

Lockdowns in Asia as some nations see 1st major virus surges

July 9 2021, by David Rising



In this July 7, 2021, file photo, a normally busy shopping area in Sydney is nearly empty of people. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the proliferation of the highly contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday, July 2021, in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Rick Rycroft, File

Several countries around Asia and the Pacific that are experiencing their first major surges of the coronavirus rushed to impose tough restrictions, a year and a half into a pandemic that many initially weathered well.

Faced with rapidly rising numbers of infections in recent months, authorities in such countries as Thailand, South Korea and Vietnam announced or imposed measures Friday that they hope can slow the spread before health care systems are overwhelmed.

It's a rhythm familiar in much of the world, where repeated surges deluged hospitals and led to high numbers of deaths. But many Asian countries avoided that cycle by imposing stiff travel restrictions combined with tough measures at home.

Now some are seeing record numbers of new cases and even deaths, blamed in part on the highly contagious delta variant combined with low rates of vaccination and decisions to ease restrictions that have hit economies hard. Though overall numbers are nowhere yet near those seen during outbreaks in hotspots in Europe and the United States, the rapid rise set off alarm bells just as many Western countries with high vaccine rates began to breathe a sigh of relief.

Thailand reported a record number of new deaths on Thursday with 75—and they came in at 72 on Friday. South Korea set a record for number of new cases on Thursday, only to break it on Friday with 1,316 infections, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency. For the first time, Indonesia is seeing a surge that has hospitals turning patients away and oxygen supplies running out.



Locals wait in line overnight for free coronavirus testing at Wat Phra Si Mahathat temple in Bangkok, Thailand, Friday, July 9, 2021. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the proliferation of the highly contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit

Of Thailand's 317,506 confirmed cases and 2,534 deaths since the pandemic started, more than 90% have come since the start of April.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's handling of the surge has been widely criticized, including the decision to allow people to travel for April's Songkran festival celebrating Thailand's New Year.

Thailand already has strict regulations on wearing masks and other rules to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but the government announced even more stringent measures Friday for Bangkok and the surrounding area, including closing spas, limiting the hours of public transit, and restricting the opening times of markets and convenience stores.

"There is something wrong with the government policies, our vaccinations are too slow, and we should get better vaccines," said resident Cherkarn Rachasevet, a 60-year-old IT analyst, who hustled to the grocery store to stock up on supplies after hearing new restrictions were coming, wearing four masks and a face shield.



Locals sleep in line overnight for free coronavirus testing at Wat Phra Si Mahathat temple in Bangkok, Thailand, Friday, July 9, 2021. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the

proliferation of the highly contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit

She lamented that she isn't due for her first shot until the end of the month.

Across the Asia-Pacific region, immunization rates have lagged for a variety of reasons, including production and distribution issues as well as an initial wait-and-see attitude from many early on when numbers were low and there was less of a sense of urgency.

In South Korea—widely praised for its initial response to the pandemic that included extensive testing and contact-tracing—critics are now blaming a current spike in cases on the government's push to ease social-distancing because of economic concerns. Meanwhile, a shortage in vaccine supplies has left 70% of the population still waiting for their first shot.

The recent death toll has been low, however, and authorities attribute that to the fact that many who have been vaccinated were at-risk older Koreans.



In this July 8, 2021, file photo, pedestrians walk past a giant public TV with a live broadcast of a news conference by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga after he announced a state of emergency because of rising coronavirus infections in Tokyo. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the proliferation of the highly contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday, July 2021, in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko

Amid a spike in infections in the Seoul area, authorities announced Friday that starting next week they would impose the strongest restrictions yet. Those include prohibiting private social gatherings of three or more people after 6 p.m., shutting down nightclubs and churches, banning visitors at hospitals and nursing homes and limiting

weddings and funerals to family-only gatherings.

No country has been worse hit in the region recently than Indonesia. The seven-day rolling averages of daily cases and deaths both more than doubled over the past two weeks.

Health experts say a partial lockdown imposed July 3 was too little too late and warned the current wave, which is mostly on the islands of Java, Bali, and a few cities on the island of Sumatra, will soon start to spread across the vast archipelago—and the health system is already buckling under the pressure.



In this July 5, 2021, file photo, people queue up to refill their oxygen tanks at a filling station in Jakarta, Indonesia. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the proliferation of the highly

contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday, July 2021, in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Dita Alangkara, File

Despite a strict national lockdown in nearby Malaysia under which residents are confined to their homes, with only one person per household allowed out to purchase groceries, new cases since it began June 1 continued to shoot up, and a record 9,180 daily cases were reported Friday. The total death toll more than doubled to 5,903 since June 1.

It's the second national lockdown over the past year and the government said it will stay in place until daily infections fall below 4,000 and at least 10% of the population is vaccinated—but it comes at a tremendous cost, deepening economic hardships, with scores of businesses forced to shutter and thousands losing their jobs.

Vietnam also imposed tighter restrictions on Friday, locking down Ho Chi Minh City, the country's largest metropolis and its economic and financial hub, for two weeks. The southern city's 9 million residents are only permitted to leave home to buy food, medicine and for other urgent matters during that time.



Locals wait in line overnight for free the coronavirus testing at Wat Phra Si Mahathat temple in Bangkok, Thailand, Friday, July 9, 2021. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the proliferation of the highly contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit

Vietnam was able to limit its total coronavirus cases to 2,800 during the first year of the pandemic, and reported almost no new cases in the three months up to the end of April when they began to climb rapidly. In the last two months, the country has recorded some 22,000 new cases, and the less stringent restrictions imposed so far have been unable to stem the rise.

"It is a difficult decision to lock down the city, but it is necessary to curb the pandemic and get back to normalcy," Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh said during a government meeting Thursday evening.

Currently, about 4% of the population has received at least one dose of the vaccine, though the Health Ministry said it hopes to inoculate 70% of the country's 96 million people by the end of the year.

One exception to the regional rule appears to be India, where the delta variant was first detected—perhaps because its surge came first. The country has slowly emerged from a traumatic April and May, when a devastating spike in infections tore through the nation, hospitals ran out of beds and oxygen supplies, and overwhelmed crematoria were forced to burn bodies in pyres outdoors.



Health workers collect nasal swabs from locals who were waiting through the night for free coronavirus testing at Wat Phra Si Mahathat temple in Bangkok, Thailand, Friday, July 9, 2021. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the proliferation of the highly contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit



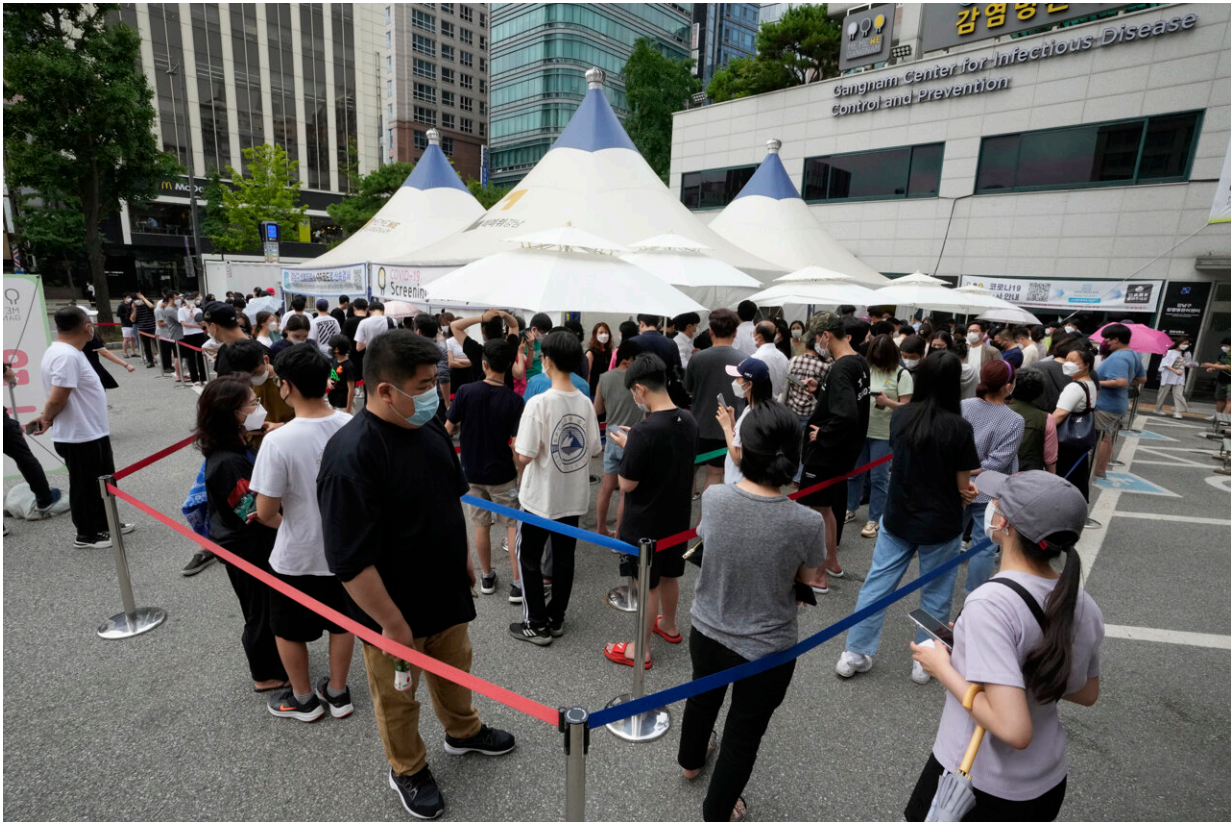
Locals wait in line overnight for free coronavirus testing at the Wat Phra Si Mahathat temple in Bangkok, Thailand, Friday, July 9, 2021. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the proliferation of the highly contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit



Locals wait in line overnight for free coronavirus testing at the Wat Phra Si Mahathat temple in Bangkok, Thailand, Friday, July 9, 2021. After initially being lauded for managing to virtually stop the pandemic in its tracks, several countries in the Asia region have seen numbers spike in recent weeks and are scrambling to speed up sluggish vaccination programs as the coronavirus spreads. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit



Locals wait in line overnight for free coronavirus testing at Wat Phra Si Mahathat temple in Bangkok, Thailand, Friday, July 9, 2021. Faced with rapidly rising numbers of new coronavirus infections and growing concern over the proliferation of the highly contagious delta variant, major Asia-Pacific cities implemented new restrictions Friday in the hope of reversing the trend before health care systems are overwhelmed. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit



In this July 9, 2021, file photo, people queue in line to wait for the coronavirus testing at a Public Health Center in Seoul, South Korea. South Korea will enforce its strongest social distancing restrictions in the greater capital area starting next week as it wrestles with what appears to be the worst wave of the coronavirus since the start of the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File



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New cases and deaths are now decreasing, but with less than 5% of the country's eligible population fully vaccinated, authorities are scrambling to distribute more shots and are investing heavily in field hospitals and ICU beds, and stockpiling oxygen supplies.

Japan and Australia also announced new restrictions this week. Japan is particularly being watched since its state of emergency means spectators

will be banned at most venues at the upcoming Olympics.

With the detection of the delta variant last month in Australia's New South Wales, state Premier Gladys Berejiklian said Friday that this is now the "scariest period" of the pandemic yet as she announced new restrictions in Sydney after the city reported 44 new cases, in line with the country's approach to move quickly with targeted measures to stamp out new outbreaks.

"New South Wales is facing the biggest challenge we have faced since the pandemic started," she said. "And I don't say that lightly."

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