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Covid-19: Cases rise in South Korea, China, and Philippines as protests erupt in Thailand

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Protests have broken out in Thailand, with demonstrators calling for the prime minister, Prayuth Chan-o-cha, to resign over the government's handling of the covid-19 pandemic.¹

The rally came as the country recorded new record highs, with more than 23 000 new cases reported on 13 August and 184 deaths.² Just 6.9% of the country's population is fully vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2.

Thailand's government is also facing criticism over new powers that would allow it to block online reports about covid-19 that may "instigate fear" even if they are true.³

Cases of covid-19 are also rising in other countries in East and South East Asia as the highly infectious delta variant spreads in the region, although the numbers are still much lower than in many European countries such as France and the UK, where new daily cases are around 30 000.

Record cases

South Korea reported 2200 cases on 11 August, the highest number of new daily cases since the pandemic began.⁴ In response, the government has asked the public to minimise holiday travel and urged companies to allow people to work from home. The country has also just agreed a deal with Pfizer for 30 million doses of vaccine to be supplied in 2022. So far 17.4% of the country's 52 million population has had two doses.⁵

In China, which is following an elimination strategy with strict lockdowns, 878 cases have been reported so far in August, more than double the 390 cases reported in all of July. Concerns have also been raised over the effects of repeated lockdowns on the economy.⁶

In the Philippines hospitals are facing huge demand, with many reporting being near full capacity and some saying they have run out of beds in intensive care units. This comes as 13 177 new cases were recorded on 13 August, bringing the country's total to 1.71 million cases, the second highest number in South East Asia after Indonesia.⁷ Just 11.1% of the Philippines' population is fully vaccinated.

Japan has also reported a surge in infections, with more than 18 000 new cases on 12 August, outstripping the 15 812 cases registered the previous day, according to news reports. Hospitals in Tokyo are said to be under fresh pressure, with more than 200 people reported as having serious illness, the highest number since the start of the pandemic.

The government will decide next week whether spectators will be allowed at the Paralympic Games, due to open on 24 August.

Switching strategy

In Singapore, where 67% of the population is fully vaccinated, the government has switched from an elimination to a "living with covid" strategy. The country will once again allow indoor hospitality and groups of up to five to meet if they have all had two vaccine doses. Fully vaccinated foreign workers and their dependents will also be allowed to enter the country.⁸

Despite the high vaccination rate, Singapore has seen several outbreaks in recent weeks. Although these forced the government to delay easing restrictions, plans are now going ahead after the number of new infections dropped below 100 a day in the week to 6 August.

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