

# After detecting new hybrid coronavirus variant, Vietnam races to increase testing and restrictions

By Miriam Berger

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Vietnam plans to test all 9 million residents of its largest city and is imposing a fresh round of restrictions following the discovery of a new, highly transmissible coronavirus variant that has led to a surge in cases in the country, which had kept comparatively ahead of the virus.

Vietnam's government on Monday imposed a two-week-long lockdown of Ho Chi Minh City, the country's economic hub, during which residents will only be permitted to leave their homes for essential activities, and public gatherings will be limited to 10 people.

The government also plans to test the city's entire population, though it has a daily testing capacity of 100,000 samples, state media reported, according to the Associated Press.

Officials initially ordered all nonessential businesses in Ho Chi Minh City to close on May 27, amid a sudden surge in new coronavirus cases. Since the pandemic began, Vietnamese authorities have acted fast to contain infections and by early May had recorded just 3,100 cases and 35 deaths.

But by then a troubling trend was emerging as new cases were detected in 31 municipalities and provinces. In recent weeks, health officials have confirmed over 3,5000 new infections and 12 deaths related to covid-19, the AP reported.

On Saturday, Vietnam's Health Ministry said that the outbreaks were fueled by a new, highly contagious variant of the virus causing covid-19, which appeared to be a mix of two other variants first identified in Britain and India.

Vietnam has vaccinated only about 1 million of its 96 million citizens, leading to concerns that this latest hybrid variant could be difficult to contain.

Most of the new cases were centered in industrial zones in the provinces of Bac Ninh and Bac Giang, where hundreds of thousands of people work at factories assembling products for companies that include Samsung, Canon and Apple, according to the AP.

At least 145 of recent cases were tied to a Protestant sect called the Revival Ekklesia Mission, based in the Go Vap district of Ho Chi Minh City. State media reported Sunday that police had filed a case against the couple who headed the church, charging them with violating health protocols meant to prevent the spread of infectious diseases by permitting people to sit and sing together in close quarters.

Vietnamese authorities have in response additionally ordered a countrywide ban on religious and large gatherings.

In the initial months of the pandemic, Vietnam's communist-run government imposed frequent temperature screenings, coronavirus testing, targeted lockdowns and other virus detection and prevention measures that drew on its extensive community-health networks already in place.

This time last year the country was focused on preventing its first recorded death related to covid-19 after a 42-year-old British pilot became gravely sick with the disease. He remained hospitalized for four months in Ho Chi Minh City, including 10 weeks on a ventilator. He ultimately survived and returned to Britain in July 2020. But by the end of that month, the country reported its first covid-19 fatality: a 70-year-old Vietnamese man with a kidney illness.

Now as the pandemic has persisted, Vietnam has joined the ranks of many low- and middle-income countries with limited access to coronavirus vaccines while several highly transmissible variants of the virus circle the globe. Scientists say that a variant in India is responsible for the country's surge in cases and fatalities, which have broken previous global records.

Though it shares a border with China, Vietnam has rejected Chinese offers of its homegrown vaccines. Instead, Vietnam vaccinated its first million people with AstraZeneca doses and recently signed a deal with Pfizer for 30 million more shots, though vials are not planned to arrive until the third and fourth quarters of this year, the AP reported. Vietnam is additionally in talks with Moderna to secure a large supply of its version of the vaccine.

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