



DIALOGUE

EXPERT SPEAK

10 APRIL 2020

“THAI RESPONSE TO COVID19”

ABSTRACT

COVID19 has somehow become the reality for everyone today. The interview has tried to dwell into the questions pertaining to a Thailand's response to the COVID19 Crisis and the challenges associated to it. In this episode of Expert Speak, Prof. Wannapa Leerasiri answers some important questions regarding response of Thailand citizen to COVID19.

EXPERT



Professor Wannapa Leerasiri
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About the Expert :

Professor Wannapa Leerasiri is a lecturer at the School of International Affairs, Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand. She received Ph. D. in Political Science from Washington State University, USA.

TRANSCRIPT OF THE TALK

Q.1. When was the first case of Covid-19 was reported in Thailand? How did the people respond to it in Thailand?

A. The first case was reported on 12th January 2020. The news about the Covid-19 were shown in Thai media and at that time television and other media started to report about the outbreak of Corona Virus in China. Although, during that time Thailand was still welcoming tourists from China. Every year, Thailand receives a large number of Chinese tourists especially during Chinese New Year (late January/February). Thailand was expected to receive millions of Chinese tourists. There was a large inflow of Chinese tourist this year too. When the cases due of Covid-19 rose in China, it created concerns among the Thai people as it had received a large number of Chinese tourists in January and February.

Q.2. When you following the situation in China in January and did you realize that this will turn into a global pandemic?

A. I was very concerns because I have friends and relatives in China and then Japan (imported case and cases on board Diamond Princess). At that time, I did not expect to be this bad. I planned to go to Taiwan in April, it was not cancelled until early March.

Q.3. How is the current situation in Thailand and how have the citizens have responded to this epidemic and the curfew?

A. Right now, the situation in Thailand is not that bad. Our numbers, both infected and death, are low compared to neighbor in the South-East Asia region and other countries in Europe and America. Nevertheless, this is a very difficult question since the problem is multi-dimensional.

Some people, mostly educated middle class, are adhering to the government guidelines. They are staying home and telework. Although some organizations practice “Work from Home”, some companies have still asked their employees to come for work on a daily basis. The government has also employed a curfew between 10 pm – 4 am curfew. Yet, the number of those who broke curfew is quite high.

A large number of people in Bangkok and big cities are daily wage earners and they are going out for work as it is tough for them to survive without the daily earnings. The government has tried to help Thai people by giving money to those who are affected by the COVID-19 such as those who was laid off. Yet, this measure has a serious loophole and several shortcomings. Many affected people were left out of this scheme. Other measures such as reducing electricity bill, giving out internet upgrade, etc. does not have major impact.

Q.4. What are the major challenges which the people are facing in Thailand?

A. There are a lot of dilemmas. For example, if the government imposes 24hrs lock down, though it may help reduce the spread of COVID-19, many people may not be able to self-sustain. The economic performance of the country will be affected. The government’s efficiency in fighting this pandemic seems inadequate and the serious cases of corruptions within the government makes the situation worse for the Thai people.

Q.5. Has government announced any relief packages for the poor people?

A. Government has announced a scheme to pay monthly 5,000 bath to people who affected by the virus for three to six months. But to avail this scheme they have to register online and those who actually needs help do not have access to government’s online platform. Also, there is no clear guideline of who’s eligible and it’s only covers a small portion of the people who seriously affected.

Q.6. Can you tell me the similarities and differences to rural people’s response and urban people’s response to this pandemic?

A. I believe that Thai people know about COVID-19 and are trying to abide by government’s orders. Some rural areas have imposed stronger quarantine measures than that of Bangkok area. Some communities have designated isolation site in the middle of the rice field or in the wood. But some other rural areas still practicing traditional religious rituals where many people are gathering in a small space. Some gambling place (though illegal) still open. In urban areas, many people are obeying government’s guidelines but here also some people are still violating it. The epic-center of this virus in Thailand is the ‘Boxing Ring’ which lies in the middle of Bangkok. Lumpinee Boxing Stadium, one of the two biggest boxing rings in Bangkok, ignored a government shutdown order, and proceeded with the match on March 6, resulting in at least 143 cases of infection related to the arena. There were approximately about 2,500 people attendees that day.

Q.7. What are the major steps taken by the people or the steps asked by the government for people to limit the spread of Covid-N19?

A. When the government fails you, we have to rely on ourselves. Thai people are making our own masks and face-shield. Thailand faces with shortage of surgical masks, PPE and some medical supplies for a while. State corruption is also a reason for this shortage. Now people are learning to

making their own masks. In terms of economy, local people are trying very hard to help local businesses such as small food stalls, local grocery shops.

I can't say that Thailand is a knowledge-based society, but we see a lot of information about COVID-19 on the social media both in Thai and English languages. I think it's a good thing. People, at least people that I know, learn to fact-check. Also, there are a lot of donation projects aiming to help medical staff all over the country.

Q.8. Do you think these steps taken by the citizen enough to limit the spread of the virus? How have people responded to past epidemics in Thailand?

A. As mentioned above, some people are still not taking this pandemic situation seriously. Many people here think that it's "just a flu" and are ignorant towards the situation. With the rise in number of cases in Thailand, some people have now realised the risks of the disease. But many of them do not have no choice. They cannot stay home and starve. There have been several epidemic in the past like Swine Flu, SARS, Mers and Malaria. But all of those epidemics were limited to small groups of people but it has never seen a country wide pandemic like the Covid-19.

Q.9. Social distancing is a major step which has been suggested across the world to fight this? Is social distancing possible in Thailand? Do you think people of Thailand will adhere to it?

A. Yes. We also use social-distancing virtually everywhere including public transportations though it really difficult. I think people are trying their best to maintain social and physical distance from others but sometimes it's rather difficult. On the other hand, though there are a lot of ignorant people. For example, teenagers were arrested because they had drinking party outside their dorm during curfew. There have been several news reports that some returnees from abroad refused to cooperate with government's quarantine measures and ran around town and it turned out that some of them had COVID-19.

Q.10. Which parts of the Thailand have been affected the most due to the outbreak of COVID-19? Has Thailand also seen migration from major cities to their hometown?

A. Tourism is Thailand's major source income. Tourist destinations like Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket are affected the most. Yet, I don't see internal migration just because Tourism industry was down. On the other hand, people moved from Bangkok to their hometown when the government order lock-down in Bangkok. This is unforeseeable move. It's really a bad decision as because of that, now the virus might have spread from Bangkok to all over the country. Most cases in Thailand are imported case. And Bangkok is the main destination. When people moved from Bangkok to other provinces, it help the virus to spread.

About the Interviewer: Alakh Ranjan is currently working as Research Assistant with Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS). He has done his Masters International Relations and Area Studies, specialisation in South Asia and Bachelors in Journalism from GGSIP University. He has also worked as Young Professional on politics and foreign policies of Nepal and Bhutan at Vivekananda International Foundations (VIF). His research focuses on Soft Power Diplomacy and Indian Foreign Policy in the Neighbourhood.



About Expert Speak:



Expert Speak is an initiative by Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA), Kathmandu. It is one of the ways we are conducting Dialogue between the curious and the expert. These experts are from different fields with different experiences. Similar is the case with the interviewers. Under the project, Expert Speak, we are undertaking a series of interviews, not just in Nepal but from experts worldwide. The project intends to dwell on the key challenges to Nepal's Foreign and Economic Policies. Also, the project intends to understand Nepal's geopolitical challenges opportunities.