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Cambodia ends controversial COVID-19 restrictions

Strict policies that prevented hundreds of thousands of people from leaving home, and left many without food or supplies for weeks, have been lifted. Megan Tatum reports.



The Cambodian Government has announced an end to highly restrictive COVID-19 measures that had left thousands in the country at breaking point. From April, 2021, several areas in the capital Phnom Penh, as well as near the coastal city of Sihanoukville and Poipet city near the Thai border, have been subject to tough COVID-19 control measures. Designated red zones, affecting 300 000 people at one point, have prevented anyone leaving their home for any reason other than medical emergencies, COVID-19 tests, or vaccinations.

The policy has left thousands pleading for food, as markets closed and Government food parcels failed to reach all those in need. On May 19, a local news report suggested an imminent and significant reduction to the toughest restrictions, with officials quoted as saying there would be “practically” no red zones following a decline in cases. On May 20, all red zones in the capital were removed, and newly designated as either orange or yellow zones—lower level risk categories.

“Before this revocation of red zones, many residents had been pushed to a breaking point, taking to social media or resorting to protest in order to plead for essential assistance”, said Ming Yu Hah, deputy regional director for campaigns at Amnesty International. “They were increasingly desperate. The failures of the Government’s approach left many people to go hungry, without access to the essential items they needed to survive.”

Although Cambodia had been praised for its early efforts in the pandemic, having recorded just 366 cases of COVID-19 in total in 2020, cumulative case numbers since February, this year, grew to more than 20 000 infections by May 12, with 130 deaths. At its peak,

on May 4, daily infections reached 938. As of April 14, both Phnom Penh and a satellite district were placed under lockdown and days later came the announcement of a three-colour zoning policy, which would see areas deemed the highest risk designated as red zones.

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The result has been a “social crisis”, said one Cambodian-based researcher, who spoke on condition of anonymity. “Some people were in red zones for 4 weeks, without access to food or able to leave their houses, or able to go and earn money. Some went out onto the streets as they were so desperate; they had nothing to eat or feed their families with. The Government simply didn’t prepare for the humanitarian situation that would emerge if you put people under these conditions.” She added that although food parcels—consisting of 25 kg of rice, canned fish, soy sauce, and fish sauce—had reached some households, “donations are neither consistent nor nutritious. It’s not enough to ensure people are taken care of.”

Indeed, when in mid-April the Phnom Penh municipal Government created a group on the messaging platform Telegram, aimed at highlighting those in need of emergency assistance, membership quickly reached 50 000 people, with many pleading for help amid claims that aid had not reached them for days.

One survey of Phnom Penh residents in mid-May found that 83% faced food shortages in the coming week, 70% said they could no longer earn an income, and 93% had at least one

family member feeling overwhelmed, helpless, or hopeless.

Amid criticism, there have been “tweaks and improvements” to the Government response, according to one regional activist, with the reintroduction of cash support for vulnerable families among “moves to increase social support”. But authorities had continued to restrict access in red zones to both NGOs and the UN, say organisations. In their place, grassroots efforts have been set up to provide food donations. Media organisations have also been barred.

Ahead of the news that red zones would be substantially reduced, Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division, urged the Government to rethink its response, granting access to aid groups, UN agencies, human rights groups, and independent media. “So far, the lack of response by the Government is scandalous and is compounded by the failure by the UN Country Team to make a strong, concerted push for access to red zones”, he told *The Lancet*.

Amnesty International had also been critical of the inaction of UN teams to gain access, although UN representatives and Cambodian officials were negotiating ahead of the easing of restrictions, according to the same regional activist.

Should Cambodia consider reintroducing red zones, in the event that COVID-19 cases rise again, NGOs have warned that the Government must rethink its approach. “An increase in COVID-19 cases could see red zones re-implemented in future”, said Hah. “It is vital that the authorities learn lessons from recent experiences and fundamentally alter their approach to the epidemic by placing human rights at the core.”

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