National Responses to Covid-19 in Southeast Asia

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 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 allows 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 overseas Filipino Workers; as of April 9, over 9,600 overseas workers have returned home since the beginning of the outbreak in February.
- **Quarantine or lockdown**: On April 14, President Duterte announced that “[i]f a treatment is already being used, [he] will lift the quarantine [in Luzon] since we can buy an antibody treatment if we get sick.” He expects the treatment to be ready in May.
- On April 2, the National Task Force on Covid-19 announced that it will start conducting mass testing by April 14.
- **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 these restrictions was reported on April 4. Since the incident, Human Rights Watch has reported instances of law enforcement abuse in how these public health measures are enforced, particularly with regard to the targeting of LGBTQ people.
- **On March 16**, President Duterte announced an Enhanced Community Quarantine for the main island of Luzon—home to about 60 million people, including Metro Manila—as well as a curfew for cities in Luzon from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. until April 13, now extended to April 30. Provinces and cities in the Visayas have also extended their lockdowns from April 12 to April 30. As of April 8, Quezon and Rizal provinces are also on lockdown.
- **Other responses**: The Manila Health Department has started mass testing on April 13, claiming it conducted nearly 1,000 tests in one day.
- **Economic stimulus**: 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, reapportion 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.

- 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 enables national
  and local governments to quickly access relief funds.

- 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 April 7, the Duterte administration announced a $610 million (P30.8 billion)
  “Bayanihan Grant to Cities and Municipalities” to assist local governments. The one-time
  grant will amount tp one month of cities and municipalities’ internal revenue allotment.

JPMorgan downgraded the Philippines’ growth forecast from 2.1 percent to 0.9.

- On April 13, the government approved a $1 billion (P51 billion) wage subsidy package
  intended to support about 3.4 million small business workers. Workers qualifying for
  the financial assistance will receive about $340 (P8,000) for two months.

- On April 14, the IMF lowered the Philippines’s GDP growth projections for 2020 to 0.6
  percent from 5.9 percent in 2019.

Malaysia:

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. Armed Forces have been deployed to enforce a partial lockdown
with an increase in testing and contract tracing as confirmed Covid-19 cases continue to rise.

- Border closures and entry bans: Malaysia shut its borders to travelers on March 16,
  banning all visitors and barring residents from travel overseas. As of April 14, the
government is allowing Malaysians in Singapore to return only if they are tested and
placed in quarantine facilities (about 200 Malaysians are returning from Singapore
daily). However, local leaders in Johor have asked that the central government revise
the entry process and has urged returning migrant workers to self-quarantine for 14
days. Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob also advised that Malaysian workers in
Singapore remain there until further notice.

- On April 14, the Ministry of Transport announced that Malaysia Airlines will operate
  weekly flights from the peninsula to Sabah and Sarawak.

- Quarantine or lockdown: Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin enacted a 14-day
  “Movement Control Order” (MCO) on March 18, which has been extended twice to April
  14 and then to April 28—a few days after the start of Ramadan. All Ramadan bazaars
  will be closed, and there will be no public prayers in mosques.

- 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, resulting in
the arrest of hundreds of MCO violators. Beginning on April 1, any travel to buy food, daily necessities, and medicine 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. This includes 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 (RM 10 billion), was unveiled on April 6. This 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 packages equals 15.5 percent of Malaysia’s GDP and is equivalent to 84.2 percent of the federal government’s original 2020 budget.
- On April 9, a consortium of 10 Malaysian companies, including Petronas, Huawei Malaysia, Unilever Malaysia, donated about $7 million (RM 30 million) in cash and equipment to the Ministry of Health.
- On April 14, the IMF lowered Malaysia’s GDP growth projections for 2020 to -1.7 percent from 4.3 percent in 2019.

Thailand:

As Thailand slowly returns to a semblance of normalcy after five years of junta rule, Prime Minister Prayuth is now faced with a new crisis. Inconsistent policies about 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, resulting in widespread criticism and frustration on social media in Thailand. Prime Minister Prayuth has responded with a clamp down on the press and social media reporting.

- Border closures and entry bans: All borders were closed on March 22, and foreign visitors are banned. On April 6, the Civil Authority of Thailand extended the temporary ban on international flights until April 30.
- Quarantine or lockdown: Provinces Nonthaburi and Udon Thani plan to ease their partial lockdowns due to a decline new infection starting April 15 and April 18 respectively. On April 2, Prime Minister Prayuth announced a national curfew starting April 3 prohibiting people from leaving their houses from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m., with exemptions for medical and banking personnel and those handling consumer goods. On April 10, Prime Minister Prayuth signed an order tweaking the initial curfew; under the new order, civil servants, health care personal required to travel, essential transport services, and public utilities employees are now allowed to work and operate outside of curfew hours. 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-April 30, granting sweeping powers to the government to restrict domestic travel, ban social gatherings, and censor the media.

- Bangkok and other provinces have banned the sale of alcohol, with Bangkok’s ban effective from April 10-20, reportedly to limit celebrations around the Thai new year holiday known as Songkran. Schools will remain closed until July 1.

- According to a poll conducted between April 7-10 by Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, when asked about their confidence in the government’s ability to deal with the outbreak, 58.75 percent of respondents said they were not confident, with 22.66 percent saying they were not confident at all; 8.18 percent were very confident.

- Economic stimulus: On April 3, the government unveiled plans for a new stimulus package; while no dollar amount was revealed, Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak 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 cash transfers, soft loans, and tax benefits. 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 9, six of Thailand’s largest banks, including Kasikorn Bank and Siam Commercial Bank, announced that they will cut lending rates.

- On April 13, the Board of Investment of Thailand approved various measures to boost investment in manufacturing medical equipment, including tax breaks for investments in the medical sector, the adjustment of existing production lines, and measures to encourage a more complete value chain in Thailand. 92 public-private partnership projects worth $3.3 trillion (1.09 trillion baht) are currently being planned to stimulate the economy.

- On April 14, the IMF lowered Thailand’s GDP growth projections for 2020 to -6.7 percent from 2.4 percent in 2019.

**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 national government’s communication strategy have meant that public awareness of social distancing remains a problem.*

- Border closures and entry bans: On March 31, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said that the Indonesian government would 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:** Indonesia has declared the Covid-19 outbreak a “non-natural national disaster.” An increasing number of regional administrations have since requested “large-scale social restrictions (PSBB)” status from the Ministry of Health; **PSBB status for Pekanbaru** was approved on April 12 but **denied for Sorong and Palangka Raya** that same day.

  - **On April 14,** the National Disaster Mitigation Agency announced that satellite cities in the Greater Jakarta Area (Jabodetabek) **will implement** PSBB. Depok, Bekasi and and Bogor will implement measures on April 15 with other cities following on April 17.

  - **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 31,** the government declared a “**public health emergency,**” whereby regional administrations will be able to impose stricter social restrictions, like closing schools, workplaces, and limiting religious and public gatherings. As of April 1, 7 of Indonesia’s 34 provinces had adopted these new regulations.

  - **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.

- **Other responses:** On April 9, the House of Representatives set up a Covid-19 legislative taskforce. The taskforce will connect local donors and entrepreneurs to hospitals and medical centers and will only handle medical supplies, not cash.

- **Economic stimulus:** A first **stimulus package** worth $725 million 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 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.

  - **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 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. Meanwhile, the Indonesian **Ministry of Home Affairs on April 13 announced** that regional administrations had reallocated $5.3 billion (Rp 85 trillion) to
fund pandemic relief efforts. As of April 13, over 1.6 million employees nationwide have been furloughed from the formal and informal sectors.

- On April 14, the IMF lowered Indonesia’s GDP growth projections for 2020 to 0.5 percent from 5.0 percent in 2019.

Singapore:
*Singapore has been hailed as a global public-health model due to 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 a sharp spike in cases in recent days, leading the government to finally close schools and all non-essential businesses on April 3 for one month.*

- Border closure: On March 22, the city-state barred all short-term visitors from entering Singapore. The only non-nationals allowed entry are 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. Singapore banned the entry of all travelers from China on January 31.
- Quarantine or lockdown: Singapore has banned public and private gatherings of any size between non-household members until at least May 4. The new regulations will last for up to six months with first offenders facing up to six months in jail and a $7,000 fine. On April 9, National Development Minister Lawrence Wong threatened to close parks and sports stadiums if people continue to congregate outdoors. Face masks have also been made mandatory.
- 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 living in cramped conditions. In a televised speech on April 10, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long expressed concerns about the “outbreaks in several foreign worker dormitories” and announced the creation of a task force lead by the Ministries of Health and Manpower. The Ministry of Health has deployed special teams to bring supplies, food, and medical assistance to quarantined foreign workers.
- On April 3, Prime Minister Lee Hsieng Loong announced that all schools and non-essential workplaces would close to curb the rise of a second wave of the pandemic.
- Other responses: The government introduced a bill on April 7 that would allow for temporary arrangements to hold safe national 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.
- Economic stimulus: On March 26, Singapore unveiled a second stimulus plan, the “Resilience Budget,” worth $33 billion. 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 marks 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.

▪ 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. Singaporeans aged 21 and older will start receiving $424 (S
$600) from April 14. Altogether, the government's response to Covid-19 will total $41.6
billion ($$59.9 billion), about 12 percent of the GDP. This is the largest, most aggressive
stimulus package in Asia so far.

▪ On April 14, the IMF lowered Singapore’s GDP growth projections for 2020 to -3.5
percent from 0.7 percent last October.

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. 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. Vietnam banned all flights to and from China on February 1. Domestic flights have been
restricted until April 30.

▪ Quarantine or lockdown: A 15-day national lockdown began April 1. Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh
City, and 10 other “high-risk” localities will continue their social distancing campaigns
until at least April 22. 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. Vietnam has placed several villages with confirmed cases under complete
quarantine. About 77,000 nationwide are currently under quarantine as of April 8. From
April 9, all travelers to Ho Chi Minh City will be tested upon arrival. Those who test
positive will be quarantined at public facilities.

▪ Economic stimulus: On March 3, Prime Minister Phuc announced a $1.16 billion (VND 27
trillion) fiscal package from the central contingency budget. The package includes 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.

▪ In early April, the government announced plans for a $2.6 billion (VND 60.9 trillion) fiscal
package to support the most affected by the pandemic. Under the new package,
monthly cash payments delivered until June will go to those displaced from jobs (about
$76 per month), poor and near-poor households (about $42 per month), and those who “rendered services to the state during the revolution” (about $22 a month). For five months starting from April, the collection of value-added tax, corporate income tax, and land rent will be delayed for various businesses and households. This is estimated to be worth $7.6 billion (VND 180 trillion).

- On April 14, the IMF lowered Vietnam’s GDP growth projections for 2020 to 2.7 percent from 7.0 percent in 2019.

**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. As of March 16, citizens and foreigners in the country are barred from leaving. Malaysia has closed its land border with Brunei.

- **Quarantine or lockdown:** No new Covid-19 cases have been reported for five days as of April 10. Restrictions could be lifted if no new cases are recorded for 28 days. As of April 6, all travelers, citizens, and foreigners arriving in Brunei must undergo a 14-day quarantine period at designated facilities. The government has prohibited mass gatherings, weddings, and sporting events. All mosques, sarau, and prayer halls will remain closed until April 20. Malls and shop owners have been advised to limit the number of customers entering the premises with restaurants only providing takeout orders. On April 9, the education minister announced public and private schools will continue online classes until May 14. Brunei is issuing tracking devices to all Covid-19 patients currently under home quarantine and recovered Covid-19 patients. Patients released from the National Isolation Centre (NIC) must self-isolate at home for another 14 days. Those who violate this order may be jailed up to six months and fined up to $10,000.

- **Economic stimulus:** 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. 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 April 13, Brunei announced a special $400 monthly allowance for health care workers, including doctors, nurses, volunteers, hospital cleaners, and security guards.

**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 put forward a*
draft emergency law granting 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:** Starting April 10, all travel between districts and across provincial borders will be prohibited. All travel in and out of Phnom Penh will be banned; this measure excludes essential services and workers. All visa exemptions, visas on arrival, and e-visas are suspended until April 30. All foreigners must have a medical certificate issued no more than 72 hours prior to date of travel stating that they have not tested positive for Covid-19 and have proof of insurance policy with minimum medical coverage of $50,000. On March 17, Hun Sen ordered a 30-day ban on arrivals from Italy, Germany, Spain, France, the United States, and Iran. All neighboring countries have closed their borders with Cambodia. Joint military exercises involving hundreds of Chinese soldiers have proceeded as scheduled.

- **Quarantine or lockdown:** All persons entering the country will be placed under quarantine for 14 days starting April 8. As of April 7, all massage parlors and health spas are temporarily closed. Migrant workers in Thailand have been advised to remain abroad after reports of new imported Covid-19 cases. As of April 1, Cambodia’s more than 157 casinos and schools have closed.

- **Other responses:** On April 10, the Cambodian National Assembly passed a state of emergency law granting Prime Minister Hun Sen greater powers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The law “is intended to protect public order, security, people’s interests, lives, health, property and the environment,” said a Ministry of Justice spokesperson. Under the new law, the government has the power to monitor communications, social media, and restrict the distribution of information. “The Cambodian government is using the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext to assert absolute power over all aspects of civil, political, social, and economic life—all without any time limits or checks on abuses of power,” said Brad Adams of Human Rights Watch. 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 announced the government has 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 closed its land border with Myanmar. Border crossings through Myanmar-Bangladesh border gates were restricted, except for trade flows, on April 13. Land borders are closed to all travelers, including Myanmar citizens, until April 15. All visas on arrival are suspended, except to diplomats, until the end of April. The ban on all incoming international flights has been extended from April 13 to April 30.

Quarantine or lockdown: Yangon has been placed under a de facto lockdown until April 19, as the regional government has instructed residents not to go outside during the Thingyan holiday (April 13-16) except for food and medicine. All travel into and out of Mandalay province is prohibited until April 21, with possibility of extension. Since April 7, all sectors of the economy in Mandalay, excluding essential services (pharmaceutical distributions, manufacturing industries, drug stores, petrol stations, banks, and power suppliers), have been closed. 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. The national government has not yet declared a state of emergency or instituted any nationwide lockdown.

In mid-March, the government formed a Covid-19 committee led by State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi to oversee the crisis response. On March 31, however, Myanmar’s military set up a separate task force led by the military-appointed first vice president, U Myint Swe. The task force includes 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 and 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 Aung Sang Suu Kyi and has arrogated broad powers to investigate Covid-19 cases, trace their close contacts and 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.”

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: On March 30, the government shut down all international border checkpoints to stop passengers from exiting and entering Laos, effective until 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:** On March 30, Laos issued a national stay-at-home order except for essential outings. The Lao government set up central, provincial, and district task force committees to implement the national lockdown policy. 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. Starting on March 19, schools, bars, entertainment venues, and major shopping centers were ordered to shut down for 30 days.

- **Economic stimulus:** On March 20, a preliminary 13-part stimulus package was approved during the cabinet’s monthly meeting. About $11 million (less than 1 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.

- Vietnam organized an ASEAN Plus Three special video conference summit held on April 14. The leaders discussed measures to deepen cooperation and adopt a collective response to the pandemic, maintaining strong trade and economic ties, and supporting regional platforms and mechanisms. Among other things, the leaders agreed to strengthen the region’s early warning system for pandemics, explore the establishment of a Covid-19 ASEAN Response Fund, and enhance cooperation around regional food security, including through utilizing the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR).
- On April 7, ASEAN health ministers held a special video conference on the Covid-19 response, focused on increasing cooperation. The health ministers agreed to enhance timely data and information sharing, strengthen regional cooperation, and coordinate cross-border public health responses.
- On April 1, ASEAN senior officials and the United States held a teleconference to promote coordination between the two sides in managing the pandemic. The event was co-chaired by Nguyen Quoc Dung 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.
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 March 20, Singapore chaired a special ministerial videoconference between ASEAN and the European Union to discuss the immediate and longer term measures needed to combat the virus, including the need to boost trade and investment when the pandemic subsides. “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 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 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 February 20, the foreign ministers of ASEAN and China met in Vientiane, Laos 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 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.

International Assistance to Southeast Asia: updated Monday April 14

China’s “Mask Diplomacy”

With Covid-19 largely contained domestically, the Chinese government has pivoted to providing assistance internationally, with Southeast Asian countries being a particular focus. Unlike in Europe, where China’s so-called “mask diplomacy” has generated criticism due to some faulty equipment and skepticism about China’s geopolitical intentions, China’s emergency medical assistance has been welcomed by the governments of several hard-hit countries in Southeast
Asia. Chinese aid typically consists of shipments of surgical masks, test kits, and other medical equipment, as well as dispatching medical experts. Handovers of equipment typically take place with great fanfare. In addition to the Chinese government, foundations linked to billionaire Jack Ma and state-owned enterprises have also engaged in large donations of medical supplies.

Assistance to Southeast Asia to date has included the following:

- **Malaysia**: Malaysia has been a particular focus for Chinese aid. The largest shipment of medical supplies arrived on March 28 and was received by Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein. The shipment included 100,000 nucleic acid diagnostic testing kits, 100,000 N95 masks, 500,000 surgical masks, 50,000 sets of personal protective equipment (PPE), and 200 ventilators. This donation followed three earlier installments of relief packages from the Chinese government and other Chinese entities, beginning on March 19 with the delivery of 5,000 face masks and 10,000 surgical face shields delivered by the Chinese embassy in Malaysia to medical personnel at Sungai Buloh Hospital. On March 24, the Chinese government along with the China Communications Construction Company donated 5,500 N95 face masks, 20,000 medical masks, and 1,200 goggles to the Ministry of Health. The following day the Chinese embassy in Malaysia delivered 5,500 test kits donated by the China Enterprises Chamber of Commerce in Malaysia, China Communications Construction Company, the Chinese humanitarian group Mammoth Foundation, and the Beijing Genomics Institute (BGI).

- China has also provided medical advice on the containment and treatment of the virus and offered to send doctors to Malaysia. In response, Malaysian director general of health Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah told local reporters “but thank god, so far we have enough doctors.” Despite this close engagement, Malaysian officials have expressed doubts about Chinese-made test kits. “The accuracy is not very good,” Noor Hisham said about the first batch of Chinese-donated test kits, although he welcomed the March 28 donation after being assured by the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia that they were more accurate. Malaysian hospitals are considering test kits from Singapore and South Korea.

- **Philippines**: China sent a team of medical experts and a second batch of medical supply donations to the Philippines on April 5. Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin personally welcomed the group, along with the secretaries of health and education and other administration officials, with much fanfare at an airport ceremony. The team of 10 medical professionals and 2 Chinese officials will spend 15 days in the Philippines sharing technical advice and their experience in the testing, treatment, and containment of Covid-19 with local hospitals and experts. The new shipment of medical supplies included 300,000 surgical masks, 30,000 N95 masks, 5,000 protective suits, 5,000 face shields, and 30 non-invasive generators.

- **China’s first shipment of medical supply donations to the Philippines** arrived on March 21. The shipment included 100,000 test kits, 10,000 sets of PPE, 100,000 surgical masks, and 10,000 N95 masks. Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin welcomed the shipment, saying “(China) is a model for what the rest of the world should be doing. Instead of
blaming each other for what's happening, we should all start working together to help each other.” On March 12, President Duterte said in a televised address, “You know President Xi Jinping, for all of his goodness to us, wrote me a letter and said that he is willing to help. All we have to do is to ask.”

- **Indonesia:** Chinese state councilor and foreign minister Wang Yi spoke on March 18 with Indonesian coordinating minister for maritime affairs and investment Luhut Pandjaitan. During the talk, Minister Want pledged that China “stands ready to do its utmost to help Indonesia as its close friend despite the pressure on China's own medical supplies.” On March 20, Indonesia sent a military aircraft to Shanghai to pick up 9-tons of medical supplies, including disposable and N95 masks, PPE, goggles, and infrared thermometers. On March 27, a consortium of Chinese institutions and ministries sent 40 tons of Covid-19 test kits and other medical supplies to Indonesia. On April 4, President Xi Jinping committed to helping Indonesia fight the outbreak during a phone call with President Joko Widodo. During the phone call, President Xi reportedly said “we believe that with your perseverance, Indonesia will be able to defeat this [Covid-19] pandemic.”

- **Laos:** From April 10-11, a team of Chinese medical experts shared anti-epidemic experiences and held training courses throughout Laos.

- **Cambodia:** On March 23, a Chinese medical team from Guangxi province delivered medical supplies including ventilators, medical masks, and test kits to Phnom Penh. On March 18, China sent medical supplies including detection kits, ventilators, PPE, and masks. According to the Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh, more supplies are expected.

- **Myanmar:** On April 8, a 12-person Chinese medical team arrived in Yangon for a 14-day visit. The team brought an unspecified amount of medical and laboratory equipment which will enable the National Health Laboratory to process up to 200 test kits a day. On March 26, China sent 5,000 sets of PPE, 5,000 N95 masks, and 200,000 surgical masks. On March 17, the Ministry of Health and Sports received over 2,000 test kits.

**Non-government Chinese aid:**

Chinese non-government entities have also been active, most notably the Alibaba and Jack Ma foundations. On March 19, the two foundations announced they would send 2,000,000 masks, 150,000 test kits, 20,000 sets of PPE, and 20,000 face shields to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Thailand.

**Assistance from the United States:**

On April 7, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced an additional $225 million in assistance for response efforts to Covid-19, in addition to the $274 million announced in late March. So far, $18.3 million in new funding will go to countries in Southeast Asia. However, unlike China’s
“mask diplomacy,” Pompeo made clear that due to the urgent domestic need presented by the Covid-19 outbreak in the United States, shipments of critical medical supplies such as protective gear will not included in this assistance. Instead, the funding will be used to train medical workers, boost screening capabilities, and bolster national health systems. When making these new pledges, the State Department has emphasized the United States’ long-standing leadership on global health, citing billions of dollars of assistance over the past two decades that far exceeds that of other any other donor.

Pledges have included:

- **Philippines**: Approximately $4 million for testing and medical supplies, building on more than $582 million in health assistance and nearly $4.5 billion in total assistance over the past 20 years.

- **Indonesia**: $2.3 million for testing and visits by technical experts, building on more than $1 billion in health assistance and more than $5 billion in total U.S. assistance over the past 20 years.

- **Thailand**: Approximately $2 million for testing and medical supplies, building on more than $213 million in health assistance and more than $1 billion in total U.S. assistance over the past 20 years.

- **Laos**: Approximately $2 million for testing and supplies, plus deliveries of protective equipment and visits of technical experts. This builds on nearly $92 million in health assistance and more than $348 million in total U.S. assistance over the past 20 years.

- **Cambodia**: Approximately $2 million for risk communication, community engagement, and laboratory support in response to the pandemic. This builds on more than $730 million in health assistance and more than $1.6 billion in total U.S. assistance over the past 20 years.

- **Myanmar**: Approximately $3.8 million for testing and medical supplies, plus deliveries of protective equipment and visits of technical experts. This builds on more than $176 million in health assistance and more than $1.3 billion in total U.S. assistance over the past 20 years.

- **Vietnam**: Nearly $3 million for testing, plus visits by technical experts. This builds on more than $706 million in health assistance and more than $1.8 billion in total U.S. assistance over the past 20 years.

- **Malaysia**: No financial assistance announcement related to fighting the outbreak as of April 9.

Singapore’s “Test-kit Diplomacy”: 

Singapore was the first Southeast Asian country with excess capacity and ability to deliver aid to neighbors. “From a foreign policy point of view, we now have test kit diplomacy. What we need to do as a world is to share best practices, to rapidly develop test kits, vaccines, antivirals,” said Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on March 10.

- **Malaysia**: On April 1, Singapore donated 5,000 Universal Transport Medium swabs, a critical component in fast acting test kits, to Malaysia.
- **Philippines**: On April 1, the Temasek Foundation donated 40,000 test kits and 2 ventilators to the Philippines. On March 25, Singapore sent 3,000 test kits and a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) machine for processing tests to the Philippines.
- **Vietnam**: On March 30, the Temasek Foundation presented 10 ventilators to Vietnam to support the country’s treatment of Covid-19 patients. The foundation said it will supply 10 oxygen generators to Ha Noi and 10 to Ho Chi Minh City in the near future.
- **Brunei**: Singapore sent 3,000 test kits and a PCR machine for processing tests on March 25.
- **Indonesia**: On April 2, Singapore sent medical supplies to Indonesia, including 30,000 test kits, 5 PCR machines, and more than 1,000 sets of PPE. On March 13, Singapore donated 50 sets of PPE and 2 ventilators to Batam City mayor Muhammad Rudi. On April 8, an Indonesian navy vessel was sent to Singapore to collect supplies to manufacture 210,000 liters of hand sanitizer for use in the city.
- **Myanmar**: On March 4, Singapore sent 3,000 diagnostic tests and 2 PCR machines to test for Covid-19 to Myanmar.

From Vietnam:

*Vietnam has extended aid to regional and international partners since early April after ramping up its domestic production of medical supplies.*

- **Laos**: On April 3, Vietnam sent nearly 5 tons of Covid-19 related medical equipment worth $304,000 to Laos, including test kits, 340,000 face masks, and PPE. On March 30, border guards at Quang Tri province gifted their neighbors more than 1,000 face masks, hand sanitizer, 300 kilograms of rice, 36 boxes of instant noodles, and 36 containers of instant milk.
- **Cambodia**: On April 7, Region 7 of the Vietnam People’s Army provided medical supplies and equipment, including 50,000 face mask, 1,000 sets of PPE, and 1,000 liters of hand sanitizer to units of the Cambodian Royal Army. The group also provided 30,000 face masks and $21,450 in assistance to Vietnamese Cambodians in the area. On April 3, Vietnam donated 390,000 face masks.
- **Indonesia**: On April 5, Vietnam’s Ministry of Science and Technology sent 500 diagnostic test kits to Indonesia.
- **Myanmar**: On April 10, Vietnam presented $50,000 as a symbolic gift of support during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **United States**: On April 8, Vietnam donated 450,000 protective suits to the United States, with an additional 450,000 suits to follow in the near future. The delivery
promoted praise from President Trump on Twitter, expressing thanks to “our friends in Vietnam.”

- **China:** On February 8, Vietnam’s Ha Giang province border guards donated 1,000 face masks and 20 sanitizer containers to the Yunnan Border Guards as a symbolic gesture. Two weeks later, the Department of Military Medicine within Vietnam’s Ministry of National Defence supplied unspecified “medical equipment” to China’s Ministry of Defence in a more formal ceremony. On March 8, border guards at Dien Bien province gifted 10,000 face masks to their Chinese counterparts.
- **Europe:** Vietnam on April 7 donated 550,000 masks to France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Britain.
- **Russia:** On April 13, Vietnam donated 150,000 made-in-Vietnam antimicrobial face masks. On March 27, Vietnam’s Department of Military Medicine gifted unspecified military medicine to the minister counsellor of the Russian Embassy.

From Japan:

*Japan, traditionally a major donor in Southeast Asia, has been slower than China to respond to Covid-19 with new funding so far.*

- On February 14, the government of Japan announced it would donate 222,000 sets of PPE to Cambodia, the Philippines, Laos, and Mongolia. The equipment was drawn from a stockpile by the Asia-Europe Foundation financed by Japan’s contribution.

- **Vietnam:** The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) on February 7 announced that it was providing Covid-19 testing reagents to the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology of Vietnam, equivalent to approximately 14 million yen in total. Japanese foreign minister Toshimitsu Motegi on April 1 pledged to provide at least 200 million yen in aid to Vietnam to combat the virus.

- **Myanmar:** JICA announced on February 25 that it would send Covid-19 primer and testing reagents to the National Health Laboratory of Myanmar, worth approximately 400,000 yen in total.

From South Korea:

*South Korea has begun to pivot toward international assistance with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announcing on March 27 that the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia were “on its priority list for exporting quarantine supplies, such as coronavirus test kits.” As of March 26, 47 countries have issued requests for the import of South Korean-made Covid-19 tests.*

- **Indonesia:** In a March 28 call with Indonesian foreign minister Retno Marsudi, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha pledged that South Korea would provide “as much
assistance as it can, including protective equipment” to Indonesia. On April 8, South Korea donated 300 disinfectant sprayers as part of a commitment to provide $500,000 in “varied forms of assistance” to Indonesia.

- **Philippines**: Philippines health secretary Francisco Duque III announced on March 16 that the Philippines had received 500 test kits from South Korea with a further 5,000 to 10,000 kits expected to arrive that week.

- **Vietnam**: On March 30, the government announced that its Health Ministry imported 200,000 rapid coronavirus test kits from South Korea.

### Assistance from the World Bank


- On April 7, Bank Indonesia governor Perry Warjiyo announced Indonesia will receive $7 billion in loans from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The funds will go towards the country’s budget deficit and help finance its response to the pandemic.


### What We are Reading:


- Sean Flemming, “Viet Nam shows how you can contain COVID-19 with limited resources,” WEF, March 30, 2020,


