

APRIL 3

National Responses to Covid-19 in Southeast Asia

Malaysia:

Malaysia's confirmed Covid-19 cases are rising rapidly and lead the region in terms of reported cases. Following initial nonchalance in responding to the outbreak, complicated by an abrupt change in government, Malaysia has now implemented major lockdowns under a "Movement Control Order," using the armed forces for enforcement and is ramping up testing and contact tracing.

- **Border closures and entry bans:** Malaysia [shut](#) its borders to travelers and restricted internal movement from March 16 until March 31.
- **Quarantine or lockdown:** Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin enacted and then extended a "Movement Control Order (MCO)" until April 14. The government will decide by April 10 whether the MCO should be extended; this includes prohibition of religious, sports, and cultural congregations. Places of worship and businesses must close except for essential services and stores. The Malaysian Armed Forces, using personnel and drones, have [been mobilized](#) for detection and enforcement. Beginning on April 1, any travel to buy food, daily necessities, and medicine (list of essentials reduced to 10 items) has been restricted to 10 kilometers from a person's residence. Violators face penalties up to \$229 and up to six months of imprisonment.
- **Economic stimulus:** Two economic stimulus packages have been unveiled so far. The first one of \$4.6 billion (RM 20 billion), launched by interim prime minister Mahathir on Feb 27 to cushion the blow of Covid-19, focuses on tourism and other industries, including nationwide electricity discounts of 2 percent for industrial, commercial, and domestic users, as well as a monetary assistance scheme for employees. The second one, estimated at \$53 billion (RM 230 billion) was unveiled by new prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin on March 27. The package includes \$23.1 billion for businesses and \$2.3 billion in direct cash payments for 4 million low-income households. The combined value of the stimulus equals 15.5 percent of Malaysia's GDP and equivalent to 84.2 percent of the federal government's original 2020 budget. Malaysians will start receiving [assistance](#) on April 1.

Philippines:

The Philippines' confirmed cases are surging, now topping the region in terms of number of new, reported cases per day. Under President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippine government has veered from dismissing the threat and abstaining from any restrictions on travel and tourism from China, to an abrupt move by President Duterte to impose a lockdown on the entire island of Luzon, including Metro Manila, enforced by the military and the police. Duterte was granted "special temporary power" by Congress, which is allowing him to implement draconian measures that are creating extreme hardships, especially for Manila's massive urban poor.

- Border closures and entry bans: Domestic and international flights have been canceled until April 14. Foreigners are banned from entry except for overseas Filipino workers; repatriating Filipinos, their foreign spouses, and children (provided that the foreign spouse and children are travelling with the Filipino national), and foreign government and international organization officials accredited to the Philippines. The country stopped issuing visas to foreigners worldwide.
- Quarantine or lockdown: On April 2, the National Task Force on Covid-19 announced that it will start conducting mass testing by April 14. On March 16, President Duterte announced he would be placing the country's main island of Luzon—home to about 60 million people, including Manila—under lockdown until April 12, five weeks after the first cases was reported (the government is currently considering an extension of the lockdown). Only essential services and stores remain open during the lockdown period and are asked to employ a reduced workforce and observe strict physical distancing. On April 1, Duterte ordered the police and the military to shoot protesters violating these measures.
- Economic stimulus: On March 30, the government approved a \$3.9 billion social protection program. The response package will provide \$100 to \$150 monthly aid for two months to poor families, \$2,000 for every health worker who contracted Covid-19, and \$20,000 for every health worker who died from the disease. On March 16, President Duterte announced a \$531 million stimulus, including wage subsidies, support for the tourism industry, and social security. On March 17, the Philippines government announced the entire country will be placed under a “state of calamity” for a period of six months. The declaration will enable national and local governments to quickly access relief funds.
- On March 24, President Duterte signed into law Republic Act No.11469, granting him “special temporary power” to manage the pandemic, placing the Philippines under a state of emergency. Although he failed to get approval to take over private companies and utilities, President Duterte can now tap into private hospitals and ships, reappropriate the executive department's budget, and punish those disobeying quarantine orders and spreading false information. While the decree is scheduled to last for three months, it can be extended by Congress; Duterte is required to report to Congress weekly about actions performed under the law. President Duterte will also have access to \$5.36 billion from various government agencies to mitigate the potential economic fallout.

Thailand:

As Thailand returns slowly to a semblance of normalcy after five years of junta rule, Prime Minister Prayuth is now faced with a new crisis. Inconsistent policies over travel and quarantine, poor communication, and supply shortages have highlighted the government's inability to promptly and adequately respond to the surge of Covid-19 cases and has been sharply criticized by many in Thailand.

- Border closures and entry bans: Borders are closed to foreign visitors. Thailand will block all travel to Thailand, including by Thais, until April 14 to prepare “state

quarantine” facilities. Related agencies are expected to cooperate with Thai embassies to ensure all Thais returning home will be quarantined with proper medical checks.

- Quarantine or lockdown: On April 2, Prime Minister Prayuth announced a national [curfew](#) starting April 3 prohibiting people from leaving their house from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m., with exemptions for medical and banking personnel and those handling consumer goods. The army is helping enforce the curfew and violators risk a \$1,200 fine (TBH 40,000). An Emergency Decree has been implemented from March 26 to April 30 whereby Prime Minister Prayuth chairs the country’s response to the pandemic. Social gatherings will be banned, domestic travel restricted, and all but essential shops shut until the end of April.
- Economic stimulus: On April 3, the government unveiled plans for a new stimulus package; while no dollar amount was revealed, Deputy Prime Minister Somkid announced at a briefing that the overall package would amount 10 percent of Thailand’s GDP. This comes after the Thai government approved a stimulus package expected to inject \$12.7 billion into the economy on March 10, including includes cash transfers, soft loans, and tax benefits.

Indonesia:

Indonesia’s confirmed Covid-19 cases are rising extremely rapidly, and it now tops the region in terms of deaths from the virus. Indonesia’s response has been slow and rather piecemeal, with announcements of lockdowns in Jakarta and other metropolitan areas, but inconsistent guidelines, the lack of enforcement for self-quarantines, and the weakness of the government’s communication strategy have meant that public awareness of social distancing remains a problem.

- Border closures and entry bans: Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said after a cabinet meeting that the Indonesian government will temporarily ban all foreign visitors from entering the country. Land borders with Timor-Leste and all sea and land ports in Papua province have been closed by provincial leaders. People with a Permanent Staying Permit or a Temporary Staying Permit can enter Indonesia if they have a valid health certification stating that they are fit for travel issued by local health authorities in English at least seven days prior to departure.
- Quarantine or lockdown: On April 3, Coordinating Maritime Affairs and Investment Minister Luhut said that the government decided to allow *mudik* (when tens of millions of people return to home and ancestral villages at the end of Ramadan) in May “to prevent the economy from stopping altogether.” The government will however disburse financial aid to low-income families in order to dissuade people from participating in the *mudik*. The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) concurrently announced that *mudik* from areas affected by the Covid-19 pandemic is *haram*.
- On March 30, the cabinet announced that it will only be considering a “civil emergency” as a last result but is planning on implementing stricter measures for social distancing. Jokowi said he had ordered the National Police to legally enforce the restrictions
- On March 27, a state of emergency was declared in Jakarta, meaning closure of entertainment centers, including bars, massage parlors, restaurants, and cinemas. Malls

and supermarkets remain open. Offices in Jakarta suspended activities for 14 days beginning on March 23.

- **Economic stimulus:** On March 31, President Jokowi announced a government regulation in lieu of law (Perppu) introducing Indonesia's [third stimulus package](#) worth nearly \$24.6 billion (Rp 405.1 trillion). The package allocates \$4.5 billion (Rp 75 trillion) for health care spending, \$6.6 billion (Rp 110 trillion) for social protection, and \$4.2 billion (Rp 70.1 trillion) for tax incentives. On March 13, the Indonesian government issued its second emergency stimulus package worth \$8.1 billion, which includes exempting some workers in manufacturing from income tax and giving manufacturing companies a discount on corporate tax payments. A first [\\$725 million stimulus package](#) announced in February 2020 provided fiscal incentives to support the country's tourism, aviation, and property industries. The package also allocated \$324 million for low-income households.

Singapore:

Singapore stands as a global leader in its early and aggressive response to Covid-19 and has managed to largely contain the virus through widespread testing; comprehensive contact tracing; and mandatory, well-enforced quarantines for those testing positive and their contacts, and all returning travelers. Singapore has also relied on its technical capabilities to develop test kits as early as January, which it is now distributing to countries in the region, and on its world-class health care system. Yet even Singapore will finally closed workplaces, schools, and all but essential businesses on April 3 for a one-month lockdown.

- **Border closure:** Short-term visitors are banned. On March 22, the city-state barred all short-term visitors from entering Singapore, saying that from 11:59 p.m. on Monday, the only non-nationals allowed in would be work permit holders in "essential sectors" such as health care. Malaysians with a Singapore work permit will continue to be allowed to work in Singapore.
- **Quarantine or lockdown:** On April 3, Prime Minister Lee announced that all schools and non-essential workplaces would close to curb the rise of a second wave of the pandemic after avoiding imposing curfews. Violators will face a \$7,000 fine and jail time for up to six months.
- **Economic stimulus:** On March 26, Singapore unveiled an unprecedented stimulus plan, the "Resilience Budget," worth [\\$33 billion](#). This is the largest, most aggressive stimulus package in Asia so far. The package is designed to assist hard-hit sectors (e.g., food services, aviation, tourism), self-employed individuals, and cash payouts depending on income. This is only the second time that Singapore has dipped into its reserves—the first time being in 2009 during the global financial crisis (about \$1 trillion). Singapore had first announced [\\$4.4 billion of relief funding](#) for workers and businesses through co-funding of business costs and tax relief on February 18. The total fiscal boost now stands at about 11 percent of the city-state's GDP.
- The Monetary Authority of Singapore [eased](#) monetary policy on March 30.

Vietnam:

Despite limited resources and a bustling border with China, Vietnam has managed to contain the pandemic relatively well with its prompt and aggressive response, starting with early travel restrictions in late January and a local quarantine in mid-February. The Communist Party of Vietnam has shown its ability to mobilize society, enact aggressive containment and monitoring strategies, and communicate effectively with citizens, underpinned by its network of informants who surveil citizens and help enforce government restrictions.

- Border closure and entry bans: Foreign visitors are banned, including all overseas Vietnamese and their non-citizen spouses and children; foreigners with sought after skilled labor might be considered for an exemption. On March 31, cross-border activities of individuals at main and secondary border gates and trails in border areas with Cambodia and Laos are suspended.
- Quarantine or lockdown: A 15-day national lockdown began April 1. All cities will stop public gatherings with more than 20 people and shut non-essential public services until April 15. Those in public places are required to wear face masks. About 75,000 people are currently under quarantine.
- Economic stimulus: As of April 2, the government is poised to announce a [\\$2.6 billion](#) package relief to support the most affected by the pandemic. Under the new package, Social policy beneficiaries and those who have “rendered services to the state” during the crisis will receive \$21.8 each month in April, May, and June. About 984,000 poor households and 1,260,000 near-poor households across the country will receive \$42 each month in April, May, and June.
- On March 9, Prime Minister Phuc revealed a \$1.16 billion fiscal package from the central contingency budget, including tax breaks, delayed tax payments, and government spending on infrastructure in an effort to maintain a 6.8 percent growth target, according to state media. Vietnam has stopped exporting rice from March 24 to ensure national food security.

Brunei:

The Sultanate has implemented drastic measures to clamp down on travel, impose strict quarantine rules, and conduct extensive testing. Most cases in Brunei can be linked back to a large-scale religious event in Malaysia at the end of February.

- Border closures and entry bans: From March 24, all foreign visitors are banned from entry; land, sea, and air entry points closed. Malaysia has closed its land border with Brunei.
- Quarantine or lockdown: All returning Brunei citizens must undertake a 14-day self-quarantine. Brunei has [prohibited](#) mass gatherings, weddings, and sporting events. Foreign residents are barred from leaving the country. If Brunei records zero new cases for 28 days, the Covid-19 restrictions may be lifted.
- Economic stimulus: On April 1, the Ministry of Finance and Economy announced additional steps in aiding various small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and individuals affected by the pandemic, amounting to about \$1.7 million in the form of deferment of principal or loan repayment and the exemption of fees and charges. On

March 19, the Brunei Darussalam Monetary Authority announced measures to alleviate the financial burden on sectors hit hard by the pandemic. From April 1, businesses in the tourism, hospitality, air transportation, medical, and food import services will have a six-month deferment of their principal repayments of financing/loans.

Cambodia:

After downplaying the risks of the crisis and refusing to shut the country's borders for several weeks, Prime Minister Hun Sen finally declared a state of emergency on March 31 and is using the army for enforcement. Hun Sen's reluctance to act earlier likely stems from his desire to maintain a close relationship with China.

- Border closures and entry bans: From March 30, all visa exemptions, visas on arrival, and e-visas are suspended until April 30. [All foreigners](#) must have a medical certificate stating that they have not been tested positive for the virus and issued no more than 72 hours prior to travel date and have proof of insurance policy with minimum medical coverage of \$50,000. Neighboring countries closed their borders with Cambodia. On March 17, Hun Sen ordered a [30-day ban on arrivals](#) from Italy, Germany, Spain, France, the United States, and Iran. Joint military exercises involving hundreds of Chinese soldiers proceeded as scheduled.
- Quarantine or lockdown: On March 31, the government approved a draft law on a state of emergency, giving the government all powers to take "necessary measure" to contain the pandemic. It stipulates a number of measures including imposing curfews, preventing mass gatherings, and locking down public or private spaces, among others. The military will be used to enforce the new law.
- Cambodia's more than 157 casinos will close starting April 1. Schools are closed. Human Rights Watch has documented the [arrests of 17 people](#) since late January 2020 for sharing information about the coronavirus in Cambodia.
- Economic stimulus: As of March 30, additional fiscal resources for the health sector of around \$70 million (around 0.2 percent of 2019 GDP) are expected. On March 9, Hun Sen said the government had allocated between \$800 million to \$2 billion to address the economic impacts of Covid-19. Only "[legally registered and formally verified](#)" SMEs will receive benefits. 95 percent of Cambodian SME's are informal businesses that are not officially registered.

Myanmar:

With its long, porous border with China, Myanmar's paucity of Covid-19 cases, with the first cases only reported on March 23, likely results more from the lack of testing than the absence of the virus. Myanmar's underdeveloped health care system and the lack of a strong response mounted by the government underscore Myanmar's unpreparedness to cope with the pandemic.

- Border closures and entry bans: All northern checkpoint borders with China are closed except for goods and crew. India has temporarily closed its land border with Myanmar.

All visas on arrival are suspended until the end of April. All international flights are suspending from March 30.

- Quarantine or lockdown: On March 31, the government formed the Covid-19 Control and Emergency Response Committee is led by military-appointed First Vice President U Myint Swe to support measures around law enforcement and stability. The committee will take instructions from State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi.
- Imposing community quarantines is currently under consideration as coronavirus continues to spread. All bars are closed and shopping malls are operating under reduced hours. All “potentially infected” will be put under a compulsory 14-day quarantine. All migrant workers returning to Myanmar are required to stay in quarantine centers for 14 days.
- Economic stimulus: A fund of nearly \$70 million was established at the Myanmar Economic Bank to provide soft loans to affected business (particularly the priority garment and tourism sectors and SMEs).

Laos:

Laos, the most rural country in Southeast Asia, was the last country in Southeast Asia to report Covid-19 infections. The country’s almost non-existent health care system and weak governance will be tested in the upcoming weeks as the number of cases increases, offset only in part by significant assistance it has received from China since early March.

- Border closures and entry bans: All international checkpoints will be closed to stop passengers from exiting and entering Laos from March 30 to April 19. All types of visas and visa exemptions are suspended. Outbound travel by Lao citizens and document holders is prohibited except for essential travel. Returning Lao citizens are required to undergo a mandatory 14-day self-quarantine monitored by local officials. Road borders with Myanmar and China are closed. Thailand has barred the movement of people at all nine of its border checkpoints, including ports. Vietnam has closed all border checkpoints with Laos as of April 1.
- Quarantine or lockdown: Laos has issued a stay-at-home order except for essential outings. Provincial borders will remain closed until April 30, except with the approval of local authorities. Gatherings of more than 10 people are prohibited. Shuttle flights will be allowed for countries needing to pick up their citizens from Laos. As part of the lockdown, the government has ordered the closure of private hospitals and clinics nationwide.
- Economic stimulus: On March 20, a preliminary 13-part stimulus package was approved during the cabinet’s monthly meeting. About \$11 million (less than one percent of GDP) has been allocated for prevention and control. The government was expected to further discuss economic stimulus measures on Thursday, March 26.

What We are Reading:

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