort to maintain a 6.8 percent growth target, according to state media. Vietnam has stopped exporting rice from 24 March to ensure national food security.

On 3 April the Ministry of Finance decided to more than double the fiscal stimulus package in the second draft of a government decree from VND80.2 trillion to VND180 trillion, which is roughly US\$7.64 billion—a six-fold increase from the first proposal from the previous month. The ministry extends the scope of the fiscal stimulus package in forms of tax breaks, delay in tax payments, and reductions in land rental fees in five months, for new beneficiary groups.

Meanwhile, a few days before the announcement of the stimulus package, the government also a financial support worth up to VND30 trillion to aid vulnerable people directly affected by the pandemic. Under the plan, people out of work, self-employed people, and household businesses forced to suspend operation could receive up to VND1 million per month, while social beneficiaries and revolutionary contributors are entitled to VND500,000 per person per month.

Brunei

Confirmed cases and testing

Most cases in Brunei can be linked back to a large-scale religious event in Malaysia at the end of February, which has also been acknowledged as a source of a large number of infections in Malaysia and Indonesia. More than 30 COVID-19 cases in Brunei did not show any symptoms of infection (asymptomatic), and remained in asymptomatic condition throughout the infections, until they were confirmed to have fully recovered.

⁹ John Reed, “Vietnam’s coronavirus offensive wins praise for low-cost model,” *Financial Times*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/0cc3c956-6cb2-11ea-89df-41bea055720b>

After having no new COVID-19 cases for five consecutive days, on 10 April one new case was added, bringing the total number of infected persons in the country to 136, as of the time of writing.

Restriction of movement

Brunei has implemented drastic measures to clamp down on travel and imposed strict quarantine rules. Starting on 16 March, citizens and foreigners in the country are barred from leaving. Malaysia has closed its land border with Brunei. From 24 March, all foreign visitors are banned from entry, while all returning Brunei citizens must undertake a 14-day self-quarantine. The government has prohibited mass gatherings, weddings, and sporting events, and indicated these restrictions would be lifted when no new cases are recorded for 28 days.

Economy and welfare

On 19 March, the Monetary Authority announced measures to alleviate the financial burden on sectors hit hard by the pandemic. This was followed by additional steps to aid SMEs and individuals affected by the pandemic, which was announced by the Ministry of Finance and Economy on 1 April. The aid is designed in the form of deferment of principal or loan repayment and the exemption of fees and charges. Moreover, businesses in the tourism, hospitality, air transportation, medical, and food import services will have a six-month deferment of their principal repayments of financing/loans.

Cambodia

Confirmed cases and testing

Prime Minister Hun Sen made several unfitting remarks to respond to the growing concern in January and downplayed the risks of COVID-10 for several weeks, drawing criticism from within and outside of the country. One criticism asserts that his entire response when the virus epicentre was in China was mendaciously designed “to maintain close relationships with Beijing, not to protect the Cambodian people he is supposed to represent.”¹⁰

The first case was confirmed on 27 January 2020. Since then, the number gradually increase, although not in the same rapid manner as some countries like Malaysia, Indonesia or the Philippines. At the time of writing, the total stands at 120 (see Table 1).

Restriction of movement

The government refused to shut the country’s borders for several weeks as it downplayed the risk. This changed abruptly on 31 March when the Prime Minister declared a state of emergency and put forward a draft emergency law that would give the government all powers to take “necessary measure” to contain the pandemic, prompting an outcry from human rights groups.¹¹ In addition to measures to impose curfews, prevent mass gatherings, and lock down public and private spaces, the draft law allows surveillance of telecommunications and control of media and social media, including the prohibition of sharing information that could “generate public alarm or fear” or “confusion.”

All visa exemptions, visas on arrival, and e-visas are suspended for one month. All foreigners must have a medical certificate issued no more than 72 hours prior to date of travel stating that they have not been tested positive for COVID-19 and have proof of insurance policy.

10 David Hutt, “Will the COVID-19 Crisis Spell the End of Cambodia’s Hun Sen?” *The Diplomat*, 2 April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/will-the-COVID-19-crisis-spell-the-end-of-cambodias-hun-sen/>

11 “Cambodia: Prisons Potential COVID-19 Epicenters,” Human Rights Watch, 5 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/05/cambodia-prisons-potential-COVID-19-epicenters>

Economy and welfare

On 9 March, the Prime Minister said the government had allocated between \$800 million to \$2 billion to address the economic impacts of COVID-19, which includes tax holidays to businesses in the tourism and manufacturing sectors, and has promised to fund garment workers laid off because of the downturn. But the majority of small businesses and workers are unlikely to get any financial help from the state, which is a problem because 95 percent of Cambodian SME's are informal businesses that are not officially registered.

Another announcement was made on 30 March that additional fiscal resources for the health sector of around \$70 million (around 0.2 percent of 2019 GDP) are expected.

Myanmar

Confirmed cases and testing

Myanmar has thus far confirmed a very small number of COVID-19 cases (see Table 1). However, looking at its long border with China, it is highly unlikely that the number is that low. Reports suggest that the number is due more to the lack of testing than the absence of the virus. Myanmar reported its first case only on March 23, much later than other Southeast Asian states, but not the last one.

A tug-of-war for power currently takes place in the response to COVID-19 in Myanmar, which is seemingly complicating the bureaucracy for a proper response.¹² In mid-March, a COVID-19 committee led by State Counsellor Ang Sang Suu Kyi was formed to oversee the crisis response. However, two weeks after that, Myanmar's military set up a separate task force to trace contacts of confirmed cases and clamp down including through arrests on "fake news" and "disinformation" that could cause "panic among the people."

Restriction of movement

Land borders are closed to all travellers, including Myanmar citizens until 15 April. All northern checkpoint borders with China are closed except for goods and crew, while India has closed its land border with Myanmar. All visas on arrival are suspended except to diplomats until the end of April. All international flights are suspended since 30 March. All bars are closed, and shopping malls are operating under reduced hours. All "potentially infected" are under a compulsory 14-day quarantine. All migrant workers returning to Myanmar are required to stay in quarantine centres for 14 days. Nonetheless, the government has however not yet declared a state of emergency or instituted any broad quarantines or lockdowns.

Economy and welfare

A fund of nearly \$70 million was established at the Myanmar Economic Bank to provide soft loans to affected business (particularly the priority garment and tourism sectors and SMEs), and some fund is set aside to buy laboratory equipment and medical supplies.

Lao PDR

Confirmed cases and testing

Laos was the last country in Southeast Asia to report a COVID-19 case, which was on 24 March. As Table 1 suggests, Laos has only confirmed very few cases of COVID-19. Similar to Myanmar, the

12 Bertil Lintner, "COVID-19 restores Myanmar military's lost powers," *Asia Times*, 2 April 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/COVID-19-restores-myanmar-militarys-lost-powers/>

number is due more to the lack of testing than the absence of the virus. No fatalities has been reported yet.

Restriction of movement

On 29 March, authorities announced a nationwide lockdown — residents have been ordered to stay home except to necessary goods, seek medical assistance, or carry out work that has been expressly authorized by the government. Authorized business sectors include financial institutions, listed companies, medical services, post services, utilities, collection and treatment of waste, agricultural produce markets, retail shops, supermarkets, and restaurants for the provision of takeaway and delivery services only. Hotels and resorts may continue to function but only to provide accommodation and restaurant services. This is effective until 19 April, but may be extended.

All international checkpoints is closed from 30 March, while all types of visas and visa exemptions are suspended. Outbound travel by Lao citizens and document holders is prohibited except for essential travel. Returning Lao citizens are required to undergo a mandatory 14-day self-quarantine monitored by local officials. Road borders with Myanmar and China are closed. Shuttle flights will be allowed for countries needing to pick up their citizens from Laos. Provincial borders will remain closed until 30 April, except with the approval of local authorities.

Economy and welfare

On 20 March, a preliminary 13-part stimulus package was approved during the cabinet's monthly meeting. About \$11 million (less than one percent of GDP) has been allocated for prevention and control. On 7 April, World Bank Regional Office of the East Asia and Pacific approved US\$18 million for Lao PDR to help the country respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whither Regional Cooperation

Southeast Asia has a regional organisation, namely the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Aside from putting efforts individually to tackle COVID-19, are they cooperating with their neighbours?

On 7 April 2020, ASEAN's Health Ministers convened through a video conference to intensify regional cooperation with various stakeholders as member states step-up measures to control the spread and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference was also participated in by ASEAN Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi and officials from the WHO Regional Offices for Southeast Asia and Western Pacific who provided global and regional updates on the pandemic.

Two days after that, ASEAN Foreign Ministers convened at the 25th Meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) through video conference on 9 April 2020, where they agreed to synergise to fight COVID-19 and its impacts. After the meeting, the Indonesian Foreign Minister assured that “the ASEAN diplomatic machine continues to spin”¹³ as member states try to collectively overcome a pandemic that has infected at least 15,000 people and claimed the lives of more than 500 in the entire Southeast Asia region.

On 14 April 2020, the heads of states of ASEAN held a special ASEAN Summit and special ASEAN Plus Three Summit, also through video conference. The leaders plot a strategy to overcome a crisis that has threatened their economies and kept millions of people in their homes under lockdowns. The

13 Dian Septiari, “ASEAN leaders to meet online over COVID-19,” *The Jakarta Post*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2020/04/12/asean-leaders-to-meet-online-over-COVID-19.html>

summit included discussions on a regional stockpile of medical equipment for emergencies and establishing a regional fund for combating the pandemic.

What can we interpret from these regional efforts? Consistent with my argument in CSIS-DMRU Commentaries No. 028, I am concerned that declarations and agreements to work together that are not being followed up will create unrealistic hope and false picture of the global situation. It is even more concerning when states feel pressured into joining such calls, and deliberately make commitment without the intention of actually implementing it to avoid being the odd one out. Yes, diplomatic machine should continue to spin, but what kind of product does this machine produce?

The impression that these agreements are mere diplomatic niceties can be found, for example, in the joint statement of the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers, where the ministers agree to “further enhance our collective effort to COVID-19 by... (1) Continue enhancing free, open, transparent and timely sharing of information, data and expertise...” As discussed throughout this paper, one of the main criticisms to the handling of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia is the lack of transparency with regards to the official data shared by the governments. There is low confidence, both by international organisations, media, and scholars to these official data. Thus, it is far-fetched to think that these countries would be willingly sharing and opening their data.

Summing up: Some general trends

Overall, COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia total to 1 percent of worldwide cases. This paper concludes with some points to sum up Southeast Asian states’ responses to COVID-19.

First, lack of testing seems to be prevalent in the majority of countries, bar perhaps only Singapore. In most of these countries, lack of testing is due to the difficulty in importing the test kits, both in terms of gaining access to existing supply or lack of fund. In some countries, there are allegations that lack of testing is deliberate, in order to cover the real number of infections in their respective countries. This may be due to a number of factors, for example to avoid drastic economic impact or to prevent social upheaval.

Responses to COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Some General Trends

1. Lack of testing
2. Low confidence on official data
3. Inconsistent policies, indecisiveness, and poor communication
4. Different health system capabilities
5. Economy vs Health argument slowed down response
6. The China factor
7. Domestic before regional effort

Second, still related to the first point, there is low confidence on the official data provided by the governments. Health experts have warned that faulty figures may breed a false sense of security and help the virus causing the deadly disease to spread.¹⁴ Allegations that some governments are deliberately giving misleading information, as explained in the first point, have led to the need to find other sources of estimated data other than those given by governments, to try to at least get a better sense of the real situation. Such low confidence is made even worse by the terrible communication strategies adopted by some countries.

Third, almost all governments of Southeast Asian countries are criticized for inconsistent policies, indecisiveness, and poor communication. COVID-19 took all countries by storm, and no country in the world was ready for it. Nonetheless, some governments were

¹⁴ Zsombor Peter, “Experts Doubt Low Coronavirus Counts.”

more prepared for crises than others, and it has thus far very apparent in the dealings with COVID-19 in Southeast Asia.

Fourth, Southeast Asian countries have different health system capabilities, from the countries like Singapore with sophisticated health care system that is well-trusted by the population, to Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and Myanmar that all have under-funded public health systems. A country-level health system's surge capacity during outbreaks is representative of their baseline capacity of delivering public health care services, and not surprisingly, some ASEAN nations have demonstrated their enviable, world-class health system capabilities during this outbreak.¹⁵

Fifth, there has been a strong argument between prioritizing economic vs public health calculation, which is something that caused confusion and delays in decision making from January until mid-March 2020. It has to be emphasized that this has been the case for most of all the other countries in the world too, not just in Southeast Asia. Concerns about negative economic impacts of COVID-19 have made some governments reluctant in making quick and significant response to the pandemic, including closing of borders and restricting movement either through quarantine or lockdown. Only when casualties started to dramatically increase that countries realize the severity of the pandemic and that some economic sacrifices must be made.

Sixth, individual country's relation with China is a factor, albeit to different degrees for each country. Reading the media in Southeast Asia, one will find such factor ranging from some countries downplaying the threat in the early phase of the outbreak in order to maintain good economic relations with China to the fact that for some countries COVID-19 has emphasized the promises and pitfalls of China's growing economic and political influence in Southeast Asia. Even later on as we move to the fourth month of 2020 with China having handled their domestic battle with COVID-19 and now offering assistance to Southeast Asia, we can see the China factor in how the Southeast Asian countries plan to win their own battle against COVID-19.

And lastly, in terms of the region, we see some regional cooperation in the form of meetings of ASEAN, but we are yet to see whether or not this endeavour will have significant impact. It is apparent that countries are focusing on their respective domestic efforts, which means that regional cooperation has been lower in the priority. COVID-19 serves as another litmus test for ASEAN centrality and unity. It is apparent that the usual dealing of ASEAN, i.e. meetings, declarations, agreements, do not work in crises as serious as COVID-19. ASEAN risks itself to becoming irrelevant as a regional organization, which in nature should be able to deal with immediate threat to the region in a robust and timely manner.

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