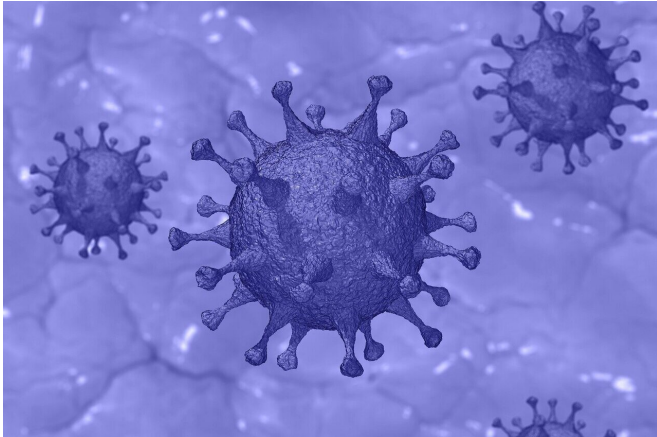# Cambodia turns hotel into COVID hospital as cases rise

8 March 2021, by Sopheng Cheang

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

A defunct luxury hotel in Cambodia's capital finished conversion into a 500-room coronavirus hospital on Monday, as authorities enforced a new law imposing criminal punishments for violating health rules and infections continued to rise in the Southeast Asian country.

The Great Duke Phnom Penh hasn't been in operation for two years, and is now set up to treat virus patients amid a third wave of the pandemic in Cambodia. Prime Minister Hun Sen assigned Gen. Hun Manet, his eldest son and a powerful army chief, to lead the two-day effort to turn the hotel into a temporary hospital.

The property is currently owned by a Chinese businessman who renamed it after purchasing it from a Cambodian tycoon. It's unclear why the upscale hotel has since been closed. Located in central Phnom Penh and apparently in good condition, the hotel was well known in the 2000s and was a popular spot for foreign embassies, NGOs and other groups during government-hosted conferences or summits.

On Friday, Cambodia's government passed a law allowing criminal punishments, including fines and prison sentences, for breaking health measures aimed at preventing the virus's spread.

For example, under the new law, intentionally spreading the virus is punishable by up to 10 years in prison, or 20 years if the offense is committed by an organized group. The law also includes administrative measures, such as travel prohibitions, bans on gatherings, lockdowns of areas with a high number of virus cases and unspecified "administrative and other measures that are necessary to respond to and prevent the spread of COVID-19."

Critics say such vague provisions allow for potential overreach and abuses by authorities because they can arbitrarily target people and groups, such as those protesting government policies.

Cambodia has officially tallied 1,011 virus cases and no deaths since the start of the pandemic. The Health Ministry announced 24 new infections on Monday.

A ministry statement said the new cases were caused by a local community outbreak. It's been traced to a foreign resident who broke quarantine in a hotel and went to a nightclub in early February. That caused a slew of infections and led the government on Feb. 20 to announce a two-week closure of all public schools, cinemas, bars and entertainment areas in Phnom Penh.

The government has since extended the closures for more two weeks for schools, gyms, concert halls, museums and other entertainment venues in Phnom Penh, nearby Kandal province and the coastal province of Sihanoukville.

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