

Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City has highest COVID death rate in region

Restrictions in commercial hub likely to stay beyond Sept. 15, experts say

TOMOYA ONISHI and GRACE LI, Nikkei staff writers

HANOI/TOKYO -- Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's southern commercial hub, has a death rate from COVID-19 of 4.95%, well above the national average and that of its peers in Southeast Asia.

As the government struggles to keep a lid on the region's deadliest coronavirus outbreak, citizens and foreign companies in Vietnam's largest city are bracing for an extension of the restrictions they have been living under since May 31. Authorities are set to decide soon whether to extend the harsh lockdown beyond the original Sept. 15 deadline.

The short-term case fatality rate for Ho Chi Minh City stood at 4.95% as of Wednesday, compared with 2.6% for Vietnam as a whole, according to data compiled by Nikkei Asia. This rate is defined as the ratio of the seven-day-average of COVID-19 fatalities to the seven-day-average of daily cases 10 days earlier.

The city's death rate stands out in the region. The short-term fatality rate in neighboring Cambodia stood at 2.38% while Thailand's was 1.34% although the kingdom is battling its worst outbreak of the virus so far, with around 15,000 new cases a day, according to Our World in Data.

As of Friday, Ho Chi Minh City had reported a cumulative total of 11,472 COVID-19 fatalities out of a nationwide total of 14,745. In all, the city accounts for roughly 78% of the country's COVID fatalities since late April, when the current wave struck.

COVID-19 has hit Vietnam even as it struggles to accelerate its vaccination drive. Ho Chi Minh City had fully vaccinated 8.6% of residents as of Monday, according to data from the Ministry of Health. That is higher than the nationwide figure of 3.5%. Even so, the city's fatality rate remains higher than the rest of the country.

The spiraling fatality rate has prompted the authorities to deploy forces, including the army, in Ho Chi Minh City since Aug. 23 to enforce stringent COVID restrictions. The city's 9 million residents are required to "stay where they are" until at least Sept. 15, by which time the central government in Hanoi hopes to bring the outbreak under control.

COVID death rates in Ho Chi Minh City among Asia's highest



*Ratio between confirmed deaths and confirmed cases 10 days earlier
 Source: Vietnam's Ministry of Health, Our World in Data, WHO, Nikkei Asia Research

However, the situation in Ho Chi Minh City shows few signs of improvement. The city reported 7,539 new cases on Friday, out of a nationwide total of 13,306. "Ho Chi Minh City remained the epicenter [of the outbreak], with the cumulative number of cases [in the city] accounting for approximately 48.3% of the national tally. Average daily case numbers have shown a 21.3% increase compared with the previous week, with an average of 5,746 cases reported per day during the week," the World Health Organization said in its "Vietnam COVID-19 Situation Report," issued Sunday.

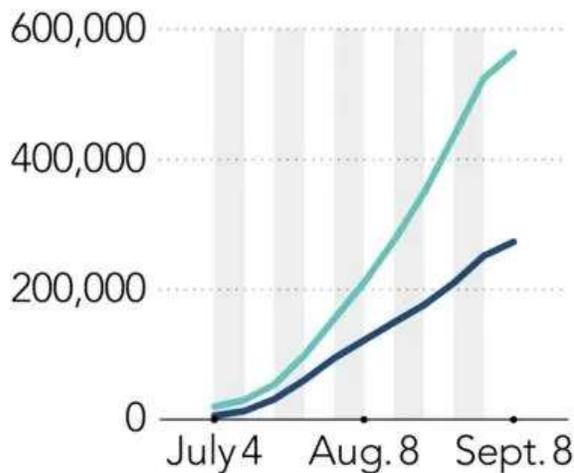
"Delta is more dominant in recent outbreaks," the WHO said, blaming the highly transmissible strain of the virus first detected in India for the pandemic raging in Ho Chi Minh City.

COVID-19 cases and deaths in Vietnam

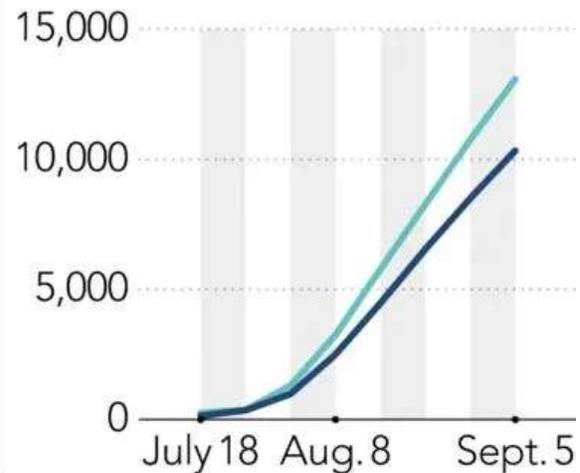
(Cumulative number)

— Ho Chi Minh City — All of Vietnam

Number of cases



Number of deaths



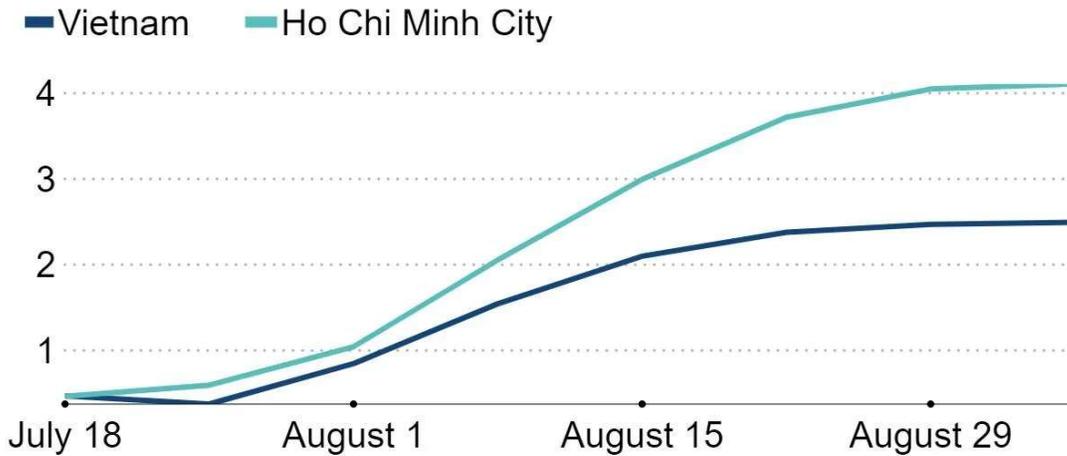
Source: WHO, Vietnam's Ministry of Health

"Only 5% of countries and regions in the world have experienced such a high mortality [like Ho Chi Minh City]," Tuan V. Nguyen, a fellow at Australia's National Health and Medical Research, told Nikkei Asia on Thursday.

The city's hospital network has been overwhelmed by the influx of COVID-19 patients, Tuan said, explaining the higher number of deaths in Ho Chi Minh City compared with other cities. "I think there was a lack of coordination within the health care system and a lack of resources that contributes to the excess of preventable deaths," he added.

Although the city's vaccination program has accelerated since June 21, it will take time to see the vaccinations take effect, Tuan said.

Vietnam fatality rate (In percent)



Source: WHO, Vietnam Ministry of Health

With the city under lockdown since May 31, anxiety is growing among Ho Chi Minh City residents. At a rare online livestreaming event on Monday, the city's new mayor, Phan Van Mai, addressed citizens facing a shortage of food due to the city's strict lockdown.

"You asked everyone to stay where they are, but you don't provide food. Are we supposed to live by just breathing air?" said Thuy Huynh on Facebook.

"Mr. mayor, why do new cases keep increasing, instead of decreasing? Are the restriction measures effective? If not, what next?," Van Vu, another citizen, said during the livestreaming event.

"Mr. Mai, how could new cases be reported at 7,000 or 8,000 daily? When will I be able to go to work? I am starving now," another citizen, Huong Do Van said.

Authorities will soon decide whether to extend the restrictions beyond Sept. 15. Dang Tam Chanh, a political analyst based in Ho Chi Minh City, thinks they have no choice but to silently ease the rules, step by step. "People are suffering a downgrade in their living standards, while their worries about COVID-19 remain," he said.

The city may partially lift the restrictions in some districts with fewer infections, said Duong Quoc Chinh, a Hanoi-based political expert. Lifting the curfew that has been in place in the city since July 26 is also a possibility. But it is also possible the lockdown will be extended for at least next two weeks beyond Sept. 15, he said. "Time is needed for [Ho Chi Minh City] to administer the first dose of vaccine to more than 80% of the citizens, including people over 18 years old," he said.

Prolonged restrictions could create social instability, Chinh warned. "The working class in Ho Chi Minh City do not have the habit of saving money. Many of them can survive only a week without daily income," he said. Poor people could take to the streets.

Meanwhile, businesses, including foreign manufacturers operating in Ho Chi Minh City and neighboring provinces, have had their operations disrupted. Representatives of U.S. companies voiced concerns about their ability to maintain their operations in Vietnam at a meeting with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh on Sept. 4 in Hanoi.

Details of the talks were not disclosed but participants, including chipmaker Intel and sportswear company Nike, raised a number of issues related to supply chains, transportation and securing workers, according to state media. Dahiya Tripti, an official with Intel Products Vietnam, declined to comment on the talks.

At the meeting, Prime Minister Chinh sought to reassure the business people, saying, "These are only temporary difficulties. I have assigned relevant agencies to study and develop an economic recovery plan to safely adapt to the pandemic in the spirit of 'production must be safe, it is safe to produce.'"

The U.S. business group's European counterpart expressed similar worries. On Thursday, members of EuroCham Vietnam held a meeting with the government, with Chairman Alain Cany telling officials, "Our members are extremely affected by current [COVID-19] measures ... especially the hard lockdown in the southern part of the country."

Cany pointed to moves by some companies in Vietnam to move operations elsewhere, saying, "Our data shows that almost one-fifth of companies have shifted some production overseas so far, with a further 16% considering doing so in the future."

"Many migrant workers from provinces have quit their jobs and left Ho Chi Minh City. Companies will face labor shortages," political analyst Chinh said.

Ho Chi Minh City accounts for 22.3% of Vietnam's gross domestic product and contributed 27.5% to the state budget from 2011 to 2019.

"The economic and social consequences [of COVID-19] will cause instability and politically discredit the government," political expert Chinh warned.

Additional reporting by Kim Dung Tong in Ho Chi Minh City.