

Jakarta imposes partial lockdown as virus cases surge

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Soldiers and police hit the streets of Indonesia's capital Jakarta Friday to enforce its toughest virus measures yet as infections surge and critics warn of a looming public-health disaster.

Violators face heavy fines and up to a year in jail for breaking the new rules, which include a ban on gatherings of more than five people, limiting restaurants to online delivery orders and reducing public transport.

Motorbike taxis seen everywhere in the megacity of 30 million were banned from picking up passengers, and residents were ordered to stay home.

"I've been checking my smartphone all day but no orders so far," said Embari, a ride-hailing driver who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

"I know drivers can't pick up passengers but I was hoping for some food delivery calls."

Some Jakartans left the vast city before it was largely shuttered by decree.

"Even before the new rules life was already tough. It's difficult to find a place to eat because most stalls are closed," said 25-year-old university student Rosyad Hizbussalam, who left the capital for his hometown in East Java.

"I can't imagine now much harder it'll be after the new rules are brought in."

Jakarta's maze of normally clogged roads were largely deserted as the rules went into effect and with many off work for a public holiday.

Mosques and other houses of worship were ordered to shut for at least the next two weeks—after millions continued to attend Friday prayers in the Muslim majority nation, despite calls to worship at home.

'Accurate statistics'

President Joko Widodo declared a state of emergency last month as coronavirus deaths in the world's fourth most populous country jumped.

But he resisted calls for a nationwide lockdown fearing a collapse in Southeast Asia's biggest economy, where tens of millions eke out a living on poorly-paid, informal jobs.

Indonesia's government has faced heavy criticism over its handling of the crisis and questions about the true number of deaths.

Officially, 306 people have died of the respiratory illness, with 3,512 confirmed cases in the archipelago of more than 260 million.

That is the highest death toll for an Asian nation outside China.

But testing rates are among the lowest in the world and there are fears the number of dead could be much higher.

Jakarta city data showed some 776 suspected or confirmed victims had been buried in local cemeteries under COVID-19 protocols requiring bodies to be wrapped in plastic and quickly buried.

That is about five times the official 154 dead in Jakarta, the epicentre of the outbreak in Indonesia.

Officials have admitted data collection among different jurisdictions is patchy and incomplete.

"The Indonesian government needs to ramp up testing to know the true extent of the coronavirus outbreak in the country," said Andreas Harsono, senior Indonesia researcher at Human Rights Watch.

"The authorities should also uphold the right to information and provide accurate statistics to the public."

Indonesia's spy agency has projected some 95,000 infections by June.

A bleak assessment by the University of Indonesia's public health department warned that the country could see a death toll of more than 240,000 if testing and quarantines are not ramped up.

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