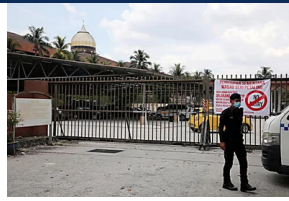


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Half of Indonesia's workers stopped working in April as a result of Covid-19 pandemic: Online survey



55 per cent of male workers and 57 per cent of their female counterparts had stopped working. PHOTO: AFP

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JAKARTA - About half of Indonesia's workers, many of whom were employed in the agriculture sector, stopped working in April as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, a recent survey has found.

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) found that of the 500 workers across Indonesia who responded to its online survey, 55 per cent of male workers and 57 per cent of their female counterparts had stopped working from the first week of April.

J-PAL, a research centre which focuses on poverty, said those surveyed, which included part-time workers, indicated they had previously worked a minimum of an hour every week.

About 37 per cent of the respondents were from the agriculture sector.

Another 7 per cent had worked in the health sector, and 5 per cent were staff of hotels and restaurants.

"Job loss appears high across all areas in the cities and districts. Eighty per cent of respondents reported eating less than usual due to financial constraints," the research centre said in its report issued last week.

There are more than 500 cities and districts, otherwise known as regencies, across 34 provinces in the world's largest archipelago.

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The survey, conducted via a Google platform, was jointly supported by the University of Indonesia and the Australian government.

After initially playing down the coronavirus threat, the country moved on April 10 to impose a partial lockdown in Jakarta which, including the greater urban area, has a population of 30 million.

The government of President Joko Widodo has since rolled various programmes to help low-income households, including cash relief and provision of food essentials.

Amid the fast deteriorating economic situation, in part contributed by weaker consumer demand, the government said it will also support small- and medium-sized enterprises through relief schemes including debt restructuring.

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Household consumption currently contributes about 55 per cent of Indonesia's gross domestic product(GDP), with foreign and domestic investments, and exports trailing behind.

South-east Asia's largest economy has not ruled out an economic "bad-case scenario", forecasting GDP growth this year at 2.3 per cent.

This would result in job losses hitting 2.9 million, the Finance Ministry's head of fiscal policy Febrio Kacaribu said in a video conference with the media and analysts on Monday (April 20).

He added that projections in a "worst-case scenario" would see much lower economic growth and more than five million people losing their jobs.

Indonesia's economic growth has been around 5 per cent in the past five years.

About seven million are currently unemployed in the country, which has a total workforce of 126 million, including eight million part-timers, according to government data.

"We are anticipating that the worst impact may be felt in the first quarter (April to June).

"How bad it will be, would depend on how long the pandemic lasts," said Mr Febrio, stressing that all efforts to meet the challenges, mainly to curb the plunge in domestic purchasing power due to limited mobility, are underway.

Cash relief for those affected or laid-off due to the coronavirus crisis would be disbursed later this month, while efforts to distribute food essentials to the poor have started.

Greater Jakarta, where 75 per cent of the confirmed coronavirus cases are from, has been hit hardest.

The capital city of Jakarta, grappling with surging infections and deaths from Covid-19, started to enforce tough social distancing measures, which observers have equated to a partial lockdown, on April 10.

Several satellite towns surrounding it imposed the same measures five days later.

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The measures include a ban on gatherings of more than five people, limiting the number of passengers in private vehicles, such as sedans, mini-buses, and pick-up trucks, to half their capacity, and restricting restaurants to takeaway orders.

Those breaching the rules face a fine of up to 100 million rupiah (\$9,200) and up to a year in prison.

The greater Jakarta area has the highest concentration of people working in the informal sector, such as push-cart traders, with many of the urban residents living in cramped quarters.

Observers say urban residents have fewer options in the wake of the outbreak and its economic impact, compared with those living in rural areas, many of whom have used their backyard to grow vegetables and fruits to survive the financial crunch.

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