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# How Vietnam fought a pandemic and won

By **Phan Anh** December 22, 2020 | 06:43 am GMT+7



A street in Hanoi is disinfected on March 7, 2020 after the city's first coronavirus case was confirmed the previous night. Photo by VnExpress/Giang Huy.

A year has passed since the world knew about the existence of Covid-19 and nations were brought to their knees.

The pandemic has wreaked havoc in over 200 countries and territories, infecting around 77 million people and killing over 1.7 million.

Even major powers like the U.S., the U.K., France, Russia, and India have seen first-hand how a virus could infect a population rapidly, overwhelming hospitals and forcing governments to impose lengthy lockdowns in the hope of keeping the infection at bay.

But some countries have been outliers, praised globally for their excellent pandemic control and keeping losses to the economy and human lives to a minimum.

Vietnam, despite sharing a 1,200-km border with China, has stood out among those success stories, having recorded only 1,414 cases and 35 deaths.

The story of Vietnam's successful Covid-19 fight is hardly a miracle however: what it did was take some simple and straightforward measures like imposing travel restrictions, contact tracing and social distancing.

But what made them work were the government's effective leadership and social unity and cohesion.

As 2020 comes to a close, we look back at how Vietnam fought the pandemic and emerged victor, and the lessons it has to offer the world.

## **First wave**

Even before the first coronavirus case was recorded in the country, the government did a risk assessment starting in early January, soon after China started reporting cases in December.



On January 14 the General Department of Preventive Medicine said the coronavirus situation in China was being closely monitored while the Ministry of Health devised response plans in case the virus did manage to enter the country.

Visitors' temperature was checked along the border, and any suspected cases were singled out and isolated.

People were also advised not to be in contact with anyone having respiratory symptoms and to maintain personal hygiene.

Anyone who returned to Vietnam from China's Wuhan, where the first coronavirus cases were reported, within the last 14 days and had symptoms like coughing, fever and breathing difficulties were advised to contact the nearest medical facilities.

Vietnam, whose memory of the SARS epidemic in 2003 was still fresh, held its breath as the threat of another respiratory epidemic loomed from beyond the border.

Despite its best preventive efforts, Vietnam recorded its first Covid-19 cases on January 23 in HCMC: [two Chinese nationals, a father and a son](#), who were quarantined at Cho Ray Hospital after testing positive.





Deputy Minister of Health Nguyen Truong Son (L) wears protective suits to see two Chinese nationals infected with the novel coronavirus inside a quarantine ward of the Cho Ray Hospital in HCMC, January 23, 2020. Photo by VnExpress.

Immediately afterward, on January 24, Vietnam suspended all flights from and to Wuhan despite the World Health Organization (WHO) saying there was no need for widespread travel bans at that point in time.

More flight suspensions followed in the days after that as more cases sprouted up until finally flights to China were completely stopped on February 1.

The nation's first case of community transmission was recorded on February 1 as well: a hotel employee in Nha Trang beach town who had been in contact with the two Chinese nationals.

The same day Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc announced there was [an epidemic outbreak](#) in Vietnam caused by the novel coronavirus, and ordered stricter border controls and visa restrictions.



From February 3 Vietnamese nationals returning from China had to go into quarantine for 14 days.

On February 12 Son Loi Commune in the northern Vinh Phuc Province was [locked down following outbreaks](#) there after several workers returned to Vietnam from Wuhan with the infection.

Son Loi was the first locality to undergo a 14-day lockdown to contain the coronavirus.

Through the month society tried to blockade itself against the disease with people rushing to buy masks and getting students and office workers study and work from home.

The Lunar New Year break for students, to have ended in early February, was extended to keep children at home.

By the end of February Vietnam had 16 Covid-19 cases in all.

On March 6 Hanoi confirmed its first case.

Vietnam's [17th coronavirus victim](#) was a 26-year-old woman in Ba Dinh District who neglected to inform authorities about her health status on returning from Europe on March 2.

By the time she was diagnosed with Covid-19 she had been in contact with several family members and outsiders, including staff at a local hospital she visited after she had a fever.

To prevent infection from spreading in the community, authorities quickly performed contact tracing and isolated the woman's neighborhood.

But in the days that followed more cases were diagnosed across the nation, all through people who had entered Vietnam from other countries.

By now China was not the world's only coronavirus hotspot: It had spread across the world, and Europe and the U.S. too had large numbers of infections.





In Vietnam, some places were becoming hotspots, including a neighborhood in Phan Thiet in the south central Binh Thuan Province.

Before the epidemic had a chance to spiral out of control, Vietnam [stopped issuing visas to foreigners](#) on March 17, and closed its borders on March 21.

International flights were suspended from March 22, with the government only allowing repatriation flights to bring back Vietnamese from abroad.

On March 20 two nurses at Hanoi's Bach Mai Hospital became the first medical workers in Vietnam to be found infected.

The hospital soon became a Covid hotspot with more and more cases surfacing, forcing authorities to lock it down for 14 days starting March 28.

Also on March 20 a British pilot in HCMC was diagnosed as the nation's latest patient. He had been to the city's Buddha Bar, which was later found to be a major source of infection.

His case was covered extensively by both the Vietnamese and global media since he was thought to be moribund several times. Thankfully [he recovered after a long and arduous struggle](#) by medical workers and returned to his country in July.

In the face of a growing contagion, on March 31 Vietnam announced its most drastic measure yet to stem its spread: a 15-day [nationwide social distancing](#) order starting April 1.





A lone biker passes through a largely desolate Ly Thuong Kiet Street in Hanoi just before a nationwide social distancing order was imposed on April 1, 2020. Photo by VnExpress/Giang Trinh.

All non-essential services were shut down, and people were told to stay home, except to buy food or medicines or for other emergencies.

New Covid-19 cases were still being detected, with major outbreaks recorded in Hanoi's Ha Loi village in Me Linh District and Dong Van Town in Ha Giang Province.

Social distancing was lifted on April 15 in most localities, except Hanoi, HCMC and some other areas deemed to be at high risk of infection.

But by April 23 social distancing basically ceased though Covid-19 prevention measures like wearing masks were still in place.

Vietnam began to kick-start the economy, return people's lives to something like normalcy, resume public transport, and let students return to school though still highly vigilant against possible outbreaks.

The country enjoyed several Covid-free months and the economy began to look up.

Was the pandemic beaten?



It was then that a second wave unexpectedly hit in late July, resulting in the nation's first coronavirus-related deaths since the outbreak began in January.

## **Second wave**

On July 20 a 57-year-old man in the central Da Nang City came to the Da Nang C Hospital with a fever and cough. He was tested and [found to have Covid-19](#).

But the puzzle for doctors and authorities was there was no known source of infection.

After over three months of no local transmission, the pandemic had returned to Vietnam once more.

The Da Nang Center for Disease Control immediately did contact tracing and started isolating people who had been in close contact with the man.

More cases were found all over the city, including particularly concerning outbreaks at three hospitals: the Da Nang C Hospital, the Da Nang General Hospital and the Da Nang Orthopedic and Physical Rehabilitation Hospital.

All three were placed under lockdown.

Within less than a month over 500 cases were then recorded in 14 cities and provinces other than Da Nang, with their origins however traced to the city.

To prevent the virus from spreading even further Da Nang began another 15 days of social distancing on July 28, and people were requested to stay at home except for emergencies.

The semi-lockdown was extended for two more weeks until September 5.

On July 31 Vietnam recorded its [first coronavirus death](#): a 70-year-old man in Quang Nam Province who had kidney failure and myocardial infarction.

Since then 34 more deaths were recorded across the country, many of them being elderly patients with underlying conditions.





The final case of community transmission at the time was recorded on September 3, marking the end of the second wave of Covid-19.

But in late November a Vietnam Airlines flight attendant in HCMC contracted the novel coronavirus from a colleague returning from Romania after breaching quarantine protocols.

His infection was confirmed on November 29, but by then he had infected three others, breaking the country's streak of nearly three months without community transmission.

The man [faces possible charges](#) of "spreading dangerous infectious diseases in humans" which carries a jail term of up to 12 years.

It was the first time Vietnam threw the statute book at someone for flouting Covid-19 prevention regulations.

Following the fresh outbreak the government halted all inbound commercial flights from December 1. A few had been allowed to bring in certain categories of people like Vietnamese nationals and foreign experts and diplomats.

For around half a month since there has been no local transmission.

## **Aftermath**

The pandemic, arguably the biggest world-changing event of the 21st century, has had a massive impact on Vietnam, especially its economy and job market.

Its [GDP growth in the first half](#) of 2020 was only 1.81 percent, the lowest in a decade.

Some 1.2 million people are expected to file for unemployment benefits this year, with over 983,000 already doing so in the first 10 months, a 32.5 percent increase year-on-year from 2019. By the third quarter 31.8 million workers aged 15 or above either lost their jobs or had their working hours and incomes reduced, according to government data.

A study by the General Statistics Office of the first three quarters found 33.4 percent of surveyed businesses had to cut their workforce to deal with Covid-19 losses, and the figure

could rise to 36.4 percent by the end of the year, it said.

The worst hit sectors have been aviation, tourism, hospitality, entertainment, and food and beverages.

The aviation and tourism industry saw their workforce shrink by 30.4 percent in the first nine months of the year, while the figures were 29.9 percent for hotels, 17.4 percent for sports and entertainment, and 15.4 percent for the food and beverage industry.

However, thanks to its stellar Covid-19 response so far, Vietnam is expected to have among the highest economic growth rates in the world this year -- 2.4 percent -- according to the [International Monetary Fund](#).

Strong economic recovery is expected in 2021, with GDP growth projected to be 6.5 percent, the IMF added.

A domestically developed Covid-19 vaccine, [Nanocovax](#), began human trials last week.

The first phase is expected to finish in February, the second in August and the final in February 2022.

Three other vaccines are also under development, with two expected to begin human trials early next year.





A medical worker holds up two vials of Nanocovax, a Vietnamese Covid-19 vaccine that has entered human trials on December 17, 2020. Photo by VnExpress/Giang Huy.

The public has largely complied with and been supportive of the government's coronavirus prevention measures. Having experienced the SARS epidemic in 2003, Vietnamese knew not to mess around with a deadly contagion that has gone on to kill over 1.6 million people globally.

Most Vietnamese [strongly supported the government's national social distancing](#) order imposed in April to contain Covid-19, according to a report by the United Nations Development Program and the Mekong Development Research Institute.

Some 89 percent of respondents said they supported the government's target of saving lives even if it means the economy might take longer to recover. Globally, only 67 percent of people agreed the government should prioritize lives over the economy, the report said.

Numerous foreign think tanks and organizations have also hailed Vietnam for its exemplary Covid-19 containment efforts.



U.S. political news organization Politico said in May Vietnam responded best to the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of health and economic impacts, while Hong Kong's Deep Knowledge Group named Vietnam among the safest places to be during the pandemic.

The country's coronavirus success has been attributed to its early and proactive response, extensive, transparent public communication and rigorous, aggressive testing, contact tracing and quarantine measures.

Kidong Park, the WHO representative in Vietnam, said in August the country's effective Covid-19 management could be attributed to its significant progress in managing public health emergencies and a comprehensive approach towards the Covid-19 fight utilizing social unity and the government's leadership.

The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization said in May: "Vietnam relied on four relatively cost-effective solutions to combat the virus: strategic testing, contact tracing through apps and effective public communication campaigns. As well as these, it implemented a national lockdown."

It noted how Vietnam acted swiftly as soon as China reported its first Covid-19 cases, closely monitoring its borders and carrying out tests at airports, utilizing technology to help with contact tracing and quickly developing its own Covid-19 test kits.

"Vietnam proves that sometimes less is more, even during Covid-19."

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As a British national, I could not agree more. I am very lucky to be here in this hard time for the world but I whole heartedly thank the country and the wonderful people who have tried to help me, as do my family and friends in England. Everyone has been so kind and thoughtful and the food is to be treasured. " I thank you all so much" Love from Robbie.

Robert Saddleton - 08:11 22/12/2020

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I think the worst thing to do now is stand back and applaud. Vietnam has almost got hit twice since the initial outbreak and as ministers have said the country cannot afford the damage done in other nations. Now if only Vietnam can apply this type of response to many other areas - transportation, corruption, crime, pollution, education etc this could be the greatest country in the world next century

Jerry Lee - 07:34 22/12/2020

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The Vietnamese government and its citizens should be praised for the way they handled the Covid virus. I am an American expat living in Vietnam and I feel safer here than I would if I were back in America. I have several American friends who have died from the virus because Trump didn't take the virus seriously. He put the economy ahead of human life.

Greg Kleven - 08:03 22/12/2020

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Confucius principles. It's a main reason South Korea, China, Taiwan also won hand down BIG, with Japan at around the fence; and also the reason they became high income countries in the short time. Education and disciplines are the key.

T. Su - 09:54 22/12/2020

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As a Sri Lankan living in Vietnam, I am incredibly lucky to be here rather than in my mother country (sad to say) or any other country for that matter during this pandemic. I cannot applaud enough for the Vietnam government's response and actions towards containing this virus and protecting the lives. It was notable that people here took this very seriously as well and supported the government despite their hardships and personal beliefs, which I cannot ... 

Sri Lankan - 11:49 22/12/2020

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