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THAILAND'S COVID SETBACK

By
Murray Hunter



Plans to reopen the economy have stalled once again.

Thailand's reputation for effective handling of the Covid-19 pandemic is under challenge with a third outbreak on the eve of the April 10-16 Songkran, the country's new year and its biggest holiday. There were high expectations that the coming April 10-16 Songkran festival would signal the beginning of Thailand's recovery after year-long restrictions.

This was especially the case when the government revised its economic growth forecast downward from 3.5-4.5 percent to 2.5-3.5 percent after the economy shrank 4.2 percent in the last quarter of 2020. Thailand is in the worst economic slump since the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

These hopes have been dashed with the new outbreaks, centered around Bangkok and its suburbs. Although daily new infections remain under 1,000 and total deaths are below 100, it is the trend that is worrying officials. The tourism industry already has an estimated two million unemployed workers. If this outbreak takes hold, massive welfare will be further required at a time when public debt is already well over 50 percent of GDP.

That is not to mention the political consequences for a shaky government already accused of manipulating the most recent election to stay in power and using the courts to put the popular Future Forward opposition party out of business as well as manipulating parliamentary numbers to keep its tenuous majority. Student protests have started to pick up after falling sharply with the onset last year of the coronavirus.

The resort island of Phuket just recently welcomed a test batch of 16 tourists on a Thai Airlines flight from Frankfurt, with the province governor heralding their arrival as a major step forward for the economically devastated island, which hasn't had a foreign tourist arrival for more than 12 months.

The small group took advantage of relaxed quarantine requirements, from 14 days to 10, or seven for already-vaccinated tourists. That was a forerunner to the announcement that from July 1, mandatory quarantine would be waived for all vaccinated tourists to the Thai tourism 'sandbox plan', which also includes Koh Samui, Pattaya, Krabi, and Chiang Mai. A major inoculation campaign had been underway, with 460,000 Phuket residents to receive vaccinations ahead of the elderly and vulnerable in other parts of the country to facilitate the return of international tourism, a scheme that has attracted strong criticism.

Over Songkran, 8,754 domestic flights were scheduled to handle the expected masses of holidaymakers to either their hometowns or tourist destinations. Although this is a much-needed boom for the depressed domestic airline industry, Tassapon Bijeveld, the executive chairman of Asia Aviation, the largest shareholder in Thai Air Asia, urged the Thai government to shut down domestic travel to prevent a third wave of infections, which would lead to a depressed industry in a lockdown environment.

Some private hospitals say they have run out of Covid-19 test kits and would be unable to cater for patients if cases explode. In addition, more than a dozen frontline physicians have been diagnosed, forcing many panic-stricken people to seek medical assistance elsewhere. The government has pledged to pay private hospitals the costs of treating cases, but a hospital administrator told Asia Sentinel that rebates don't cover costs. On Friday, the government promised more test kits to private hospitals and allowed them to import their own vaccines.

This latest outbreak is said to have originated within entertainment districts of Bangkok and Chonburi, 85 km southeast of Bangkok, earlier this month. Most cases have involved people of working age who have frequented pubs, karaoke, hostess lounges, and soapy massage parlors, then spread to family members and to other regions as people traveled, particularly for the Qing Ming festival earlier this month to honor Chinese ancestors. As they visit local pubs, restaurants, and shopping centers, Covid-19 is also spreading to the general population according to Panprapa Yongtrakul, a spokeswoman for the National Center for Covid-19 Situation Administration (CCSA).

That has been a contentious issue. Transport minister Saksayam Chidchob was one of a group of cabinet ministers to test positive. There has been widespread talk through both the mainstream and social media that the group had patronized the exclusive VIP Krystel Club in Thong Lor district. Chidchob has strongly denied that he ever visited the club, popular with politicians and government officials, yet refused for more than a week to provide any timeline of his whereabouts.

It was not until April 10 that authorities said Chidchob had been infected by three close aides who had patronized the Krystel and Emerald Clubs - ground zero for this latest outbreak. Chidchob's lawyer has warned of legal action against anyone who posts messages online harming the minister's reputation, implying he was infected while visiting the clubs. Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has also threatened legal action against anyone who links the prime minister's office complex "Thai Khu Fa" with the cluster originating from the VIP clubs.

The epicenter of this outbreak is in Bangkok, Samut Prakan, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, and Chonburi, with almost half the cases but it has spread to 61 other provinces at the time of writing, with early cases mostly related to entertainment venues, excepting a cluster in Narathiwat prison where 140 inmates and correctional officers have tested positive. They have been accommodated at a field hospital within the prison.

So far, all deaths, about half a dozen during this wave, have occurred in people over 60 and with pre-existing conditions, including tuberculosis, hypertension, heart conditions and diabetes, etc. Daily cases have risen to over 600, with a sharp growth trend. Unlike last Songkran, where the government strongly discouraged inter-provincial travel, the government has promoted travel with an extension of the "We travel together" scheme, offering travel, food, and accommodation subsidies, which thousands have taken advantage of.

Prayuth at an April 8 press conference said the government wouldn't set any travel restrictions or impose any curfews, "no matter what happens," leading to widespread social media criticism. A prominent Thai virologist Dr. Yong Poororawan, from Chulalongkorn University has warned of impending disaster, with the country "prepared to see the daily infection rates jump from tens to hundreds per day after the Songkran festival" without travel and other restrictions.

However, in the first week of April, the Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) governor unilaterally declared that visitors from Bangkok and peripheral areas would be quarantined for 14 days if traveling to the province. Within a day, this was reversed in what was called a “misunderstanding.”

The central government has approached the latest outbreak erring on the side of economic considerations, in contrast to neighboring Malaysia, which implemented a movement control order (MCO), or lockdown, and various Australian state governments which implemented short and sharp lockdowns.

There appears to be some rift between the central government and provincial administrations, which have erred on the side of safety. A growing number including Chiang Mai, Phuket, Nan, Songkhla, and Trang have declared that visitors from Bangkok and peripheral regions must be quarantined for 14 days or be tested on arrival. These different approaches are causing great confusion as masses of travelers are confronted by different sets of rules, some of which have been activated without notice.

The only national order the central government has made is to close pubs and other designated entertainment venues for 14 days. Unlike last year, restaurants, hotels, traditional massage parlors, hairdressers, and local events have been formally exempted.

Some hotels have reportedly taken it upon themselves to close, advising customers to change their travel times. Mass events have announced cancellations. A number of Buddhist temples have closed for 14 days. How many small bars across the 41 provinces will actually comply remains to be seen.

Traffic leaving Bangkok is reported to be down around 50 percent on past years, but long queues are developing at hospitals for rapid covid tests as an alternative to quarantine. Although the Tourism Authority of Thailand estimated domestic tourism during the Songkran season would generate around Bt12 billion (US\$390 million), the latest estimate based on the 50 percent drop will mean the Songkran season will only generate Bt6 billion. Some areas with high case numbers like Hua Hin in the south of the country had already seen 70 percent of hotel rooms canceled.

News circulating through social media that the army is building field hospitals around the country and that the UK variant is much more contagious has frightened a formerly complacent population. The appearance of the UK variant has also led to questions about how this strain was actually able to enter the country with borders closed and a rigid quarantine system. Authorities have not been able to answer this, leading to conjecture about the integrity of the quarantine system.

There is also concern and criticism over the inoculation program. In addition to criticism over the government’s strategy of strategically inoculating frontline workers in the tourism industry, the vaccination rate is very slow. From February 28, only 405, 911 had their first shot, and only 60,463 had the second one. The bottleneck appears to be limited vaccine stocks, with local

production of the AstraZeneca vaccine undertaken by Siam Bioscience, owned by the King's business holdings, not due to go online until June.

The Prayuth government has taken a major gamble on its targeted approach to the latest outbreak. If new cases plateau quickly and clusters are brought under control, the strategy has caused minimum damage to the economy. If this strategy fails and case numbers increase exponentially, Thailand will join most of its neighbors in going for a lockdown for a long period of time, until herd immunity is gained within the country through widespread vaccinations.

The next two weeks will tell.

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