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Background Brief:

Vietnam and COVID-19

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We are writing a general report about Vietnam and COVID-19. And request your response to the following three questions:

Q1. The numbers reported by Vietnam concerning coronavirus cases and deaths are incredibly low. Are these numbers credible?

ANSWER: Vietnam's figures of the number of persons who contracted coronavirus and the number of COVID-19 deaths are credible. There are a number of foreign doctors working in Vietnam, including a specialist from Oxford University attached to the Ho Chi Minh City Center for Disease Control and Prevention, who have vouched for the figures.

Q2. Could you please summarize what have been the secret of Vietnam's success in tackling the pandemic?

ANSWER: The Vietnamese government acted promptly and decisively to deal with COVID-19 once the first case was discovered in Vietnam. Vietnam's public health system, which is organised nationally, has past experience in dealing with Avian Flu, SARS and MERS to draw on. In the case of COVID-19, the government ordered immediate isolation of individuals who contracted COVID-19 and mass testing, initially locking down an entire village and then extending lockdowns to hot spots.

Vietnam sealed its land borders, blocked airline flights from affected countries, and restricted inter-provincial travel. The government also introduced compulsory mask wearing, social distancing, temperature checks, disinfection measures, and the shut-down of bars, restaurants, sporting events etc. Vietnam's public health system instituted an efficient system of contact tracing based on traditional methods.

Vietnam mobilised the military to set up isolation facilities and mobilised retired medical and nursing staff to assist.

The government instituted daily press briefings by officials from the Ministry of Health, the only authorised agency to report on the coronavirus.

The state-controlled press assisted the government in getting its health message across.

The government also took action to combat fake news and misreporting.

Q3. How much do you credit the Vietnamese communist regime for this success? Would it have been more difficult if Vietnam was a democracy?

ANSWER: Vietnam's effort to combat the coronavirus were definitely aided by the nature of its one-party regime, including a surveillance system from national to municipal ward and village commune level. Vietnam did not suffer the problems associated with independent minded local authorities and individuals such as witnessed in the United States.

Vietnam's political system includes a capacity to mobilise the population through mass organisations for women, youth, trade unions, and party associations.

But it would be misleading to characterize Vietnam's successful efforts to combat the coronavirus as solely due to the nature of the one-party regime. Vietnam is overwhelmingly a communal society that has a tradition of pulling together. It is also a society that values the aged and familial relations. Great concern was shown in Vietnam for those most at risk, such as elderly parents. Citizens felt it their duty to report neighbours who tried to evade the requirement to report their recent foreign travels or flouted self-quarantine restrictions. Neighbours called out and shamed individuals who did not wear masks in public, even foreigners.

On 28 January, the Lowy Institute for International Affairs, a Sydney-based think tank, released a COVID Performance Index that ranked Vietnam second after New Zealand for successfully countered the coronavirus.

<https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/covid-performance/>

Coincidentally, on the same day Vietnam experienced its first two cases of community transferred coronavirus infection in fifty-five days. This has now become the largest COVID-19 outbreak since January-April 2020 when the coronavirus was first reported. Vietnam had subsequent outbursts in Da Nang City in July 2020 and Ho Chi Minh City in December 2020. Both were contained.

The recent outbreak occurred at the Vietnam Poyun Electronics Company in Hai Duong province (77 cases) and Van Dong International Airport in Quang Ninh (13 cases) that received repatriation flights of Vietnamese who had been working or travelling abroad. Chi Linh City in Hai Duong and the Van Dong Airport have both been locked down.

Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc called an emergency meeting of the COVID-19 Task Force and issued a directive to close provincial borders and track down those who had been in contact with the new cases. The Health Minister dispatched hundreds of medical specialists to Hai Duong where three field hospitals are being set up.

The latest outbreak has spread to Hai Phong City, Hanoi, and Bac Ninh province, all in the north. As a result, large gatherings in advance of the Lunar New Year have been banned in these localities including cultural, sports and entertainment activities, and end of year parties. Vietnam is now preparing for as many as 30,000 new COVID-19 cases.

As of 29 January, there have been 1,705 cases in Vietnam in total since January 2020, including 35 deaths. The current outbreak totals 93 cases.

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