New Surge of COVID-19 Infected Cases in Thailand

Pongsak Rattanachaikunsopon*, Parichat Phumkhachorn

Department of Biological Science, Faculty of Science, Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand 34190.

Email: rattanchaikunsopon@yahoo.com

Timeline of COVID-19 in Thailand starts on 12th January 2020 when the Health Ministry of Thailand reported the first case of COVID-19 infection. From then till the end of February 2020, no significant increase in COVID-19 infected cases was observed. The first spike in COVID-19 infected cases in Thailand began on 6th March 2020 when a super spreader event occurred at the Lumpini boxing stadium, one of Thailand's largest boxing stadiums. A COVID-19 infected boxing fan appeared in the stadium packed with thousands of people associated with boxing matches including boxing officials, boxers' team staffs and spectators. Some of them who were unaware of being COVID-19 infected moved around and spread the disease across the country affecting more than 20 provinces of Thailand and causing hundreds of COVID-19 infected cases. Within a span of two months, from March to April 2020, around 3,000 new COVID-19 infected cases were reported. The Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) was set up as a command center to control the COVID-19 outbreak in Thailand to respond to this crisis. In the whole month of April 2020, the government temporarily shut schools and universities, as well as many entertainment and recreational venues and advised people to stay home as much as possible and follow COVID-19 precautions such as physical distancing, hand-washing and mask-wearing. Furthermore, the state of emergency was applied to keep controlling the spread of COVID-19. The restrictions mentioned in the announcement included a continuation of the nationwide curfew from 22.00 to 04.00, and the ban on gatherings and group activities. These attempts were successful by bringing the COVID-19 situation back to controllable status. From May 2020 till November 2020, the average number of new daily infected cases was about 10-15 cases. From June 2020, no local transmission of COVID-19 was found. All new infected cases were imported from outside of Thailand.

A new surge of COVID-19 infected cases in Thailand began on 17th December 2020 when a 67-years old woman was detected to be COVID-19 infected. She works in a seafood market in SamutSakhon province and has no history of travelling abroad recently. The disease tracking investigation was likely that she received the disease from a migrant worker from Myanmar. SamutSakhon province has about 300,000 migrant workers. About 80% of them are from Myanmar. Among them, illegal migrant workers were believed to be spreaders of the disease because they came into the country without taking COVID-19 testing and quarantine. To investigate the number

of COVID-19 infection among migrant workers and people around them, Thai government has launched mass testing for COVID-19 infection in SamutSakhon. The new high daily COVID-19 infection record of 576 was reported on 19th December 2020 leading to the SamutSakhon province's lockdown. The infection rate still increased and Thailand has recorded 809 new COVID-19 infected cases on 21st December 2020, the largest single day surge since the first case was found in Thailand on 12th January 2020.

Most of the new infections were found in migrant workers from Myanmar, who are working in the SamutSakhon seafood market. To make matters worse, people associated with the seafood market have moved around across the country, unintentionally spreading the disease nationwide. During a week of the new surge, more than 1,400 new infected cases accounted for about 25% of all COVID-19 infected cases in Thailand since January 2020. Some infectious disease experts in Thailand have called this crisis a second wave of COVID-19 infection in Thailand. However, the spokesperson of CCSA has different opinion. He said that it should be called a new outbreak of COVID-19 in Thailand because the new spike in COVID-19 infected cases in December 2020 is not directly derived from cases in the first spike in March 2020. It is not so important what the new surge of COVID-19 infection in Thailand is called. The much more important matter is how Thai government handles this new crisis. Human behavior plays an important role in this situation. No matter what approach the government uses to control COVID-19 crisis, it will not be successfully without people's collaboration. If people strictly practice COVID-19 precautions such as physical distancing, hand-washing and mask-wearing along with the intensive enforcement of effective COVID-19 control regulations by the government, the COVID-19 situation will be back to controllable status soon. The sooner the crisis is solved, the lesser the price we have to pay.

Keywords: COVID-19, Thailand, Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA), SamutSakhon seafood market

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