Migrant worker cases drive Thai coronavirus total past 5,000

21 December 2020

The new cases in Samut Sakhon, most not exhibiting symptoms, were found by mass testing after a 67-year-old shrimp vendor at a seafood market tested positive for the virus. The Klang Koong seafood market—one of the country's largest—and its associated housing were sealed off by razor wire and police guards.

The province has also imposed a night curfew and other travel restrictions until Jan. 3. Many public places, including shopping malls, schools, cinemas, spas and sports stadiums, have been ordered closed.

Health workers record migrant workers ahead of collecting nasal swab samples from them to test for COVID-19 in Samut Sakhon, south of Bangkok, Thailand, Sunday, Dec. 20, 2020. Thailand on Sunday reported a few new local infections, a day after identifying more than 500 cases south of Bangkok in a country that had largely brought the pandemic under control. (AP Photo/ Chalida Ekvitthayavechnukul)

Thailand's total number of confirmed coronavirus cases surged past 5,000 on Monday as hundreds of migrant workers tested positive, posing a major challenge for the authorities.

Thailand has been one of several Southeast Asian countries that were faring relatively unscathed by the pandemic. But on Saturday, health officials reported a daily record of 548 new cases, almost all of them among migrant workers in the seafood industry in Samut Sakhon province, 34 kilometers (21 miles) southwest of Bangkok.

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha said his government would wait to see how the situation looked in a week's time before deciding on any special restrictions for New Year's celebrations.

A health worker in protective clothing collects nasal swab sample from a man to test for COVID-19 in Samut Sakhon, South of Bangkok, Thailand, Sunday, Dec. 20, 2020. Thailand reported more than 500 new coronavirus cases on Saturday, the highest daily tally in a country that had largely brought the pandemic under control. (AP Photo/ Chalida Ekvitthayavechnukul)

Some 360 of the 382 new cases reported Monday were migrant workers in the province, said the Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration. There were 14 other cases defined as locally

transmitted and eight found in state quarantine facilities where virtually all people arriving from abroad must stay for two weeks.

Most migrant workers in Samut Sakhon are from neighboring Myanmar, which has seen a surge in coronavirus cases that began in August. The situation in Myanmar had caused concern among Thai officials, and efforts were made to sharply reduce border traffic.

There was alarm last month when several cases were found among Thai women who had worked in Myanmar and then evaded health controls when returning home to northern Thailand. Several people from the north who recently were in Myanmar and tested positive were tracked only after having already flown to Bangkok.

Thailand has had a total of 5,289 cases, including 60 deaths.

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