

Thailand faces growing outbreak ahead of New Year travel

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Thai authorities struggled to contain a growing coronavirus outbreak just days before the country's traditional Songkran New Year's holiday, when millions of people travel.

Health officials reported 559 new infections on Friday, following increases over the previous two days. The government response has so far centered on closures of nightlife venues in 41 provinces for two weeks. Governors of some provinces are placing restrictions on travelers arriving from elsewhere.

Such daily increases are rare for Thailand, which has weathered the pandemic far better than many nations through measures including strict border controls that have decimated the country's lucrative tourism industry. Thailand has also experimented at times with curfews, alcohol bans and closures of schools, shopping malls and restaurants.

The outbreak—which has infected at least one Cabinet minister and forced a number of others into self-quarantine—is increasing criticism of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's government and its

handling of the pandemic. While Thailand has only recorded 30,869 infections and 96 deaths, critics say the vaccination drive is too slow—less than 1% have gotten their jabs—and support for people whose livelihoods have been wiped out by the pandemic is lacking.

The director-general of the Department of Disease Control, Dr. Opas Karnkwinpong, said this week that according to Health Ministry projections, the number of new infections could rise as high as 10,000 per day if no adequate measures are taken.

Travelers and businesses alike had been hoping that this year's Songkran holiday could go forward without a spike in infections. The official holiday was canceled last year during the country's first major outbreak.

The government has so far declined to issue blanket travel restrictions though provincial authorities are allowed to set quarantine rules for people coming from high-risk zones such as Bangkok. Several provinces have done so, throwing many people's travel plans into question.

Chief among them was Chiang Mai in the north, one of the country's most popular destinations until the [coronavirus](#) pandemic crippled the tourism industry.

Chiang Mai provincial [health officials](#) are requiring visitors from Bangkok and four surrounding provinces to self-quarantine for the duration of their stay, up to 14 days, the state Thai News agency reported. A 280-bed field hospital has been set up to treat COVID-19 patients.

The state-owned Transport Company, a major inter-provincial bus operator, estimated that only half of the 100,000 people anticipated to leave Bangkok on Friday for other provinces had embarked on their journeys, the Bangkok Post reported.

It said at least two airline executives wanted travel restrictions tightened over the Songkran holiday. Tassapon Bijleveld of Asia Aviation, the largest shareholder in Thai AirAsia, and Nuntaporn Komonsittivate of Thai Lion Air both said a further spread of the virus could endanger the future large-scale return of foreign visitors.

The current outbreak is the largest since December, when it was centered around a fresh food market that employs a number of migrant workers from Myanmar. This time, the outbreak has been traced to a number of bars and nightlife venues in the heart of Bangkok, including many popular with the rich and powerful. Cases are now on the rise in at least 20 provinces, with authorities saying some of those infected have a more contagious variant of the virus first detected in Britain.

So far, Thailand has been using a relatively small supply of the Sinovac and AstraZeneca vaccines. While there have been some high-profile vaccination events—including most recently for workers at now-closed entertainment venues—there is still no clear timetable for the general public.

Authorities in Bangkok have set up mass testing sites in some neighborhoods, drawing large crowds of people who often had to wait hours in line. Efforts to trace infections have been complicated after a number of hospitals in Bangkok said they are suspending testing due to shortages of the chemicals needed to process tests.

The government has ordered preparations to set up field hospitals to accommodate any surge in patients and said vacant rooms in Bangkok hotels could also be converted to accommodate infected people if numbers keep rising.

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