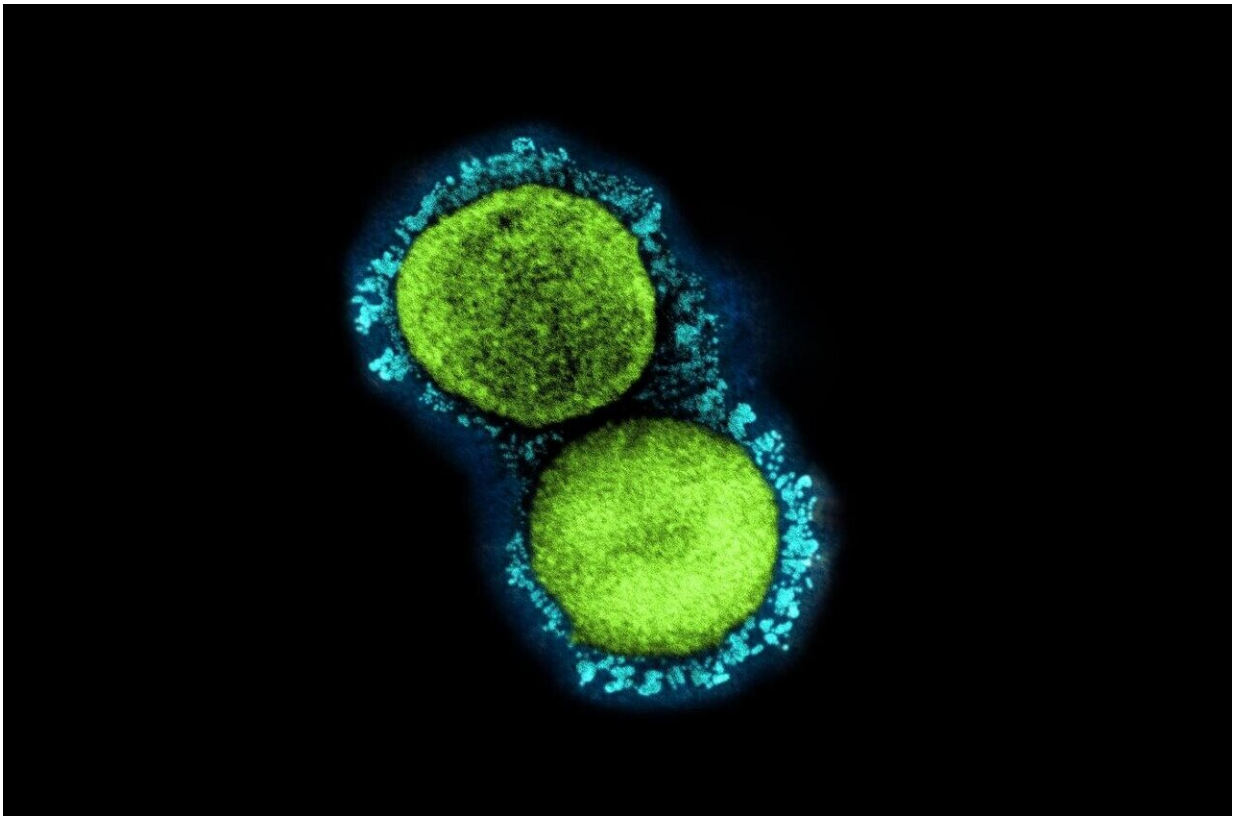


Thai hospitals short of beds as COVID cases soar: ministry

July 29 2021



A transmission electron micrograph of SARS-CoV-2 virus particles (UK B.1.1.7 variant), isolated from a patient sample and cultivated in cell culture. Credit: NIAID

Thailand's health ministry sounded the alarm over Bangkok's dire lack of hospital beds and isolation facilities on Thursday as COVID-19 cases

and deaths soared to a new record.

The Southeast Asian country is struggling to contain its latest outbreak fuelled by the highly contagious Delta variant, with infections and deaths skyrocketing and the healthcare system stretched thin.

Despite the hardest-hit provinces being placed under severe restrictions and a nighttime curfew, Thailand on Thursday registered a new single-day record of 17,669 cases and 165 deaths.

"I am speaking frankly—we do not have enough beds in hospitals," said Somsak Akkasilp, the health ministry's director general of the Department of Medical Services, in an uncharacteristically candid press conference.

"In big hospitals, all (intensive care units) are over-occupied. They have 10 beds for ICU but they have to handle 12 ICU cases," he said, adding that medics were moving critical patients from the emergency room once the beds are vacated.

Hospitals in the capital have the capacity to manage 1,000 new patients a day, but Somsak said they were well past that number—with 4,000 new cases recorded Thursday in Bangkok alone.

While authorities are starting to recommend home isolation for milder cases, there are issues with supplying medicine to them, said Somsak.

In addition, the city's isolation and quarantine facilities are getting filled, and metropolitan authorities are working with private hospitals to free up more beds.

"But I have to speak frankly—no matter how much we increase it, it is not likely to be enough for this current outbreak," Somsak said.

"We do not know if the pandemic has reached its peak yet... We have to flatten the curve," he added.

Thailand has reported more than 561,000 coronavirus cases and 4,562 deaths.

The bulk of them were detected since the latest wave kicked off in April from an upscale Bangkok nightlife district frequented by the politically connected.

The administration of Premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha has come under vociferous criticism for its handling of the pandemic, from accusations of vaccine mismanagement to the lack of government compensation for affected sectors.

Currently the kingdom is administering Sinovac, Sinopharm and AstraZeneca doses.

But the mass inoculation campaign has been slow, with much of the population angered that the government has not procured Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, which use newer mRNA technology.

The US embassy has donated 1.5 million doses of Pfizer vaccines to Thailand, which are expected to arrive Friday.

Fresh Phuket restrictions

In the southern island of Phuket—where vaccinated foreign tourists can visit via a quarantine-free scheme—local authorities announced more restrictions Thursday after a slow uptick in cases.

Under the fresh measures, domestic travellers will be banned from entering Phuket via land, sea, and domestic flights from August 3 to

16—except for emergency services.

But a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman said the restriction "will not affect the Phuket sandbox", as international tourists who have done their 14-day stay on the island will still be able to travel to other provinces.

Earlier measures saw foreign migrant workers banned from moving around the area while at-risk venues—including boxing schools and malls—were already closed.

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