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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 and Its Impacts*

Migrant Workers: Wake-Up Call for Malaysia

By Khor Yu Leng and Johan Saravanamuttu

SYNOPSIS

The world was awakened to Singapore's spike of COVID-19 cases among its foreign workers recently. This should alert countries like Malaysia and Thailand, which have even larger numbers of migrant labour, of the impending crisis they have yet to face.

COMMENTARY

THE SPIKE in new infections of COVID-19 in Singapore, due to the large presence of foreign workers living in dormitories in the city state, is a wake-up call to other countries with a large migrant labour force.

Singapore's frank reporting of the virus spread among its foreign worker community has alerted neighbouring countries. In Malaysia, possibly even more reliant on foreign workers (legal or documented and illegal or undocumented) to do its manual and unpopular jobs, the situation can be precarious.

Warning Bells

Having kept the spread of COVID-19 under control, the world was awakened by Singapore's announcements within a couple of days (around 8 April 2020) that a quarter of its key purpose-built dormitories for the foreign labour force would be put under quarantine. The virus had been spreading with clusters at construction sites and the popular Mustafa 24-hour department store in Little India.

Singapore has moved aggressively on mass testing of foreign workers and this has

pushed up its case count which put it at the top of infection tables in East and Southeast Asia. As at end of April 2020, Singapore registered 16,169 cases, mostly among foreign workers accommodated in dormitories.

Three countries in Southeast Asia – Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand – have the lion's share of migrant workers in the region, housing among them some 96 percent of the total.

Singapore has slightly more than a million semi-skilled and unskilled foreign workers (excluding domestic helpers), 323,000 of whom are housed in 43 dormitories. Malaysia has the highest number of the three countries, with 2.2 million documented workers and possibly another three million who are undocumented according to industry talk. Now, officialdom in Kuala Lumpur openly talks of an all-in total of six million.

Thailand has about three million migrant workers coming from neighbouring Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The foreign workers of Singapore and Malaysia come from Southeast Asia and South Asia.

While the Singapore foreign worker situation is predominantly an urban phenomenon, those in Malaysia are dispersed in the urban economy and the plantation sectors of the economy. The Singapore situation points to some crucial lessons to contain the COVID-19 pandemic among migrant workers for Malaysia and Thailand.

Lessons from Singapore

Migrant workers basically serve the larger community, the elite and middle-class consumers of their host countries by taking up jobs in construction, essential services and plantations which locals avoid; especially at the prevailing wages.

Ironically, it is the middle-class travellers and globe-trotting elites of their host countries who may have brought the virus into their ranks. Herein lies the core problem; while social distancing is more easily implemented in middle-class communities, such social distancing and even basic hygiene may not be so easily practised in the crammed dormitories, low-cost apartments and other poor facilities which house migrant workers.

Singapore's containment strategy will likely yield results soon because of the island's tight governance and its efficiency in controlling social behaviour; especially its ability to segregate affected communities. Deaths per million from COVID-19 at only two in Singapore is among the lowest in the world and the overall number of cases, while still spiking, looks likely to come down.

Singapore's measures to contain the virus is premised on social distancing in worker dormitories. Those working in essential sectors have been separated from their (mostly) construction sector brethren into disused army camps and public housing flats earmarked for redevelopment.

For those in construction, they are housed in different locations through arrangements with their respective employers. News media reported two hostel ships, used by

offshore workers in the oil and gas sector, were also deployed. The use of additional accommodation areas is apparently aimed at rapidly reducing the residential density of foreign worker dormitories.

Situation in Malaysia and Thailand

How have Malaysia and Thailand dealt with its migrant workers, which currently have not appeared much in statistics on the virus? If the problem is not properly contained the presence of large migrant worker communities in both these countries could be a time bomb for the virus to explode exponentially.

The poor living conditions of migrant workers would be the very circumstances that will prove to be the grim prelude to the third wave of COVID-19 infections in Southeast Asia. Or did Malaysia lock down in the nick of time, from 18 March 2020?

Malaysia's Ministry of Health has announced a mass testing plan for higher risk populations in high risk zones. The closure of areas near the Selayang wholesale market in Kuala Lumpur is notable; and results seem benign so far with [74 positive cases found among 15,000 tests](#) (for 18,000 locked down as of last week, with foreigners making up 90 percent of the count). South Korean test kits are reportedly arriving in Malaysia.

Malaysia has millions of migrant workers in the urban sector living in informal dormitories, including in low cost flats. The foreign diplomatic missions from where the workers originated were told to provide meals for the affected workers since the lockdown. Malaysian authorities and NGOs have provided additional support.

Malaysia also has hundreds of thousands of foreign workers in the plantation and agriculture sectors. Industry sources often cite their high, 80-90 percent reliance on foreign workers. It is notable that for developed countries the level of reliance averages 16 percent, and in the likes of Germany 30 percent of agricultural workers are seasonal migrants.

No Clear Plan of Action on Migrant Workers

So far both Malaysia and Thailand have yet to reveal any clear plan of action regarding migrant workers. Merely going by the number of tests, both countries lag well behind Singapore at 20,815 per million. To date Malaysia has conducted 4,701 per million and Thailand has recorded 2,551 per million (29 April).

Some Malaysian businesses have reported that the instinct of their foreign workers is to leave for home as they expect no support from their host countries following the economic shutdown. The Indonesian Foreign Ministry reported that over 34,000 of about two million Indonesian migrant workers in various sectors returned home after Malaysia set travel restrictions.

Those in the rural sector may be better off as agrifood is an essential sector with ongoing operations, and residential densities are expected to be lower. For those sectors at a halt, a number of companies are delivering food supplies, and they are now eyeing the back-to-work rules including virus screening by the Social Security

Organisation or SOCSO (an agency under the Ministry of Human Resources). But what about the millions of illegal/undocumented workers?

As warned by Glorene Das, executive director of the Tenaganita women and labour rights organisation, a fresh wave of COVID-19 infections among migrant workers was "of grave concern" because there has been inadequate testing among Malaysia's widely dispersed millions of migrant workers in urban and rural settings.

An exodus of tens of thousands of migrant workers back to Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar when Thailand announced its lockdown in late March created alarm and concern about the poor protection accorded to such workers. The question still arises as to what the situation is of the millions still locked down within Thailand's borders and how widespread the incidence of coronavirus is among them.

Khor Yu Leng is an independent economist at Segi Enam Advisors and a specialist on sustainability. Johan Saravanamuttu is Professor Emeritus at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Adjunct Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of a series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg