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WORLD & NATION

Asian countries impose new restrictions as coronavirus cases come roaring back



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...w social distancing measures. (Anthony Wallace

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SINGAPORE — Vietnam has banned public gatherings of more than two people. Hong Kong has closed nightclubs, karaoke bars and mah-jongg parlors, and deployed health inspectors to check that restaurants are seating parties at least six feet apart. Singapore on Friday said that schools and nonessential businesses would close for a month, a sweeping shutdown it had avoided until now.

Suddenly, Asian governments that appeared to be bringing the coronavirus [under control](#) are imposing new social restrictions as the numbers of infections — many from overseas — [continue to rise](#).

In places that took [early, effective action](#) against the COVID-19 outbreak, the stepped-up measures in recent days are a sign that fighting the disease will take much longer than anticipated. They also show that governments must adapt their responses as the threat from the virus evolves, epidemiologists say.

“We have to find measures that can control, slow down the virus, and do so in a way that is sustainable — not just for two weeks, two months, but all the way through to the end of the year,” Lawrence Wong, co-chair of Singapore’s coronavirus task force, said this week.

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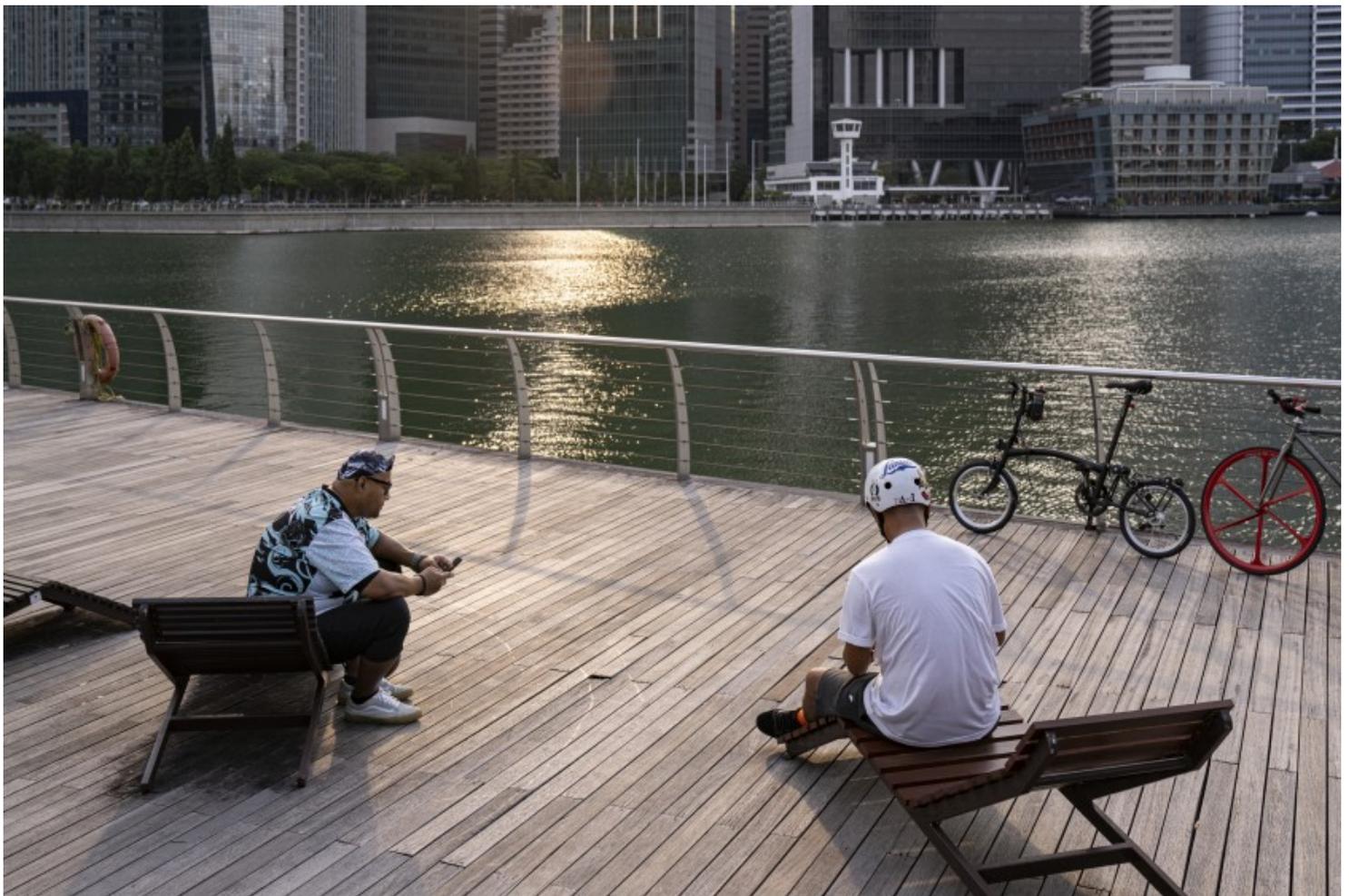
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March 31, 2020

The novel coronavirus “is now so widespread that it is highly unlikely that our current control measures would be able to drive this virus out of the human population,” said Ooi Eng Eong, deputy director of the Emerging Infectious Diseases Program at the Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore. “Without a vaccine or antiviral drug, we should expect to deal with this virus [for] the long haul.”



Observing new government guidelines, people sit at a distance from each other at Singapore’s Marina Bay on Monday. (Ore

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Singapore and Vietnam, despite their proximity to the source of the outbreak in China, managed to keep a lid on coronavirus cases starting in January thanks to vigilant traveler screening, contact tracing and quarantining of suspected infections.

Hong Kong quickly closed schools, museums and government buildings, although residents were otherwise spared the hugely disruptive shutdowns and shelter-in-place orders now in force in much of the U.S.



A security guard in a Hong Kong shopping mall. (Anthony Wallace / AFP/Getty Images)

As COVID-19 cases surged in the U.S. and Europe, Asian countries also began to close

who were living or studying abroad
of infections

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the risk of transmission.

New infections are also emerging in people with no recent travel history, a worrying sign that the disease continues to circulate in the community more than two months after Singapore's first controls were implemented.

On Thursday, Singapore notched 74 new infections, its highest single-day total, 54 of them from transmission within the community. Ten were [linked to a senior citizens' home](#), prompting the government to announce a monthlong ban on visitors to nursing homes island-wide.

Experts say countries must be alert to a resurgence of the virus when existing measures lapse or people start to grow complacent.

“With the second wave, we are finding it a lot harder to control local spread as well as stop imported cases,” said Paul Ananth Tambyah, Singapore-based president of the Asia Pacific Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infection. “That is something that all countries will probably eventually discover.”

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Hong Kong has limited the size of weddings to 20 people as part of social distancing measures. (Anthony Kwan / Getty Images)

Hong Kong, known for its nightlife, last week banned gatherings of more than four people but let bars and pubs remain open, even as dozens of infections were [linked to such venues](#). On Thursday, as the government recorded 37 more cases to bring its total to 802, watering holes were ordered to close for two weeks.

Vietnam, among the first countries to block travel from China and close schools, went three weeks without recording a new infection. In the last month, however, the number of confirmed cases has risen from 16 to more than 220.

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in visitors and ordered a two-week

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Traffic was light in Hanoi on Wednesday, the first day of Vietnam's two-week nationwide shutdown to stop the spread of the coronavirus. (Linh Pham / Getty Images)

Experts say that Vietnam is still seeing mostly clusters of infections, meaning the virus isn't spreading in the population in a significant way. Vietnam's rulers are hoping that tough measures will keep its still-developing health system from being overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients.

"I'm sure that's what's on their minds, that if they can prevent transmission now perhaps they can have an easier time in the future," said Todd Pollack, an infectious diseases specialist at Harvard Medical School who leads a Harvard-based health initiative in Hanoi

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“But the borders can’t stay closed forever. And if other countries haven’t had that same level of success against the virus, you’re going to continually deal with imported cases.”



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In prosperous Singapore, which had earlier banned large gatherings and instituted temperature checks at high-traffic buildings, stricter measures implemented last week limited private gatherings to 10 people. Authorities suspended all religious services and closed bars, karaoke lounges and nightclubs, and warned that anyone standing within three feet of another person in line could face up to six months in jail.

Officials also ordered commercial establishments to ensure three feet of space between patrons. At cafes and shopping centers, employees taped a large “X” on every other seat, denoting where people aren’t supposed to sit.

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People observe safe distancing at a shopping mall in Singapore. (Ore Huiying / Getty Images)

But on Friday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the continued rise in community infections warranted new, even more aggressive measures. He called on citizens to “bear with the painful adjustments we have to make” with the monthlong shutdown of schools and nonessential businesses.

Experts say Singapore’s gradual approach had allowed life to carry on more or less as normal for a population accustomed to efficient public services. But officials began to believe that people weren’t taking the pandemic seriously enough.

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is task force chief, lamented that
ould go to malls or have parties of

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