

Fatigue and frustration as China presses strict zero-COVID strategy

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Nearly two years into a pandemic that has seen China pursue some of the world's most stringent coronavirus measures, some grumbling has started to emerge over the strategy, particularly as other nations learn to live with the virus.

The zero-COVID approach is unrelenting—with border closures,

targeted lockdowns and mass testing triggered sometimes by just one case.

The cost and pain of the strategy have been felt especially acutely by the 210,000 residents of Ruili, a Chinese city on the border with Myanmar that has endured three major lockdowns and frequent mass testing—leaving many businesses on the brink of collapse.

A merchant surnamed Lin said his jewellery business was hanging by a thread, with tourists and customers staying away because of COVID restrictions.

"We continue operating... but we're scraping by," Lin told AFP, refusing to give his full name for fear of reprisals.

In a widely shared television interview this month, University of Hong Kong professor Guan Yi questioned China's strategy, arguing it should not conduct mass testing "at every turn" or give out booster vaccine doses without enough data on their efficacy.

While China largely succeeded in stamping out infections during the first year of the pandemic, the Delta variant has proven more difficult to contain.

Cases have been detected in more than 40 cities in recent weeks, putting millions under lockdown and disrupting the lives of millions more—even though the numbers pale in comparison with many other countries.

Weddings were cancelled and mourners told to keep funerals short, as schools were closed and flights grounded—sometimes stranding thousands of tourists.

And there was outrage online over [health workers](#) killing a pet dog with

a crowbar while its owners were in quarantine, with furious [social media](#) users complaining about how harshly COVID measures have been implemented.

Growing domestic pressure

Those deemed to have failed in controlling COVID are often sacked, driving local officials to increasingly drastic containment measures.

One region offered thousands of dollars for information about an outbreak.

Beijing is "facing growing domestic pressures to pivot to a more [flexible approach](#)", Yanzhong Huang of the Council on Foreign Relations told AFP.

The desperate saga of one man highlighted the trouble some have faced because of tech malfunctions or bureaucratic lags.

After an overnight work trip, the man could not get the "green code" on a health app that people require to travel and was left stranded.

It sparked an outcry. The man's baffled colleague wrote on social media that he was vaccinated, had not travelled to high or even medium-risk areas, and had a negative test result.

After the incident got attention online, authorities admitted there may have been mistakes in some isolated cases.

Analysts say Beijing is unlikely to relax its approach until at least after a top Communist Party congress in late 2022, and if there are more effective vaccines available by then.

China has given conditional approval to five domestic vaccines, but their published efficacy rates lag behind shots developed elsewhere.

Some government figures have quietly expressed doubts over their efficacy against the Delta variant.

State media, however, have tried to shut down debate, with Xinhua insisting it is "simply not right" to question China's strategy.

Leaders are likely to dig in their heels and dismiss "frustrated citizens as a minority", said Natasha Kassam of the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank.

'Miserable'

Meanwhile in Ruili, the frustration among the residents was laid bare in a WeChat post from former deputy mayor Dai Rongli, who said the measures were "squeezing... the last signs of life" out of the city.

It struck a chord.

"Only those in this situation know how miserable people are feeling," one local wrote in response.

One Ruili toddler has already taken more than 70 COVID tests, local media reported.

With no income, a video maker surnamed Lu said he was forced to burn through savings just to pay rent for his office space.

"I can't hold on for much longer," he said.

Some Ruili residents have decided they cannot wait for things to change.

A jade merchant surnamed Wen told AFP he left the city with his family after months of struggling.

"There's no business to be done now in Ruili."

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