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VIRUS OUTBREAK

Singapore to help firms after borders shut to India workers

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ANNABETH LEOW ✉ leowhma@sph.com.sg 🐦 [@AnnabethLeowBT](https://twitter.com/AnnabethLeowBT)**JANICE HENG** ✉ janiceh@sph.com.sg 🐦 [@JaniceHengBT](https://twitter.com/JaniceHengBT)

Singapore is closing its borders "until further notice" to all non-residents who were recently in India - just two days after moving to curb entry approvals for these travellers. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Singapore

SINGAPORE is closing its borders "until further notice" to all non-residents who were recently in India - just two days after moving to curb entry approvals for these travellers.

But the latest ban - which kicks in on Friday night at 11.59pm - will worsen a foreign manpower crunch in certain labour-intensive sectors, industry players bemoaned to The Business Times (BT).

That is even as Education Minister Lawrence Wong, who co-chairs the multi-ministry taskforce on Covid-19, said on Thursday that the government is working on extra support for the construction, process and marine (CMP) sectors, which are expected to be hit by the freeze.

Noting that many local small businesses could be affected, he said: "We are reviewing to see what these support measures will be, and will announce them when ready."

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Eddy Lau, executive director of the Specialists Trade Alliance of Singapore, told BT over the phone that "we are really in quite dire straits".

"I'm chasing like mad to expedite. Safe management measures compromised on productivity and compounded the whole situation," said Mr Lau, whose association represents building businesses such as electrical service workers and lift contractors.

Contract delays were a top concern for employers, many of whom have struggled with travel disruptions that choked off manpower supply and a two-month "circuit breaker" last year that closed non-essential work sites.

Another bugbear is the upward pressure on wages, with Unicon Construction project director Winston Ang telling BT on Thursday: "Tomorrow, the manpower costs will surely go up."

Skilled bricklayers who used to earn S\$60 to S\$80 a day can now command around S\$250, said Mr Ang, who added that he has lost about S\$300,000 since the pandemic hit.

Costs in the process sector, which includes petrochemical, speciality chemical and pharmaceutical plants, had already gone up by 30 per cent, according to Association of Process Industry president Charles Quek.

He said: "How much more will depend on how long this entry ban will last and how fast the industry can get workers from other sources."

He estimated that the entry ban could affect at least 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the process workforce.

As such, Koh Brothers group chief executive Francis Koh asked for the government to be more lenient in giving contractors project extensions: "If government agencies are still pressuring for progress, then contractors will start poaching from other sides. This will not be good for everyone."

In a Facebook post, National Development Minister Desmond Lee pledged to work with the Housing and Development Board (HDB), private developers, construction firms and other stakeholders, "to see how their projects can be brought back on track".

Just weeks ago, Mr Lee had told Parliament that about 85 per cent of HDB Build-To-Order projects are six to nine months behind schedule - affecting some 43,000 households.

Businesses are already weighing back-up options as they adjust to the latest labour setback. At this time, the process sector will have to turn to Bangladesh or Myanmar for workers, Mr Quek said.

While productivity will inevitably suffer, Mr Koh said that "we will try to improve our productivity by relying more on machinery and pre-cast elements to reduce reliance on labour".

Lim Ah Cheng, CEO of Dyna-Mac Holdings, said that the oil and gas service provider is short of workers and will face higher costs in bringing in workers from Thailand or Malaysia.

But "we have been actively working to improve productivity" by pooling resources and collaborating with partners here and in Batam, he told BT. "I think we still can work around these challenges to mitigate delays," he said.

All long-term pass holders and short-term visitors who were in India in the last two weeks - including transit passengers - will be barred from entering or transiting through Singapore as of 11.59pm on Friday.

The ban, which the Ministry of Health said is "until further notice", applies even if travellers had already obtained prior approval to enter Singapore.

Meanwhile, all travellers who have recently been in India must serve out a full 21-day stay-home notice (SHN) order at dedicated SHN facilities.

The latest move supersedes a decision just two days earlier, which imposed an extra seven-day SHN on travellers from India but would have allowed them to serve it at their residences.

All newly-arrived migrant workers deemed to hail from "higher-risk countries or regions" must also serve out an SHN at a dedicated facility, before moving to a Migrant Workers Onboarding Centre for an additional testing regime.

This includes migrant workers with positive antibody results, who had previously been granted early release from SHN.

Mr Wong said that most new arrivals from India work in the CMP sectors and live in dormitories - which carries the risk that a new virus strain may be "leaked" into the dormitory population by new arrivals.

The authorities also flagged the concern that recovered cases could be re-infected, especially as they may lose their immunity over time.

Recovered dormitory inhabitants and CMP workers infected more than 270 days prior are thus no longer exempt from rostered routine testing (RRT) from April 29. Newly-arrived workers with antibodies against Covid-19 must undergo RRT too.

There are also plans to give a single "booster" dose of vaccines to recovered migrant workers, who are not part of the current vaccination programme, said Second Minister for Manpower Tan See Leng.

Manpower Minister Josephine Teo, who did not attend the press conference, later wrote on Facebook: "At every dialogue with trade associations and chambers, we are inevitably asked when the inflow of migrant workers can be expanded. I understand the pressures on businesses and have explained the need for caution..."

"We are grateful for the continued support of employers, and are actively looking at ways to provide them further assistance."

- Additional reporting by Elysia Tan and Yong Hui Ting

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