Third Wave of COVID-19 in Thailand

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Thailand has been experiencing COVID-19 pandemic since January, 2020. During 15 months period (from January 2020 to April 2021) facing this highly spread disease, Thailand has been attacked by 3 COVID-19 waves. It is too early to tell whether the third COVID-19 wave is the last one in Thailand.

The very first case of COVID-19 in Thailand was reported on 12 January, 2020. It was imported from Wuhan, China by a 61-years-old Chinese female tourist landed at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Thailand. At that time, no pragmatic plan or regulation was assigned to cope with the disease. Only the “arrival containment” policy was implemented based on the assumption that there was no local transmission of COVID-19 in Thailand. Luckily, no significant increase in a number of COVID-19 cases was observed during the first 2 months of COVID-19 situation in Thailand (mid-January, 2020 to mid-March, 2020). The number of cumulative COVID-19 infected cases was less than 500 cases with daily new infected cases in double digits. By the beginning of March, 2020, Thais believed that COVID-19 situation in Thailand was contained.

The first and second waves of COVID-19 were occurred in Thailand during March 2020 and April 2020, and during December 2020 and February, 2021, respectively. Brief details of both waves have been recently published.^{1,2} For each wave, hundreds of new infected cases were recorded daily.

The third wave of COVID-19 in Thailand began by the end of March, 2021, when parties in Bangkok's Thong Lor area were tested positive for Covid-19. Krystal Club and Emerald Club were believed to be super spreader sites for the latest wave of COVID-19 in Thailand. Both of them are well known to be high-end luxury clubs and bars for Bangkok's wealthy elite. The third wave of COVID-19 in Thailand is considered more serious than the former two waves because it affects many more people than the previous ones. This may be due to the fact that the coronavirus responsible for the new wave is the SARS-CoV-2 variant B.1.1.7 (UK variant B.1.1.7), a highly transmissible variant.³ However, it is still inconclusive that the SARS-CoV-2 variant B.1.1.7

causes more severe illness than pre-existing SARS-CoV-2 variants^{4,5}. Even though the government quickly responded by closing all bars and entertainment venues in more than 40 provinces, it may not be enough to prevent a third wave of the pandemic. The daily new infected cases jumped from double digits not to hundreds (like in the first two waves) but to Thousands. At the date that this article was published, the crisis is not solved, and the number of cumulative cases in Thailand was approximately 45,000 cases. This number tends to increase as the infection is still not controlled.

In retrospect, Thailand overcame the first two waves of COVID-19 due to effective government policies and actions and good collaboration of Thai people in practicing COVID-19 precautions such as physical distancing and hand-washing and mask-wearing. However, what we have done before may not be enough to contain the third wave of COVID-19 because its causative SARS-CoV-2 variant is much more difficult to handle than the previous ones. Luckily, Thailand now has about one hundred thousand doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine and two millions doses of Sinovac Biotech's vaccine in hand. Both of them have already approved by Thailand's Food and Drug Administration for emergency use. Besides the two vaccines, the Thai government is looking for other COVID-19 vaccine options. Furthermore, in the near future (tentatively scheduled in June, 2021), a Thai life-sciences company, Siam Bioscience, will manufacture millions doses of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine locally for regional distribution. COVID-19 vaccine can be an important key of success in controlling the third wave of COVID-19 in Thailand only if the Thai government comes up with effective policies both on vaccine procurement and immunization plan.

Key Words: COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2 variant B.1.1.7, Thailand, Vaccine

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