

# Cambodia has zero COVID-19 deaths and has just declared its first case of community transmission

By [Erin Handley](#)

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*Despite its weak health system, Cambodia has so far managed to control the spread of COVID-19. (AP: Heng Sinith)*

While COVID-19 has ravaged much of the globe, Cambodia has just this week declared its first case of community transmission.

## Key points:

- Cambodia has recorded zero deaths from COVID-19
- The Prime Minister initially downplayed the threat of the virus and the country has conducted few tests
- But Cambodia has been praised for its "surprising" success

Despite its underfunded healthcare system, the South-East Asian country has pulled off an enviable feat, recording just 331 cases as of Thursday, and zero deaths.

Some countries in South-East Asia have managed the virus better than others. Indonesia had recorded more than half a million cases, and the Philippines is not far behind.

The latest cluster, which the Cambodian Government calls "the November 28 incident", has seen malls and cinemas closed, weddings and gatherings of more than 20 banned for two weeks, and schools shutting for the rest of the year.

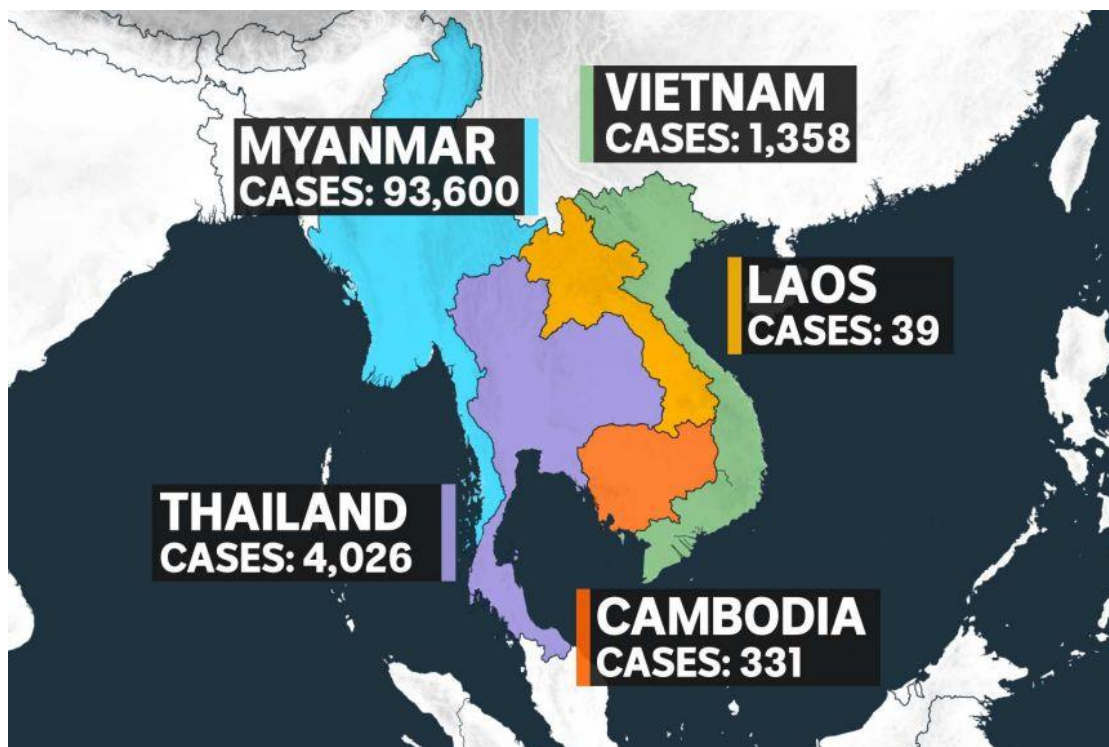
"We still do not know where the virus has emerged," Prime Minister Hun Sen told a crowd of people on Monday.

Dr Ailan Li, the World Health Organization's (WHO) representative in Cambodia, said the latest cluster had risen to 19.

"This is concerning, but not surprising. As long as the virus is circulating anywhere, it is a threat to people everywhere," she said.

It's not the first hiccup on Cambodia's COVID-19 curve.

Last month, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto tested positive upon landing in Thailand after a whirlwind visit to Cambodia, forcing hundreds of people into quarantine, including the Prime Minister.



*Cambodia has done well compared to other countries in the region. (ABC News: Jarrod Fankhauser)*

The latest cases are connected to Chhem Savuth, the director of the General Department of Prisons, and his wife.

Phnom Penh's prisons are [notoriously overcrowded](#), with some at double capacity, according to the department's spokesman, Nuth Savna.

Mr Savuth visited the city's largest prison on November 23 after taking a mandatory temperature check, Mr Savna said.

Mr Savna said prison officials have been tested but the prisoners themselves have not, despite [an image circulating of Mr Savuth](#) standing over inmates and gesturing, without a mask.

## **At first, Cambodia downplayed the virus**



*Passengers react after they disembark from the MS Westerdam in Cambodia in February, after being rejected from other countries.(AP Photo: Heng Sinith)*

The country's response in the early days of the pandemic raised some eyebrows.

When other countries were shunning cruise ships, Cambodia welcomed the MS Westerdam to its shores.

The Prime Minister initially downplayed the threat of the virus, refused to ban flights from China and chastised reporters for wearing masks.

In early February he announced he wanted to travel to Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak at the time. He ultimately visited Beijing instead.



*Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen wanted to visit Wuhan in February. (Reuters: Samrang Pring)*

But by the end of March, the country had closed its borders, imposed quarantine requirements and cancelled its Khmer New Year holiday.

It also announced a stimulus package and funding for its health sector and received millions in foreign assistance, including \$50 million from Australia.

Dr Chao Punlue, who has treated Cambodian COVID-19 patients, said the Government had taken good preventative measures.

He said none of his patients required ventilators, as they were not serious cases.

"Cambodia has sufficient resources, including foreign aid, we have the ability to promote timely prevention, the highest level of vigilance of the Cambodian people, and the Cambodian Government has always paid the most attention to COVID-19," he said.



Doctors in Cambodia apply PPE before treating COVID-19 patients.(Supplied)

"Of course, the Prime Minister of Cambodia and the people are very worried after the community outbreak, but Cambodia is also preparing to fight the spread of COVID-19 without causing a large-scale outbreak."

Ultimately, he said, no country could resolve the pandemic without a vaccine.

## **Citizens surprised by success so far**

Cambodian woman Cheng Sokhorn, who is currently undergoing a mandatory 14-day quarantine after arriving home from Switzerland, was shocked when she first arrived in the European nation.

She said the Swiss weren't wearing masks in crowded public places and didn't appear to be taking the virus too seriously.

"In Cambodia, we all take it seriously ... almost everyone wears a mask," she said.

But she said in late October, when Switzerland was swept up in a second wave and recording thousands of cases a day, the country began re-imposing restrictions.



Cambodian woman Cheng Sokhorng said she was surprised at how European countries were handling the virus.*(Supplied)*

At first Ms Sokhorng questioned the transparency of the Cambodian Government figures, thinking that if cases of the highly-infectious disease were going unreported, they couldn't remain hidden for long.

But after months without widespread transmission, she thought Cambodia had done a good job of controlling the virus.

"Before we always suspect the figure is not accurate ... but now I believe the Government took good care of [the situation]," she said.

Chak Sopheap, head of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, said she was "surprised" at how well the country had coped, especially compared to other countries with more robust health systems.

"I think we all know that we have a poor record [in our] health system," she said, pointing out the Cambodian elite routinely fly overseas for their healthcare.

"But when it comes to the COVID response, I feel that the medical teams have done quite well, and that should be recognised.

"It is somehow a bit surprising, but welcome."

Still, there are concerns about the handling of quarantine and testing.

Some medical professionals declined to talk to the ABC, with one saying COVID-19 was a very political topic in the current climate.

There have also been social and human rights concerns during the pandemic, with many going without work in the tourism, entertainment and garment factory sectors.



The pandemic has seen more than 200 factories close in Cambodia, placing tens of thousands of people, most of them women, out of work.(Supplied)

Cambodia and other South-East Asian nations have been accused of [using the pandemic to silence their critics](#).

Ms Sopheap said it was disappointing people had been punished for speaking out about the virus and accused of spreading "fake news".

"The role of the Government is to educate the public to be more informed, to be more aware [of] the reliable source that the public should look at, rather than to crack down on critical voices," she said.

## How did they do it?

There's no shortage of theories about how Cambodia has managed to avoid a large outbreak, from its hot climate to the practice of pressing one's hands together in greeting, rather than shaking hands.

## Going viral



**As governments around the world scramble to protect their citizens from the deadly coronavirus, some countries in South-East Asia are taking a creative approach, with catchy tunes about hand-washing.**

### Read more

Some have suggested Cambodia was lucky to be nestled between Thailand and Vietnam, with both countries getting on top of the virus early.

Cambodia, with its 16 million people, also has a much smaller population than some of its South-East Asian neighbours.

It also has a young population, with almost two-thirds under the age of 30.

The WHO's Dr Li said there were a number of "key factors" in the low number of cases to date.

Those include "investment in the core public health system and pandemic preparedness, strong leadership and a whole-of-government approach, public communication and community engagement," and good collaboration between the Government and health bodies.



WHO's Cambodia representative Dr Ailan Li said many factors contributed to Cambodia's low case numbers.*(Supplied)*

"Environmental and cultural factors may also play a role," she said, pointing out COVID-19 spreads more easily in crowded places, close-contact settings, and confined spaces.

"An estimated 75 per cent of Cambodians live outside major cities, and these rural settings are much less crowded. Population density in Cambodia is low."

She said Cambodia had strengthened its surveillance, laboratory and healthcare systems in recent months.

### **A human rights disaster**



**Baby Tevy lived and died behind bars. Human rights groups say her mother, jailed for months without trial over \$3.60 of meth during Cambodia's anti-drug campaign, should never have been imprisoned.**

**[Read more](#)**

But Cambodia has also conducted a low number of tests compared to Australia — fewer than 200,000 as of November 29.

Dr Li said at maximum surge capacity, Cambodia could conduct up to 3,360 tests per day.

By comparison, at the height of Victoria's second wave, the state was conducting around 20,000 tests per day and Australia has conducted 10 million tests since the start of the pandemic.

Ms Sokhorng, who recently returned home, hopes Cambodia is able to contain the spread of the latest infections.

"I hope everyone commits to being safe and clean and keeping their distance," she said.

Details: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-04/cambodia-handling-covid-19-community-transmission-zero-deaths/12938226?fbclid=IwAR1FLCmQaOHv6JwmqWTxwTHxaE0DTcKVdRn1hNu8OogJIIVrwZ0bsCJe3eQ>