

Taiwan boosts coronavirus testing for tech industry

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A doctor teaches volunteer medical staff how to collect a swab sample for Covid-19 testing in Hsinchu, Taiwan.

Taiwan is ramping up testing and vaccinations for tech industry workers in a bid to stop a sudden surge in coronavirus cases hitting its semiconductor industry at a time of global shortages.

In the science parks of northern Hsinchu city, where the world's largest contract microchip maker Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) is based, local officials have set up rapid testing sites.

"The Hsinchu Science Park is home to some very important global semiconductor factories," mayor Lin Chih-chien told AFP.

"Hsinchu city has to protect not only its residents, but also importantly protect the home base of the world's most important semiconductor industries."

Taiwan's microchip factories have been struggling to plug a pandemic-driven global shortage of chips that power essential electronic devices.

The water-intensive facilities are running at full capacity, even as Taiwan suffers its worst drought in decades.

And now Taiwan is battling a sudden outbreak of the coronavirus, with officials keen to spot any clusters in the tech sector before they spread.

Hsinchu City Medical Association said it has organised rapid testing teams with 120 volunteer doctors and plans to set up four community vaccination sites in the coming days.

"The reason we are doing this is we hope not to use the hospital's manpower... Let the hospitals deal with the most serious cases and patients while we do the rest," said chairman Chiu Kuo-hua.

Taiwan emerged largely unscathed from the pandemic last year with just a few hundred cases and single-digit deaths thanks to one of the world's best responses.

But infections have jumped in recent weeks to nearly 10,000 with 166 deaths after a cluster initially detected among airline pilots spread.

The government has since brought in strict social distancing restrictions, including closing public venues and schools, until June 14.

It also aims to roll out mass inoculations in the next few months by setting up thousands of community vaccination stations to administer one million shots weekly, if enough doses are secured.

Taiwan—population 23.5 million—has so far only received about 726,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine and 150,000 doses of Moderna.

It has pre-order deals with a host of foreign and local producers for a further 30 million shots.

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