

Laos Imposes Sweeping COVID-19 Lockdown Measures

On March 29, 2020, the Prime Minister of Laos issued Order No. 06/PM on the Reinforcement of Measures for the Containment, Prevention, and Full Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

This order is by far the most serious announcement in the country since the crisis began, and follows the first official report of COVID-19 cases by the Lao authorities outside the capital, Vientiane. In a bid to limit transmission across the country as much as possible, the Prime Minister's order imposes strong lockdown measures on businesses and the general public. It also expands the powers of the National Taskforce Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control—a special taskforce established on February 3, 2020, to provide appropriate responses and public information to prevent the spread of the virus in the country.

All measures below take effect on March 30, 2020, unless expressly stated otherwise.

Residential Lockdown Imposed with Limited Exceptions

All persons are prohibited from leaving their houses or residences, except in necessary circumstances, such as:

- ▶ Buying food and necessary consumables;
- ▶ Going to hospital; and
- ▶ Carrying out activities expressly authorized to continue operating, such as banks, financial institutions, the stock exchange, listed companies, hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, ambulances, post services, telecommunications, electricity, water treatment, collection and treatment of waste, agricultural produce markets, retail shops, supermarkets, and restaurants and beverage shops for the provision of takeaway and delivery services only.

Service providers that are allowed to remain open must practice staff rotation measures and other measures ordered by the taskforce.

Factories (expressly including garment factories, but covering all factories deemed to be "at risk," which is expected to be interpreted broadly) and entertainment venues must close. Employers of factory employees must provide their employees with a necessary welfare allowance for the duration of the closure. However, factories that are involved in the production of equipment and medical devices can still operate.

Hotels and resorts are permitted to continue services relating to accommodation and restaurants only.

All persons are prohibited from traveling to a location in which infected people have been reported, or places which may be dangerous in this respect. Exemptions may be granted by the local authorities for certain specific reasons.

Government and Civil Service

All civil servants and government employees will stop working at their respective offices from April 1 until April 11, 2020. In practice, this break will be extended up to April 19, to accommodate the Lao New Year (although

celebrations will be restricted by the prohibition of gatherings, outlined below). Certain civil servants and employees will be exempted from this, including police officers; firefighters; employees involved in the management of the electricity system, water treatment and distribution, and telecommunications; medical staff; volunteers (a category that is yet to be defined); and civil servants and employees who are mobilized for the prevention of the infection, and to control and treat infected persons.

In addition, the Prime Minister requires that all ministries and administrations, at the central and local level, should organize a minimum service so that important work can continue, and appoint enough staff to do so. All other government staff are to be encouraged to work using remote communication.

The Department of Intellectual Property (DIP) has not yet issued an official statement on the subject, but from information available to us, we understand that they currently remain open on a staff rotation basis. At this stage, it is not yet clear how the DIP plans to treat any deadlines falling within the lockdown period. We are in regular contact with the DIP, and we will update you accordingly as the situation develops.

Prohibition on Gatherings of More Than 10 People

Gatherings or events at which more than 10 people are assembled are prohibited (including gatherings for traditional events, such as religious events or for the Lao New Year). Exemptions for some events (such as funerals) may be provided, subject to the strict exercise of measures to prevent the spread of the virus (including two meter social distancing, wearing of masks, and hand washing).

Price Control

There is also a general prohibition on increasing prices on essential consumables such as masks, products to wash hands, medicine to treat symptoms, medical devices, rice, food, water, and others. The list is not exhaustive and will be considered on a case-by-case basis by trade inspectors, who are instructed to carry out surveillance and issue punitive measures in collaboration with the police.

Border Closures Except for Transportation of Goods

Borders will remain closed to individuals. Operators who are authorized to continue to operate in transportation of goods can cross borders at the international checkpoints, but they must strictly follow the measures required at the checkpoints. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is empowered to coordinate with relevant agencies to facilitate the return of foreign citizens who wish to return to their home country.

The order is effective from March 30, 2020, until April 19, 2020, subject to any amendments which the government will provide by way of a notification. The order also provides the website address <https://covid19.gov.la/> (in Lao language) in order to stay updated on the situation in Laos.

In compliance with this order, Tilleke & Gibbins' staff in Laos will continue to provide all regular services, without interruption, from their places of residence using remote working measures. However, our physical premises in Vientiane will be closed to staff and visitors.

If you have any questions about how these measures may affect your business in Laos, please contact Dino Santaniello, head of our Laos team, at dino.s@tilleke.com.

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