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Cambodia: More than 1,600 workers from 206 factories have been infected with COVID-19

Friday 30 April 2021, by [Khy Sovuthy](#) (Date first published: 29 April 2021).

Garment workers make up a large share of Cambodia's COVID-19 cases, with some 1,673 workers from 206 factories having tested positive since the latest outbreak began in February, according to the Ministry of Labor. Additionally, more than 17,000 workers are in quarantine and being monitored after having come into contact with an infected person.

"However, these numbers can increase or change because now in Kandal province's Ang Snuol district, we are testing and seeking the people who came in direct contact [with positive workers] to continue to test," said spokesman Heng Sour, who provided the updated data at an inter-ministerial press conference held Wednesday.

Though factories were last year ordered to put into place some measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including mandatory mask wearing, most workers travel on crowded trucks and live in small rental rooms with shared facilities, making social distancing all but impossible.

At the conference, Sour said that in addition to working with factories to carry out contact tracing, the Labor Ministry has been working with the Health Ministry to vaccinate factory workers. So far, 110,000 workers have been vaccinated with the first dose and more than 10,000 people have received the second dose. But with first dose vaccination suspended since a lockdown of Phnom Penh and neighboring Takhmao City, Kandal, began April 15, a large portion of Cambodia's estimated 850,000 garment workers remain unvaccinated.

Sour said the Labor Ministry was looking to restart vaccinations in the red zones, which are subjected to the strongest lockdown measures and include many of Phnom Penh's factory-dense areas.

"The ministry is completely prepared to cooperate with relevant parties especially with the Defense Ministry to facilitate vaccination at large scale in red zones that have workers and citizens," Sour said.

Of the 206 factories which have seen COVID-19 cases, 134 are in Phnom Penh, 23 in Kandal, 26 in Takeo, 16 in Preah Sihanouk province, four in Svay Rieng, one in Kampong Chhnang, and one in Kampong Cham province. He said that some 690 factories have been impacted by the lockdown in Phnom Penh and Takhmao of more than 7,000 factories and enterprises nationwide employing 1.2 million people.

About 60 factories in Phnom Penh yellow zones, which have relatively low levels of community transmission, will be allowed to reopen.

"I estimate that nearly 200,000 people can work again," Sour said, but added that those who live in red zones or dark yellow zones are not yet allowed to return to work, even if their factories reopen.

Nuon Pharoath, Phnom Penh deputy governor said in the Wednesday press conference that there are currently 7,943 people who have tested positive for COVID-19 in Phnom Penh, including 442 foreigners. Of that group 7,732 people are receiving treatment. There have been 78 deaths in Phnom Penh since the pandemic began last year, but all have occurred since the latest outbreak began in late February.

Pharoath said municipal officials are working hard to disseminate information about how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and have urged all owners of rental houses or rooms in Phnom Penh to lower rent, particularly for those living in red zones.

"In red zones, we still continue to vaccinate citizens but we need to be highly careful," Pharoath said.

Pharoath said authorities have been providing food aid to the city's poorest, but admitted they have struggled to meet the widespread need. For instance, he said, if four workers live together in one room, they will initially receive only one food package to share among them — something workers have complained about, he said.

"In a short time, we can not prepare gifts for all the people [who face food shortage]," Pharoath said. On Tuesday, he said, authorities distributed 100,000 food packages mostly in red zones in Pur Senchey and Meanchey districts.

"Today, we have a plan to distribute another 17,700 packages for Pur Senchey and Meanchey districts," he said.

Ou Ravy, 37, a garment worker who lives with three friends in a rental room in Kambol district's Kambol commune, said that she and other workers haven't worked since factories in Phnom Penh were closed on April 10. All four of them now fear going hungry after running out of rice sent from home a week ago. They pooled their remaining money to buy more rice, but haven't been able to buy meat, fish, or vegetables.

"Now, we are meeting a food shortage and we borrowed some milled rice from other workers who live next to our room to cook," said Ravy.

She said that she does not know why she and other workers who stay in her area haven't received aid as local authorities came to register everyone in the area three days ago. With lockdown extended another week, until May 5, Ravy said they didn't know how they will eat.

"We will face more food shortage for one more week, if the authority does not distribute aid for us," Ravy said. "Please can the authority help us."

Labor Ministry spokesman Heng Sour speaks during an inter-ministerial press conference in Phnom Penh, April 28, 2021. CamboJA/ Panha Chhorpoan

Labor Ministry spokesman Heng Sour speaks during an inter-ministerial press conference in Phnom Penh, April 28, 2021. CamboJA/ Panha Chhorpoan

In a joint statement issued by 36 trade unions, community groups, and labor and human rights organizations, advocates said that the latest outbreak has severely affected the livelihoods, health and safety of construction, service, hotel and informal economy sector workers. While many of the challenges are linked to the lockdown, the signatories warned that far more oversight is needed to ensure factories can adequately protect workers once they reopen.

“The biggest concern for workers’ health and safety and risks are in other factories which have not yet found COVID-19 cases and workers will face a risk of returning to their workplace in a situation where there is no guarantee of occupational health and safety,” the joint statement said.

Van Sou Ieng, president of Garment Manufactures Association of Cambodia (GMAC) declined to comment saying he was too busy.

Nguon Channara, deputy secretary general of Cambodia Footwear Association (CFA), said: “We always advise that our member factories need to respect the Labor Ministry and relevant ministries,” Channara said.

Mann Seng Hak, deputy president of Free Trade Union of Kingdom of Cambodia, said that his union had urged the government since the start of the global pandemic to prioritize the safety of garment workers but the government ignored that until the latest outbreak — leading to the high rates of COVID-19 transmission among workers.

“Today, the Labor Ministry said it allows any factories are in yellow zones to reopen, so we are concerned about this point because the number of COVID-19 infections is not yet decreasing each day,” he said, adding that if the government does not put more protective measures in place more workers will become infected.

“I think that the government should have a budget to help workers while they do not have work during COVID-19 outbreak,” he added, noting that many workers were now going hungry.

The Ministry of Health on Wednesday said it recorded 697 new cases, including 558 cases in Phnom Penh, 72 cases in Kandal, 43 cases in Banteay Meanchey, and the rest in Preah Sihanouk, Kampong Speu, Takeo, and Pursat.

As of Wednesday night 88 people have died of COVID-19 — all from the latest outbreak. Health officials have recorded 11,210 new infections since the February 20 community event, with a total overall case count of 11,761 cases since the start of the pandemic in early 2020. In total, 4,698 people have recovered from the virus, while 6,968 are currently infected. On Wednesday, the ministry announced that another 994 formerly infected people had been marked as recovered, meaning they tested negative for the virus.

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P.S.

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