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 closed its borders and shut down non-essential businesses, schools, and religious services in mid-March and is using the armed forces to enforce a partial lockdown while it ramps up testing and contract tracing.

- **Border closures and entry bans:** Malaysia shut its borders to travelers on March 16, banning all visitors and barring residents from travel overseas.
- **Quarantine or lockdown:** Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin enacted a 14-day “Movement Control Order (MCO)” on March 18, which has been extended until April 14. Non-essential businesses, schools, and places of worship are closed, and religious, sports, and cultural gatherings are prohibited. The Malaysian Armed Forces, using personnel and drones, have been mobilized for detection and enforcement, and hundreds of people have been arrested for violating restrictions on movement. 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:** Three economic stimulus packages have been unveiled. 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 third one, worth $2.2 billion (RM10 billion), was unveiled on April 6, includes wage subsidies, grants and loans for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME), and tax deductions, among other things. The combined value of the first two stimulus equals 15.5 percent of Malaysia’s GDP and equivalent to 84.2 percent of the federal government’s original 2020 budget.

Philippines:
The Philippines’ confirmed cases are surging, now topping the region in terms of the 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, with exceptions for foreign spouses and children of repatriating Filipinos who had been working overseas, as well as foreign government and international organization officials accredited to the Philippines.

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 a lockdown for the main island of Luzon—home to about 60 million people, including Manila—as well as a curfew for cities in Luzon from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. until April 12, which has since been extended to April 30. On April 1, Duterte ordered the police and the military to shoot protesters violating these measures; the first case of police shooting a civilian for refusing to follow restrictions to curb coronavirus was reported on April 4.

Economic stimulus: On April 7, the Duterte administration announced a $610 million (PhP30.8 billion) "Bayanihan Grant to Cities and Municipalities" to assist local governments. The one-time grant will amount one month of cities and municipalities’ internal revenue allotment.

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.” Although he failed to get congressional approval to take over private companies and utilities, President Duterte can now tap into private hospital and ships, reappropriation 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 is likely to 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 led to widespread criticism and frustration on social media in Thailand, which in turn has prompted Prayuth to clamp down on the press and social media reporting.

Thai nationals and Malaysians are only allowed to return to their respective home countries via flight.
Border closures and entry bans: All borders were closed on March 22, and foreign visitors are banned. Thai and Malaysian nationals only are allowed to return to their respective countries, by air travel only.

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). This follows the State of Emergency decree issued by Prime Minister Prayuth on March 26, which will be in effect through the end of April, granting sweeping powers to the government to restrict domestic travel, ban social gatherings, and censor the media. The Ministry of Education announced that schools will not reopen before July 1.

Economic stimulus: On April 7, the cabinet announced its approval for the third stimulus measure at $58 billion (1.9 trillion baht). Of this total, $18 billion will be used for financial aid to workers, $12 billion for infrastructure and job investments, $15 billion for soft loans to SMEs, and $12 billion for the Corporate Bond Liquidity Stabilization Fund. 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 7, Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto approved a government order that grants the Jakarta government the power to impose stricter social restrictions, including religious events and defense-related activities.

On April 3, Coordinating Maritime Affairs and Investment Minister Luhut Pandjaitan said that the government decided to allow mudik (tens of millions of people returning to their home province 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 virus would be considered haram (forbidden).

- 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. On April 7, Indonesia approved Jakarta’s request to impose further large-scale restrictions in the city.

- 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. On April 2, Indonesia announced tax reforms plans, including cutting corporate income tax and collecting taxes from tech companies to fund Covid-19 relief efforts. Corporate income tax will be reduced from 25 percent to 22 percent for 2020 and 2021 and to 20 percent starting 2022.

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 despite its early success in containing the virus, Singapore has seen its cases jump in recent days, leading the government to finally close schools and all non-essential businesses on April 3 for one month.

- Border closure: Short-term visitors are banned. On March 22, the city-state barred all short-term visitors from entering Singapore. 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: The government introduced a bill on April 7 that would allow for temporary arrangements to hold safe elections (which have to be held before April 14, 2021). These measures would include allowing voters to register without being
present in-person as well as vote outside their electoral division. The bill will be discussed during the next parliamentary session in May.

- On April 5, Singapore imposed a quarantine on dormitories housing 20,000 migrant workers, most of whom are manual laborers from less-affluent countries in South Asia who live in cramped conditions in two vast dormitory complexes.
- 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, with violators facing a $7,000 fine and jail time for up to six months.
- Economic stimulus: On April 6, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced an unprecedented third round of support measures called the “Solidarity Budget” that follows the February “Unity Budget.” This includes one-off payments to Singaporeans, wage subsidies, and self-employed relief schemes. Altogether, the government’s response to Covid-19 will total $41.6 billion (S$59.9 billion), about 12 per cent of the GDP.
- 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, the “Unity Budget” for workers and businesses through co-funding of business costs and tax relief on February 18.

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: All foreign visitors are banned, including all overseas Vietnamese. From April 9, all travelers to Ho Chi Minh City, arriving by train, bus, or plane, will have to get tested upon arrival.
- On March 31, cross-border activities of individuals at main and secondary border gates and trails in border areas with Cambodia and Laos were suspended.
- Quarantine or lockdown: A 15-day national lockdown began April 1. Public gatherings of 20 or more people are banned, and non-essential public services are suspended. Those in public places are required to wear face masks. About 75,000 people are currently under quarantine.
- Economic stimulus: In early April the government announced plans for a $2.6 billion fiscal package to support the most affected by the pandemic. Under the new package, cash payments will go to people displaced from jobs (about $76 per month for April through June), and poor and near-poor households (about $42 per month for the same
time period), and those who have “rendered services to the state” during the revolution (about $22 a month).

- On March 3, Prime Minister Phuc announced 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. Citizens and foreigners in the country are barred from leaving. Malaysia has closed its land border with Brunei.
- **Quarantine or lockdown:** All returning Brunei citizens must undertake a 14-day self-quarantine. The government has prohibited mass gatherings, weddings, and sporting events, and indicated these restrictions would be lifted when no new cases are recorded for 28 days.
- **Economic stimulus:** On April 1, the Ministry of Finance and Economy announced additional steps in aiding 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 declared a state of emergency on March 31 and the put forward a draft emergency law that would give unfettered powers to his government, prompting an outcry from human rights groups. 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 for one month. All foreigners must have a medical certificate issued no more than 72 hours prior to date of travel stating that they have not been tested positive for Covid-19 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 have proceeded as scheduled.

- **Quarantine or lockdown:** On March 31, the government approved a draft law on a state of emergency, granting the government all powers to take “necessary measure” to contain the pandemic. In addition to measures to impose curfews, prevent mass gatherings, and lock down public and private spaces, the draft law allows surveillance of telecommunications and control of media and social media, including the prohibition of sharing information that could “generate public alarm or fear” or “confusion.”

- 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 expressing their views on the Covid-19 pandemic 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:** The government has not declared a state of emergency or instituted any broad quarantines or lockdowns. In mid-March, the government formed a Covid-19 committee led by State Counsellor Ang Sang Suu Kyi to oversee the crisis response. However on March 31, Myanmar’s military set up a separate task force led by the military-appointed first vice president, U Myint Swe, and includes the other military-appointed members of the cabinet—the ministers of defense, home affairs, and border affairs—as well as the joint chief of staff of the defense forces along with five civilian cabinet members. According to Thai-based journalist Bertil Lintner writing in the Asia Times, this military-led task force does not report to Ang Sang Suu Kyi and has arrogated broad powers to investigate cases of Covid-19, trace their close contacts place them in quarantine facilities, and clamp down on the press and social media, including through arrests for “fake news” and “disinformation” that could cause “panic among the people.”

- 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” are 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). $200,000 will be funded to the Ministry of Health to buy laboratory equipment and medical supplies.

**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.

**ASEAN Response to Covid-19:**

While the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has convened a series of meetings on how to deal with the pandemic, including with external partners such as the United States, China, and the European Union, there has been very little collective action to date. Diplomatically, the crisis has threatened ASEAN’s centrality in regional affairs, with the crisis causing the cancellation of several key ASEAN meetings, including the ASEAN-U.S. summit scheduled for March 14 in Las Vegas and the 36th ASEAN summit scheduled for April 6-9 in Vietnam, now rescheduled for late June. South Korea and ASEAN are currently exploring an ASEAN+3 virtual meeting for early April.
• On February 19, ASEAN defense ministers met in Hanoi to discuss defense cooperation against the Covid-19 outbreak. The ministers agreed, among other things, to enhance cooperation by increasing joint sharing of information and best practices, promoting military medical cooperation, and leveraging the extant network of ASEAN chemical, biological, and radiological defense experts.

• On February 20, the foreign ministers of ASEAN and China met in Vientiane to discuss ways to tackle the public health and economic implications of the global pandemic. The 10 ASEAN countries and China agreed to step up cooperation in sharing medical and health information and best practices to enhance emergency preparedness and response, with the communiqué praising China’s response to the pandemic.

• On March 10, ASEAN economic ministers met to discuss the economic implications of the pandemic and the ASEAN response. The ministers agreed, among other things, to leverage technologies and digital trade that allow businesses to operate, refrain from creating unnecessary inflationary pressures, and address non-tariff barriers.

• On March 13, ASEAN senior health officials met virtually to discuss surveillance and containment methods, laboratory diagnosis and treatment in public and private health care facilities, travel restrictions, non-pharmaceutical measures, and other whole-of-government responses.

• On March 20, Singapore chaired a ministerial videoconference between ASEAN and the European Union. “When the situation stabilizes, it is critical that we work together to boost our economies,” Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan of Singapore said.

• On March 31, ASEAN senior health officials identified capacity gaps and opportunities for cooperation in a senior officials videoconference. Participants agreed on the following: enhancing capacity building interventions cooperation, sharing of technical information and updates, strengthening cooperation in risk communication and assessments, strengthening policy dialogue on developments of Covid-19, revisiting whole-of-government and whole-of-society preparedness and response frameworks, more extensive use of technology to collect and analyze relevant data, and strengthening the existing regional mechanisms or platforms in ASEAN in the prevention, detection and response to health threats. The Department of Asian Affairs of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ASEAN Secretariat co-chaired the conference.

• On April 2, ASEAN senior officials and the United States held a teleconference to promote coordination between the two sides in coping with the pandemic. The event was co-chaired by Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Quoc Dung of Vietnam and Assistant Secretary of State of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell. Participants shared information, experience, developments, and provided technical assistance. The ASEAN side
thanked the United States for its support (approximately $19 million) and asked for coordination in training medical staff.

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