

Factory workers making goods for the west bear brunt of virus surge in south-east Asia

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Migrant labourers tell of being forced to isolate in brutal conditions as Covid wave grips region

It was around mid-May when workers at the Cal-Comp factory in Phetchaburi, central [Thailand](#), heard a small group of their colleagues had tested positive for Covid-19. It soon became clear the virus had ripped through the production lines. A cluster associated with the electronics factory has since been linked to thousands of infections.

Hwan Htet Paing*, a worker from the factory, said he was not told the results of his Covid test, carried out on 19 May. Despite this, he was instructed to quarantine inside a vast hall at his workplace. The floor was covered with tarpaulin sheets and lined with rows of mosquito nets for each worker. Everyone was given a bucket and a cup, and bedsheets to lay across the floor. Fans were handed out to help ease the heat – until the vast numbers of people testing positive meant there were none left.

He stayed for 14 days, in the same clothes that he had been wearing when he was sent to the facility.

Across south-east Asia, countries that managed to avoid the worst of the pandemic last year are facing new waves of Covid-19, fuelled by [more contagious variants](#). In several countries in the region, including Malaysia, Vietnam and Cambodia, clusters have begun in key manufacturing sites. In Vietnam, which virtually eradicated the virus last year, total cases have tripled since the start of May, reaching almost 10,000, driven partly by outbreaks in factories.

Malaysia was forced to impose a lockdown this month [after daily cases surpassed 9,000](#). Much of the country's manufacturing sector has been allowed to continue operating at limited capacity throughout lockdown, despite concerns raised by campaigners. On Friday, it emerged that more than 800 workers at glove maker WRP had tested positive for Covid.

"Unfortunately the whole setup of these production lines and factories is not conducive to Covid-19 prevention," said Andy Hall, a specialist in migrant workers' rights.

Increased demand for certain goods during the pandemic has placed additional pressure on supply chains. Many such products are destined for Europe: tech gear and printers for people who are working from home, medical gloves for health workers, tinned tuna for people stocking up the cupboards.

In Thailand, workers at more than 130 factories have been infected, according to a survey by the industry ministry reported by Thai media. This includes Charoen Pokphand Foods, Thailand's biggest agriculture business.

Suthasinee Kaewleklai, Thailand coordinator of the advocacy group the Migrant Workers Rights Network, said many of the country's affected factories are staffed by workers from [Cambodia](#) and Myanmar, who are especially vulnerable. "They don't have worker unions or labour unions like Thai workers. They don't have representatives to negotiate what the employers should do for them."

The conditions at the Cal-Comp factory quarantine facility were so poor that workers at the site protested about shortages of electricity and a lack of food. They said the food and electricity problems inside the facility were improved after their protests.

Other workers from the factory remain under isolation at home. Chhuk Sophal*, a Cambodian worker from Cal-Comp, has spent more than two weeks inside his small rented room, relying on donors for food. The factory has left food parcels, he added, but it's not enough. "It's just rice and tinned fish. They give it to us just to eat to survive," he said.

Cal-Comp and the governor's office in Phetchaburi did not respond to a request for comment. Workers said Cal-Comp had introduced measures to reduce the risk of the virus spreading, but that, in practice, social distancing was often impossible.

Chhaeut SoPhally, a garment worker in Cambodia, which has also seen a recent rise in cases, said that even if people do manage to remain distanced on the factory floor, his colleagues were crammed together as they journeyed to and from work on the back of trucks. For some, the journey can take hours, he said.

Chhaeut tested positive following an outbreak among colleagues at a garment factory in Kampong Chhnang, central Cambodia. He was immediately taken to an isolation room to wait for an ambulance, which would ferry him to a quarantine facility. As he waited, he called his wife, who cried at the news. "I worried about my children. What if they test positive and are treated in a different place. What if my wife tests positive? Who will take care of our children?" he said. The next day the authorities placed rope around his house. His wife and children were told to remain indoors. They have relied on neighbours to leave food outside their door. He isn't sure he will be paid his full salary this month.

For many, the economic consequences of the virus are feared more than the illness itself. "In part, this is because Cambodia was largely unaffected by the virus health-wise last year, while the economic effects were devastating," said Patrick Lee, a legal adviser at the advocacy group, Central.

The United Nations Development Programme estimates that poverty will almost double in the country due to Covid-19, spreading to 17.6% of the population.

Cambodia's garment sector was thrown into crisis at the start of the pandemic, when companies abruptly cancelled orders. Over 100 factories closed last year, and more than 400 others suspended employment, often for months at a time, Lee said. Research by Central suggests the suspension of orders peaked in July last year, but that business began to pick up again as western brands beefed up their online sales.

The recent outbreak in Cambodia, which began in April and prompted a severe lockdown, has caused further disruption and again placed greater pressure on the poorest. Cambodian law doesn't require employers to pay a full salary during the lockdown, said Lee. According to Central's research involving workers at 120 factories, very few have done so.

As cases have risen across many countries in the region, access to vaccines is limited. Cambodia has fully vaccinated almost 14% of its population, far more than many of its neighbours, thanks to its close relations with China, which has provided much of its supply.

[Thailand began its immunisation campaign only on 7 June](#), and has fully vaccinated less than 2.5% of the population. There are concerns about shortages of doses, however. The country is relying primarily on Siam Bioscience, a company owned by the king which has not previously produced vaccines, to provide its supply of AstraZeneca jabs. The company is due to supply doses to eight other countries in the region, but it was recently confirmed that orders to the Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan would be delayed.

Campaigners are calling for governments to ensure that migrant workers get equal access to vaccines, including undocumented migrants who are not currently in work. Suthasinee fears there are too many gaps in Thailand's system. Though the Thai government recently allowed migrants to register with the department of labour, regardless of their status, the window for doing so was too short, she said.

Many worry about penalties if they come forward and do not have the right papers. Similar fears are felt among migrant workers in [Malaysia](#), where officials threatened to carry out raids during lockdown, and which recently announced it would deport thousands of Indonesians.

Chhuk said he used to discuss the possibility of a vaccine with friends. "Prevention [of Covid] is impossible because of the crowding," he said. "If we can get the vaccine, we will be less worried, we will be protected." Whether or not he would be able to access a vaccine, he said, was 50:50.

**Workers' names were changed at their request*

Rebecca Ratcliffe

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P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/13/factory-workers-making-goods-for-the-west-bear-brunt-of-virus-surge-in-south-east-asia>