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Vietnam's Coronavirus Struggle: The Import Dimension

Vietnam has not been immune from the issue of imported coronavirus cases.

By Thoi Nguyen

Vietnam has been increasing its effort to contain the coronavirus as the new number of confirmed cases have been rising steadily since the last few weeks. And not unlike some other countries contending with the global pandemic, some of the new cases have been imported cases were brought back by foreign visitors and repatriated Vietnamese.

Thus far, the coronavirus outbreak has threatened Vietnam's economy and affected the country severely. When the coronavirus began to rage the country in early January, the Vietnamese government quickly responded and has deservedly gotten praise for doing so.

But the situation is different now because the number of new cases brought back from overseas is on the rise. Vietnam has tested more than 30,000 people and 37 foreigners and 136 Vietnamese were infected with the coronavirus. Several big cities like Ha Noi, Da Nang, and Hai Phong have now confirmed new infections.

Some local authorities have voiced their concerns, telling overseas Vietnamese to reconsider their returned plans for the sake and benefit of the nation. Among those new cases are expatriated Vietnamese who returned home to avoid the rapid coronavirus outbreak spreading in the UK, Italy, and the United States.

As a case in point, the 140th patient is a Vietnamese student, who boarded a flight from London to Ha Noi and was forced into the quarantine area upon arrival. She has tested positive for coronavirus. She is one of hundreds imported cases from overseas that Vietnam is dealing with. The problem is getting worse because the doctor has had contact with other patients and the local hospital.

This is not an isolated incident. The biggest city in the country, Ho Chi Minh City, now has 40 confirmed cases, and most of these cases were imported in Europe. The local authorities ordered all bars, restaurants, and entertainment centers to close until the end of March. Ngo Minh Vu, a restaurant manager at Hachiban Rame, expressed his sadness and worry: "Since the coronavirus outbreak started, we had to reduce the number of employees to two thirds, keeping only full-time employees. However, we had to comply with the order when the authorities issued the documents and our employees took unpaid leave and it is very difficult time, the most suffering are our employees who do not know how to live in the next few days," he said.

On March 22, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc ordered the relevant authorities to stop all foreigners entering to the country, including those of Vietnamese origin and family members with visa waivers. There were exemptions made, however, for foreign experts, business managers, high-skilled workers carrying an official certificate. This is in addition to other measures taken as well. For instance, it has been compulsory for arrivals to test and arrive in the

quarantine area in Vietnam since March 16, resulting in tens of thousands of people to quarantine camps to deal with the influx of overseas citizen returning home. And on Friday, Phuc announced additional measures regarding the shutting of non-essential businesses and restrictions on movement.

The sacrifices made by individuals has also gotten notice within the country in a positive sense. For instance, the self-sacrifice of some Vietnamese soldiers offering bed spaces for arrivals at military-run quarantine center has been trending on social media Twitter. There is also a growing nationalist pride in Vietnam when it comes to the coronavirus crisis because the fact that the country's infections are relatively lower than those of many regional neighbors except Myanmar and Laos for now.

The reasons for Vietnam's robust response to COVID-19 are varied. But among the factors is leadership. For instance, when Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc decided to stop all events, activities and gatherings over more than 20 people in the country – it was viewed as a definitive and firm move because it was considered that Vietnam would have a short time to take action and the virus would spread faster if the country did not implement timely and drastic actions.

But uncertain days are still ahead. Indeed, for Vietnam, the worst of the crisis may also be yet to come as illustrated by the import dimension of its coronavirus challenge. The outbreak may drag on for longer than the health officials have experienced thus far, and all that assuming that life in Vietnam is still under of control. If COVID-19 gets out of control, the country's health service system will struggle to cope with the lack of resources, including beds, doctors, and nurses. As other Western countries have demonstrated, if stricter measures and a huge national effort are not sustained, it will be difficult to contain the virus. Vietnam is no exception to this.

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