

COVID-19 Asia Monitor

No. 1 – 23 March

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Government response measures to the COVID-19 pandemic are at various stages of implementation across East and Southeast Asia but several key trends can be discerned:

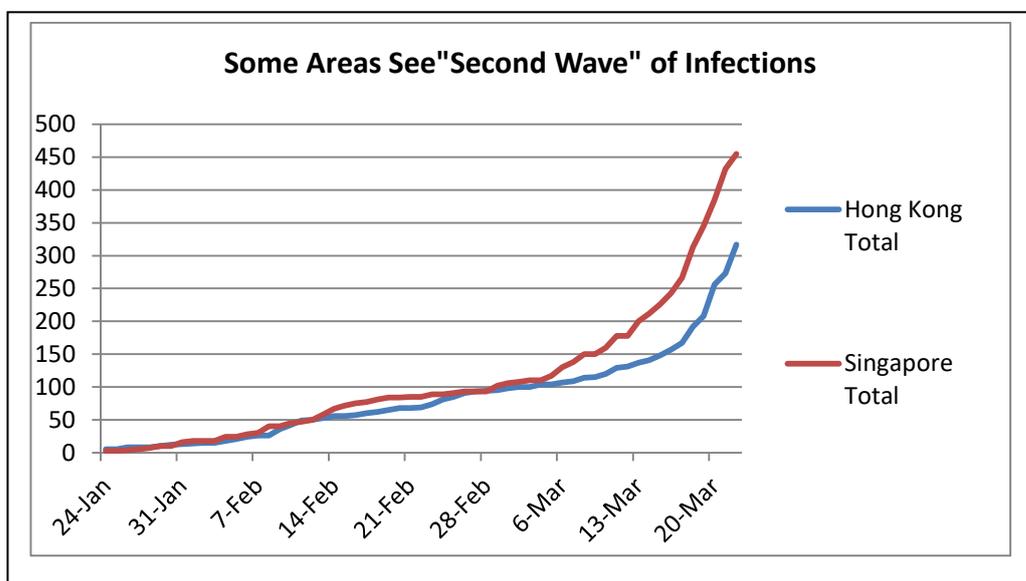
- 1.) Mainland China, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore all appear to have successfully curbed the progress of the disease, with concern shifting instead to defending against “re-infections” from harder-hit countries abroad;
- 2.) Most other countries in the region are, after many weeks of anticipation, experiencing steep increases in the number of confirmed infections consistent with exponential growth. The governments of these countries are rapidly strengthening their policy responses, including travel bans and quarantines, but such measures may be “too little, too late.” Many of the nations in this group, including Indonesia, India and the Philippines, appear to be much less well prepared to handle an epidemic compared to the countries of the first group;
- 3.) The most important “outlier” country is Japan. Amid criticism that the government has not taken adequate action, especially with regard to a limited testing policy, official infections have risen more slowly and steadily than in other areas. Concern about an “unseen epidemic” is widespread, but there is substantial disagreement about what precisely is happening.

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SELECTED COUNTRIES & TERRITORIES

Hill & Associates is tracking the epidemic and response measures in 18 Asian countries and territories:

Mainland China

The epidemiological, regulatory and social trends related to COVID-19 observed in Mainland China in recent weeks continue to deepen, with concern shifting toward preventing re-infection from abroad.

- Newly confirmed infections are now almost exclusively imported. According to official data, of 233 total infections from 16-22 March, all but three were imported;
- Quarantine policies for inbound travelers have tightened nationwide, but especially for Beijing. All Beijing-bound international flights are now being diverted other Mainland airports for screening. Other cities have only slightly less strict policies. The arrival screening process may take 12 hours or longer, and mandated quarantine measures are strictly enforced;
- Renormalization continues at varying speeds across the country, with even Wuhan beginning to loosen lockdown measures. Some cities, including Shanghai, appear close to normal on the surface, with people out and about and businesses open. Health checks are becoming more perfunctory in some places;
- Foreigners in China may experience increased scrutiny, particularly if traveling domestically. H&A is anecdotally aware of incidents of verbal abuse directed toward foreigners, but these appear to be isolated.

Hong Kong, Macau & Taiwan

Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan have all introduced measures to curb re-imported infections. New daily confirmed cases in Hong Kong have picked up substantially in the past week, with 48 infections reported on 20 March, sparking concerns of a “second wave” of the epidemic there, too.

- Most of the recent confirmed infections in all three places are imported cases, or associated with imported cases;
- All three places have tightened their border control measures. Hong Kong has expanded its quarantine measures to all countries and regions except for Mainland China, Macau and Taiwan. Macau has barred the entry of all visitors except those from the Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Taiwan has closed the border to all non-citizens;
- In Hong Kong, some people have relaxed personal anti-epidemic measures, such as social distancing, despite warnings from medical experts that the risk of infection persists. Social gatherings remain an important source of local infections. A number of recent cases have been linked to the Lan Kwai Fong entertainment district.

South Korea

Aggressive containment measures, which included a nationwide testing campaign, helped stem COVID-19 in South Korea. However, concern about a “second wave” of imported infections is growing here as well.

- The government is reemphasizing the risk of infection and continues to urge social distancing as some people, particularly the young, ease their behavior. It has also restricted mass gatherings. Resumption of school has been postponed to early April;
- Arrivals from Europe are required to undergo testing at the border. Most travelers are required to undergo 14

days self-quarantine;

- The country is adapting policies to deal with the epidemic long-term while minimizing the impact on normal life.

Japan

The prevailing issue in Japan remains the high degree of uncertainty over the effectiveness of the government's response to the health threat. It is vital over the next several weeks to watch for signs of an as yet undiscovered epidemic, including indications of a strained healthcare system.

- Some observers have criticized Japan for conducting too few tests, and for not adopting stricter social measures: work and life have for the most part continued as normal the past several months. However, it appears that the disease has not had the major impact seen in countries like South Korea and Italy;
- The Japanese Diet on 13 March amended a law that will give Prime Minister Shinzo Abe the ability to declare a state of emergency, but he has so far declined to do so;
- Japan has restricted the entry of foreign nationals from high risk countries, and requires arrivals from a number of other to undergo a 14-day self-quarantine. The government has also requested that organizers curtail large public events such as sports games. Some closed schools may reopen.

Philippines

The number of COVID-19 cases in the Philippines reached 462 after the country reported an additional 82 new infections on Sunday, 22 March. Lawmakers have said that businesses are in dire need of assistance to ramp up the production of basic necessities, including surgical masks and other goods.

- The Philippines has implemented enhanced community quarantine (lockdown) for Luzon Island including Metro Manila until 14 April. Strict home quarantine is in place and authorities are only allowing essential movements;
- International airports are currently operating in the Philippines, but airlines have reduced the number of flights in and out of the country; the government suspended all visas from 22 March including visa-free privileges and those based on visa waiver agreements with other jurisdictions;
- The Philippines has an ongoing travel ban on China, including Hong Kong and Macau, as well as North Gyeongsang (South Korea), Italy and Iran, except for Filipinos, their dependents and permanent residents;
- A proposed measure in the Senate seeks new powers for President Rodrigo Duterte to direct the operations of privately-owned hospitals and medical facilities, and requiring businesses to prioritize and accept contracts for materials necessary for the public health emergency, among others.

Singapore

Singapore has not imposed a total lockdown, but increased restrictions have been put in place. The country has 309 COVID-19 confirmed cases in hospital as of Monday 23 March, including 14 in a critical condition. One-hundred-and-forty-four people have been discharged.

- Singapore recorded its first two COVID-19 deaths on Saturday 21 March, one was an Indonesian citizen. The Ministry of Health said that 80% of recent new cases were imported;
- Authorities have maintained the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) at orange, the second-highest level, since 18 March. Under the DORSCON orange level, authorities have limited access to some facilities, such as schools, and cancelled interschool activities;
- Gatherings and events involving 250 people or more are not allowed until 30 June, and smaller gatherings are

required to comply with safety measures;

- From Monday 23 March at 2359hrs (local time) short-term visitors will not be allowed to enter or transit through Singapore. Foreign laborers on work passes will not be permitted entry unless they work in 'essential services', including healthcare and transport. Citizens, permanent residents, and long term pass holders returning to Singapore will be issued a stay-at-home notice for 14 days.

Indonesia

The government is facing pressure to step up measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 as health authorities continue to record a surge in the number of confirmed cases across the country.

- The number of confirmed cases stood at 579 with 49 fatalities – the highest death toll among Southeast Asian countries – as of 23 March. Jakarta recorded the highest number of confirmed cases with 353 and 23 deaths, followed by West Java (59), Banten (56) and East Java (41);
- Provincial governments in Jakarta and Yogyakarta have declared a state of emergency effective immediately. Jakarta's emergency status is active for at least 14 days and Yogyakarta's will remain in place until 29 May;
- The government has suspended free visa and visa-on-arrival policies as well as diplomatic/service visa-free facilities for all countries for one month starting 20 March. The government has also imposed temporary bans on visitors who have travelled to Iran, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Vatican City and the United Kingdom within the preceding 14 days;
- Additional medical checks have been implemented at seaports across the country. A number of ports, including in Aceh, West Nusa Tenggara and South Sulawesi, now only allow ships carrying food and essential supplies to dock.

Malaysia

Infections in Malaysia began rising steeply during the past two weeks; there were slightly more than 1,300 confirmed cases by end of day on Sunday, 22 March, making it the hardest-hit country in Southeast Asia in terms of total infections, according to official numbers. Anti-epidemic measures are escalating accordingly.

- The Malaysian government implemented a restricted movement order on 16 March that bars Malaysian citizens from travelling overseas and foreign visitors from entering the country;
- The government has advised all residents to stay at home and has warned that security forces will enforce compliance with the movement control order, which will remain in effect until 31 March. During this period, public gatherings are banned, along with all religious, sporting, social and cultural events. Schools, universities and non-essential businesses remain closed. All religious activities and Friday prayers at mosques nationwide have been suspended until 26 March;
- The government has warned that existing restrictions could be extended for another two weeks and possibly even longer. The government could also implement additional health measures.

Thailand

Thailand reported a total of 721 cases as of Monday 23 March, with seven in critical condition and one fatality since the first cases were detected in the country in January. Anti-epidemic measures are also quickly escalating:

- Bangkok is on virtual lockdown as of Sunday 22 March, with only supermarkets open. Five provinces that border the capital are applying the same conditions. Public gatherings have been banned in most part of the country;

- Thousands of migrant workers have been seeking to leave the country to neighboring Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam Cambodia and Laos before borders are closed;
- Airports are requiring strict entry conditions for international arrivals, including a certificate of stating that the traveller is free from COVID-19 infection (tantamount to requiring a test) and insurance cover of USD 100,000 from Sunday 22 March.

Vietnam

Vietnam now reports a total of 116 cases as of Sunday 22 March, although hundreds more cases are suspected. Many active cases are Vietnamese nationals returning from Europe and the US, or foreign nationals visiting from the same regions.

- As of Sunday 22 March, Vietnam has suspended entry for all foreign nationals, including those of Vietnamese origin and family members with visa waivers;
- Residents have been advised to self-isolate at home until at least the end of March after the country recorded a series of daily increases in infections, mostly from overseas.

Cambodia

The number of cases has also increased steeply in Cambodia with 84 confirmed as of Sunday, March 22 in 13 out of Cambodia's 25 provinces. A large proportion of cases (over 30) are French nationals and contact tracing is actively being conducted by the authorities. The country has ordered the closure of schools and cinemas and banned public gatherings but has yet to impose a lockdown nationwide. Neighbouring countries have been moving to close their borders with Cambodia, however.

Laos

Laos continues to maintain that it has no confirmed cases of COVID-19 but sources indicate a number of suspected cases, and the country has closed its four immigration checkpoints with Thailand at that country's Nakhon Phanom province. Some reports express fears of a "hidden epidemic" in the country. The authorities have called on businesses not to increase the prices of consumer goods and services amid the emerging crisis.

India

Authorities have put at least 75 districts, which have reported confirmed COVID-19 cases, under emergency lockdown until 31 March to stop the spread of the virus and mitigate the risk of large-scale community transmission. India has 396 confirmed cases, while the death toll stands at seven.

- Public gatherings have been banned in most parts of the country;
- Indian Railways has stopped all passenger services, including the rapid mass transportation systems in cities;
- All inter-state bus services have been suspended;
- Airports are not allowing international landings for a week, commencing from 22 March.

Bangladesh

The World Health Organization (WHO) advises Bangladesh to consider pre-emptive lockdown and a declaration of emergency in view of the growing number of COVID-19 cases, but the government is yet to make a decision. The country has 27 confirmed cases; two people have died.

- Air connections with 10 countries, including India, Singapore, and Malaysia, have been temporarily suspended;
- Incidents of quarantine-breaking have triggered fear of community spread as health safety compliance among the population remains low;
- The entry of foreigners has been banned through 11 international land border points, including Benapole, a major trading corridor with India.

Pakistan

The number of patients in Pakistan has been increasing rapidly, with some areas reporting shortages of medical equipment and protective gear. Pakistan reports at least 757 confirmed cases.

- The worst-affected region is Sindh with more than 330 cases, while Punjab (222) and Balochistan (104) provinces also report three-digit numbers;
- Pakistan has temporarily halted all international flights, barring cargo movement and diplomatic travel;
- The international borders with Iran and Afghanistan have been closed.

Sri Lanka

The island country has confirmed 81 COVID-19 cases, but authorities are beginning to enact strict anti-epidemic measures. More than 200 people, including a number of foreign nationals, are under observation.

- More than 300 people have been arrested for defying a nationwide curfew that has now been extended until 24 March. Authorities fear that protest gatherings will help the highly contagious virus to spread;
- Unrest occurred at Anuradhapura prison, where inmates fought with guards and tried to escape while protesting against strict isolation measures;
- Sri Lanka has suspended all international flights.

Brunei

Brunei has 88 confirmed COVID-19 cases after five new cases were reported on Sunday 22 March. The country's Ministry of Health said that one of the five is a 39-year-old local man who returned from the UK on 21 March. The ministry also said that more than 1,600 individuals were in quarantine and around 3,000 laboratory tests have been conducted for COVID-19. The government has also barred foreigners who have travelled to China's Hubei Province, Europe, and the UK within the previous two weeks from entering Brunei. In addition, anyone arriving from any other country will be required to self-isolate for two weeks. The government has also banned Bruneian nationals from leaving the country, except for reasons such as medical emergencies or resuming studies abroad.



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Contact Us

For any enquiries, comments or feedback, please contact:

Thomas Nunlist
Analyst, China and North Asia
thomas.nunlist@hill-assoc.com

Or Ian Betts
Risk Intelligence Service Line Leader
ian.betts@hill-assoc.com

GET IN TOUCH WITH OUR EXPERTS TODAY

Hill Risk Consulting (PRC) Ltd. Room 2406, Zhongrong Hengrui International Building, 620 Zhangyang Rd., Pudong, Shanghai, China 200122

T +86 21 5238 5599 **F** +86 21 5237 1693 **E** info@hill-assoc.com **W** www.hill-assoc.com