'Tale of 2 outbreaks': Singapore tackles a costly setback

May 11 2020, by Eileen Ng

In this Sunday, May 10, 2020, photo, people sit outside a building balcony at the S11@Punggol, a complex of dormitory buildings for foreign workers in Singapore. A second wave of coronavirus infections in tightly packed foreign workers' dormitories has caught Singapore off guard, and exposed the danger of overlooking marginal groups in a health crisis. (AP Photo/YK Chan)

Weeks after two of his roommates were diagnosed with COVID-19, Mohamad Arif Hassan says he's still waiting to be tested for the coronavirus. Quarantined in his room in a sprawling foreign workers' dormitory that has emerged as Singapore's biggest viral cluster, Arif says he isn't too worried because neither he nor his eight other roommates have any symptoms.

Still, the 28-year-old Bangladeshi construction worker couldn't be blamed if he were more than just a bit concerned.

Infections in Singapore, an affluent Southeast Asian city-state of fewer than 6 million people, have jumped more than a hundredfold in two months—from 226 in mid-March to more than 23,800, the most in Asia after China, India and Pakistan. Only 20 of the infections have resulted in deaths.

About 90% of Singapore's cases are linked to crowded foreign workers' dormitories that were a blind spot in the government's crisis management. Arif's dorm complex, which has 14,000 beds, accounts for 11% of total infections, with over 2,500 cases.

This massive second wave of infections caught Singapore off guard and exposed the danger of overlooking marginalized groups during a health crisis. Despite warnings from human rights activists as early as February about the dorms' crowded and often unsanitary living conditions, no action was taken until cases spread rampantly last month.

Singapore's costly oversight was also an important lesson to other countries in the region with large migrant populations. Neighboring Malaysia recently announced mandatory coronavirus testing for its more than 2 million foreign workers after dozens were diagnosed with COVID—19.

In this March 14, 2020, photo, a couple wearing face masks walk past the Merlion statue in Singapore. A second wave of coronavirus infections in tightly packed foreign workers' dormitories has caught Singapore off guard, and exposed the danger of overlooking marginal groups in a health crisis. Infections in Singapore, an affluent Southeast Asian city-state of fewer than 6 million people, have jumped more than a hundredfold in two months—from 226 in mid-March to over 23,000, the most in Asia after China and India. (AP Photo/Ee Ming Toh, File)

The slip-up highlighted Singapore's treatment of its large population of low-wage foreign workers, who play an integral part in the economy but live on the fringes in conditions where social distancing is impossible. The misjudgment was also an embarrassment for Prime Minister Lee
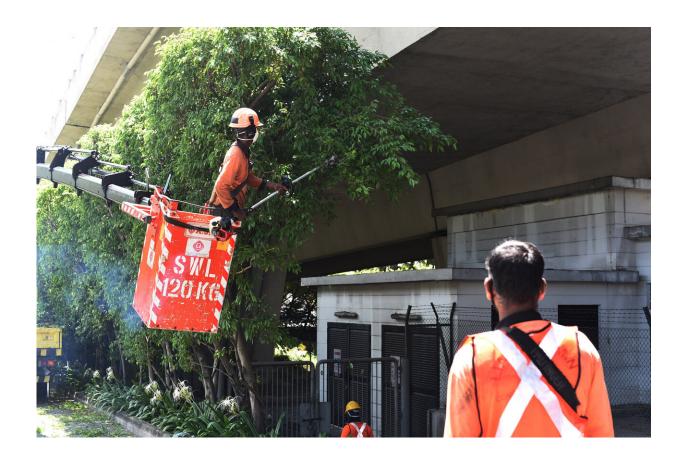
Hsien Loong's government ahead of a general election anticipated in the next few months that is expected to be the last for Lee, who has led Singapore since 2004 and is planning to retire soon.

Singapore's nanny state government, which won global praise for its meticulous contact tracing and testing in the early stages of the crisis, quickly moved to contain the problem by treating the flare-up in the dorms as a separate outbreak from that in the local community, a policy that some say is discriminatory.

The government shut schools and nonessential businesses island-wide on April 7. So-called "safe distancing ambassadors" were recruited to remind people to wear masks and stay at least a meter apart from each other in public places, or face heavy penalties.

Meanwhile, all [construction sites](link) and dorms were locked down and foreign workers largely confined in their rooms. More than 10,000 foreign workers in essential services were moved to safer sites to reduce crowding, and testing was ramped up to include people with no symptoms.

In this April 19, 2020, file photo, a team of migrant workers from India trim the trees along Holland Road in Singapore. A second wave of coronavirus infections in tightly packed foreign workers' dormitories has caught Singapore off guard, and exposed the danger of overlooking marginal groups in a health crisis. Infections in Singapore, an affluent Southeast Asian city-state of fewer than 6 million people, have jumped more than a hundredfold in two months—from 226 in mid-March to over 23,000, the most in Asia after China and India. (AP Photo/YK Chan, File)

In Arif's S11 Punggol dorm—advertised as the cheapest in Singapore—police have mounted a 24-hour patrol of the 13 multicolored housing blocks located in the island's northeast.

Arif, who was sharing a room with 11 other workers, said one of them

was moved to an army camp in early April to help ease overcrowding. Shortly afterward, another roommate was hospitalized with a fever, and on April 17 another was isolated with light symptoms. Both tested positive for the coronavirus.

Arif said he hasn't been tested yet because thousands of residents of his dorm will probably have to be tested. But he said he was comforted by Singapore's top-notch medical facilities and its relatively low number of deaths from the virus.

He gets food delivered to his room, free Wi-Fi on his cellphone and, most importantly, he said the government has pledged that the workers' salaries will be paid.

In this April 10, 2020, file photo, people wearing protective face masks exit a mall along the Orchard Road shopping belt in Singapore. A second wave of coronavirus infections in tightly packed foreign workers' dormitories has caught Singapore off guard, and exposed the danger of overlooking marginal groups in a health crisis. Infections in Singapore, an affluent Southeast Asian city-state of fewer than 6 million people, have jumped more than a hundredfold in two months—from 226 in mid-March to over 23,000, the most in Asia after China and India.(AP Photo/Yong Teck Lim, File)

"I am not worried because the government is taking good care of us like Singaporeans," said Arif, who has lived in Singapore for seven years. "Right now, we take our temperature twice a day, try to stay a meter apart from each other and constantly use hand sanitizer."

Once belittled as a tiny red dot on the global map, Singapore has relied on overseas workers to build infrastructure and help power its growth into one of the world's wealthiest nations.

Some 1.4 million foreign workers live in the city-state, accounting for 38% of its workforce. At least two thirds are low-wage, transient migrants from across Asia performing blue-collar jobs that locals shun, with many working in construction, shipping, maintenance or as maids.

Roughly 250,000 of the migrants live in 43 privately run dormitories mostly tucked away in the outskirts far from Singapore's stunning skyscrapers and luxury malls. Workers sleep in bunk beds in rooms usually packed with 12 people, sometimes up to 20, with a required minimum living space of 4.5 square meters (48 square feet) per person.

In this Sunday, May 10, 2020, photo, the S11@Punggol complex of dormitory buildings for foreign workers are seen behind a row of trees in Singapore. A second wave of coronavirus infections in tightly packed foreign workers' dormitories has caught Singapore off guard, and exposed the danger of overlooking marginal groups in a health crisis. (AP Photo/YK Chan)

In this April 10, 2020, file photo, a foreign worker talks on the phone outside his room at the WestLite Toh Guan dormitory after it was declared an isolation area under the Infectious Diseases Act, following a spike in the number of COVID-19 cases in several foreign worker dormitories in Singapore. A second wave of coronavirus infections in tightly packed foreign workers' dormitories has caught Singapore off guard, and exposed the danger of overlooking marginal groups in a health crisis. Infections in Singapore, an affluent Southeast Asian city-state of fewer than 6 million people, have jumped more than a hundredfold in two months—from 226 in mid-March to over 23,000, the most in Asia after China and India.(AP Photo/Yong Teck Lim, File)

Another 120,000 migrant laborers live in factory-converted hostels or temporary facilities at work sites, where conditions are sometimes even more dismal.

Most of Singapore's migrants earn between 500 and 1,000 Singapore dollars ($354-$708) a month.

Since last month, the government's infection data has separated foreign workers' cases from those among the general population. Although cases continue to rise among foreign workers, they have declined in the local community. The government plans to gradually reopen the economy on Tuesday before island-wide restrictions end June 1, eager to show that it has remedied the situation and that the measures have worked.

"The larger narrative that cannot be missed is the tale of two outbreaks in Singapore," said Eugene Tan, a law professor at Singapore Management University. "The outbreak that Singaporeans should pay attention to is the local community. The other outbreak of foreign workers is getting its due attention from the government, but it should not be one that Singaporeans should be unduly concerned about."

Citation: 'Tale of 2 outbreaks': Singapore tackles a costly setback (2020, May 11) retrieved 7 May 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-tale-outbreaks-singapore-tackles-costly.html