

Malaysian government sets the stage for mass Omicron infections

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With 90 percent of all COVID cases detected at ports of entry being the Omicron variant, Malaysia's Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin indicated last Thursday that the Omicron variant will inevitably overtake the Delta strain. He warned of an Omicron wave between February and March.

Daily new COVID cases for Malaysia reported on Saturday were 4,046. While this figure has fluctuated between 3,000 to 4,000 since late December, the number of Omicron cases is rising, particularly local transmissions.

The official Omicron tally so far stands at 439 cases with 54 cases from local transmission. Between January 14 and 18, 186 Omicron cases were detected. Of these, 41 were detected in Malaysia's most populous state, Selangor, and 17 were detected in the capital, Kuala Lumpur.

The official figures are small but it is highly likely, given the extreme infectiousness of Omicron, that it is spreading undetected through the country. While genomic sequencing capacity in Malaysia is better than in Indonesia, it is still limited to about 400 tests every two weeks according to parliamentary reporting from September.

Recent Omicron modelling from the Malaysian Ministry of Health puts the reproduction number of COVID infections with the government's very limited restrictions at 1.6 during an Omicron wave. Any figure greater than 1 indicates that infections will continue to rise.

Based on the government's modelling, the number of daily cases is predicted to rise to more than 30,000. The highest daily case number recorded so far in Malaysia was 24,599 on August 26 2021 during the peak of the Delta variant wave.

Given the dangers, strict public measures are needed:

stricter quarantine requirements, the shutdown of non-essential production and a shift to remote schooling with financial and other support for those impacted.

Like its international counterparts, the Malaysian government is pursuing policies that are the complete opposite of what is required and is vehemently opposed to lockdowns.

As the latest World Health Organization situation report for Malaysia notes, COVID clusters predominate at workplaces and schools, meaning that key pathways for Omicron to rapidly multiply already exist.

As well, home quarantine is permitted. This has recently been the chief point of the entry of Omicron infections as some pilgrims returning from Mecca mingle with visiting relatives at home.

Moreover, quarantine periods have been shortened from 10 to seven days for those who are asymptomatic and fully vaccinated. In addition, those who have received their booster shot and are asymptomatic are required to quarantine for only five days.

These changes have set the stage for a major new wave of Omicron infections that will put severe strains on the public health system and other infrastructure. Even before mass Omicron cases, the current COVID ICU bed usage stands at about 17 percent.

The shortening of quarantine times means that potentially infectious workers will be forced back to work placing further stresses on key services such as logistics and health care.

In spite of the serious warnings by scientific experts, the defacto head of the quartet of ministers handling Malaysia's pandemic response, Minister of Defence Hishamuddin Hussein, stressed "that the large-scale movement control order [MCO] that we all faced previously will not be re-implemented." That is, no more lockdowns.

The MCO during the Delta wave in August and September was a lockdown in name only. At the time, 18 manufacturing centres were allowed to operate, mainly at 60 percent capacity. These became vectors for further significant transmission of the virus, leading to terrible levels of death that peaked at almost 600 daily deaths in September.

The Malaysian government's gross mishandling of the pandemic during the Delta wave and the associated staggering loss of life was a significant factor in the ouster of former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

To date, based on official statistics, there have been over 2.8 million cases and almost 32,000 COVID deaths, but this is a significant undercount. A more accurate estimate of COVID deaths can be established by considering current deaths over and above recent historical averages prior to the pandemic.

Such an excess deaths calculation by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington estimates total COVID deaths in Malaysia at about 52,500 deaths to date. That is, almost two in every thousand people have died from COVID. For older age groups who have borne the brunt of COVID deaths, the fatality rate is significantly higher.

While some COVID public health measures are still in place, such as mask wearing indoors and smart phone QR code check-in at public places, the overarching approach of the Malaysian government since October 2021 has been a criminally irresponsible drive to re-open the Malaysian economy and prop up businesses. This was the meaning of the comment by Director general of Health Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah at the time that the country was in the "endemic stage" of the virus.

Chief among the re-opening measures has been the resumption of face-to-face teaching which, in turn, facilitates the return of parents to work. Already there has been a large number of young people infected.

On Thursday, Khairy indicated that nearly 580,000 children aged 18 and under have been infected with COVID since the start of the pandemic. "To date, there have been 144 deaths due to Covid-19 among those aged 18 and under. Of this, 31 were aged 5 to 11," he said. The death of so many young people is an indictment of the Malaysian ruling elite.

In addition, the young people who are infected face the danger of Long COVID.

As reported in early January, the Finnish Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services stated that Long COVID, whereby COVID symptoms persist for months after an initial infection, could become the largest, or one of the largest, chronic diseases in Finland.

The statement was based on a Finnish expert panel's examination of more than 4,000 international studies "which showed that one in two adults and around 2 percent of children may experience prolonged symptoms connected to COVID-19."

In line with its counterparts internationally, the Malaysian government is opening the door for mass infections and high hospitalisations that will inevitably lead to rising deaths and the long term debilitating impact of Long COVID.



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