

Virus-wracked Indonesia to loosen COVID-19 curbs

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Virus-wracked Indonesia said Sunday that small businesses and some shopping malls could reopen despite warnings that loosening curbs could spark another devastating COVID-19 wave, even as it moved to extend a

web of restrictions launched last month.

President Joko Widodo said measures imposed in early July would continue until August 2 as the highly infectious Delta variant tears across the Southeast Asian archipelago, which has been overtaking battered India and Brazil as the world's virus epicentre.

But he added that "adjustments" would be made to a shutdown that closed malls, restaurants, parks and offices including in the capital Jakarta, hard-hit Java and on holiday island Bali.

Traditional markets, roadside vendors and ubiquitous open-air restaurants known as warungs would be among businesses allowed to reopen Monday with restrictions, even in the worst-affected areas.

Shopping malls and mosques in less hard-hit parts of the Muslim majority country would also get the green light to swing open their doors to limited crowds and hours.

Offices would remain subject to shutdown orders, the government said.

However, there have been widespread reports of employers forcing non-essential employees to work even under the current lockdown.

Widodo, pointing to falling daily infection and hospital occupancy rates, said any loosening would be done "gradually and carefully".

Official case rates are down from more than 50,000 a day. But testing rates have also declined at the same time, while the number of positive results remains high—suggesting that the virus was still spreading quickly.

The announcement came after Indonesia saw its 24-hour death toll hit a

record 1,566 on Friday.

The World Health Organization has called on Indonesia to impose tighter virus curbs.

Widodo's government has been widely criticised over its handling of the pandemic and policies that appeared to prioritise Southeast Asia's biggest economy over public health.

"The government faces a dilemma because it has seen countries that focused on the economy risked their public health, while others that prioritised [public health](#) had their economies battered," said Arya Fernandes, a political analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

"So they're trying to find a win-win solution by imposing restrictions but still keeping the economy open."

Indonesia's vaccination levels remain far below the government's one-million-a-day target for July and only about six percent of its nearly 270 million people have been fully inoculated.

"Lifting restrictions will bring more infections and deaths," Dicky Budiman, an Indonesia epidemiologist at Australia's Griffith University, told AFP before Sunday's announcement.

"Restrictions must be in place for a minimum of four weeks and (the government) needs to increase testing, tracing and treatment to have maximum results. Otherwise, it's just the same as having no restrictions."

Indonesia has reported more than 3.1 million cases and 83,279 deaths since the pandemic began, but those official figures are widely believed to be a severe undercount.

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