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Vietnam Was Crushing the Coronavirus—Now It's Got a New Outbreak

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7-8 minutes

Vietnam had gone 99 days without a locally transmitted case of coronavirus when a 57-year-old resident was confirmed to be infected over the weekend. Since then, 34 new infections have been detected, stirring fears about the potential size and source of the outbreak in the country where the pathogen was believed to have been eliminated.

Extensive contact tracing, quarantines and mask-wearing in the pandemic's early days made Vietnam one of the world's most successful countries at [squashing the coronavirus curve](#). It has reported 450 cases and no deaths from the disease. Life had returned to normal since April, when the last domestic case was found.

Now, anxiety has returned to Vietnam's streets and homes. The outbreak in the tourist destination of Da Nang, which was flocked by domestic travelers this month, has prompted a lockdown of the city. Four cases of people linked to Da Nang, including an American citizen, were confirmed in other cities on Wednesday.

Authorities haven't identified the source of the new infections, but

said the virus strain they found wasn't prevalent in the country earlier, suggesting it was recently brought from abroad. That has raised more questions since international arrivals to Vietnam remain heavily restricted and nearly all those entering the country are required to spend [two weeks in official quarantine facilities](#).

Vietnam went for months without recording any new locally transmitted coronavirus cases, but new infections have forced the government to lock down a popular tourist destination. Here's how a country that had kept the virus in check is dealing with new surges. Photo: Luong Thai Linh/Shutterstock

The most likely cause would be a breach of quarantine procedures, said Todd Pollack, an infectious-diseases specialist at Harvard Medical School who runs a health program in Vietnam. That could mean someone entered the country and avoided quarantine—for instance, if they arrived unlawfully—or escaped from a quarantine center. It could also stem from a lapse in infection-control protocols at hospitals or quarantine centers, he said.

“We don't think that this cluster suddenly appeared out of an ongoing, low-level community transmission in Vietnam,” Dr. Pollack said.

Other countries where the virus had vanished or come close to that [are also seeing a resurgence](#), including Australia and Hong Kong. But Vietnam's circumstances are more striking since no new local infections had emerged in more than three months, with a strict quarantine system that allows authorities to catch imported cases before returnees can mingle with the general population.

Domestic attention is focused on the country's long land border, which it shares with China, Laos and Cambodia. Illegal boundary crossings are common. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc this

week ordered tighter border checks as well as investigations into undocumented entrants already in the country, particularly in the areas in central Vietnam where the new cases developed.

The government's online news publication on Sunday reported the arrests of dozens of Chinese nationals this month who it said had sneaked into Vietnam illegally. It said the people were found in Da Nang and a neighboring province, where the outbreak is centered. The government hasn't said the new cases are connected to those arrested or to undocumented migrants from China.

But the simultaneous disclosures of the outbreak and illegal border crossings is stirring anti-Chinese sentiment in the country where many are already distrustful of Beijing. The neighbors fought a war in 1979 and have long-running disputes in the South China Sea. Public perception of China has worsened since Covid-19 first emerged in Wuhan, said Le Hong Hiep, a fellow at the Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Although there is no evidence Chinese nationals are the source of Vietnam's new infections, the outbreak will further reinforce anti-China sentiment as people look for someone to blame, he said.





A health worker of Hanoi CDC testing an employee on Wednesday of a restaurant where another worked tested positive for Covid-19.

Photo: kham/Reuters

Some Vietnamese have taken to social media in recent days to express anger toward Chinese entering the country illegally. Others say Vietnam's government hadn't been sufficiently stringent about stopping unlawful crossings. China has largely controlled the virus' spread in its territory, though it is battling relatively small new outbreaks in some locations.

Authorities in Vietnam are scrambling to ascertain how large its new outbreak is. The first patient to be detected on Saturday is in critical condition, which experts say suggests he was likely infectious much before he was identified as Covid-19 positive. A government official said new transmissions may have begun early July, meaning they may have gone undetected for weeks.

It doesn't help that a majority of the cases are clustered around Da Nang, which attracted large numbers of domestic tourists this month because schools are closed for summer break. Thousands of alarmed visitors flew out on Sunday and Monday as social-distancing rules returned to the city.

After more cases were discovered Monday night, the government stopped all outgoing flights from Da Nang. Nearly 2,500 people have been tested in the city, and experts are identifying hundreds of close and secondary contacts of the patients to try to stop the

transmission chain, according to local health authorities.

In Ho Chi Minh City, authorities have called on those who visited Da Nang this month to come forward for testing. The capital Hanoi is on high alert and is also testing people who visited high-risk areas in the last three weeks. Tourist cancellations have spread to popular sites around the country.

“The approach in Vietnam has been to try to eliminate the virus if possible and only once you’ve done that can the population of the country feel safe,” Dr. Pollack said. “That’s the goal here.”

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