



Quarantining mountainous children reveals

Economic plight

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Many of Dien Bien Province's children have worn only one set of clothing since they entered centralized quarantine last week.

After their teacher was declared a source of transmission (F0), many young students who had started their summer break early became first generation infections (F1), forcing medics to walk to each village and **escort them to centralized quarantine facilities.**

After Lo Thuan, union secretary of Muong Pon Commune in the province's Dien Bien District, received the news around 10 p.m. on May 19, he and his colleagues hurriedly put on protective clothing before getting in a car to collect the students. But they could not reach the Hmong village due to its narrow access and slippery road caused by heavy rain earlier the day. So nearly 10 officials and medics walked to the village, leaving the vehicle parked on the highway. Part of the same village, houses here are built far apart, with many strewn across the mountain, making access more difficult.

"As soon as we received the news, we called each household, asking the parents to take their children to the commune health center. But it was late at night and many families had gone to sleep, so we had to go to each house ourselves even though they are far away. It was difficult to walk on the muddy road, so it took us a longtime," Thuan recalled.

Though many students had entered centralized quarantine, on the evening of May 19, Thuan and his colleagues received news the new F1 cases were preschool kids.

Due to their young age, many families refused to "hand over their children," before being **persuaded** it was their best course of action.

"Learning from previous times of quarantine, when many children had no set of extra clothes, and had to walk barefoot, we prepared some clothing for them, though the amount was little," Thuan shared.

According to commune officials, the furthest student lived 10 kilometers from the village center.

By 2 a.m. the next morning, 27 students had been picked up. Meanwhile, a few of them had followed their parents to the fields, forcing officials to wait until they returned.

As of the evening of May 22, Muong Pon Commune had traced 76 F1 students, including 34 preschoolers. All were placed in the same isolation room with the F1 teachers for convenience

"Due to the lack of facilities, we called on benefactors to provide more supplies to serve students," Thuan added.

Nguyen Thi Tuan, an officer of the Social Protection Center of Dien Bien Province, said the entire province had up to 1,000 F1 students who had to enter centralized isolation, with many only having set of clothes.

"Most of the children are 4-12 years old. They lack items from clothing, face masks to food," Tuan said.

Many individuals and organizations have sent them face masks, food and clothing in support.

According to Tuan, due to rapid contact tracing and nocturnal student transfer, it is hard for parents to keep of their children's location.

Centralized quarantine camps are usually set up at boarding schools, where basic necessities like blankets and beds are provided. But many places still lack face masks, antiseptic solutions, medical gloves, drinking cups and other necessities.

Areas facing the shortest supplies are Nam Po District and Muong Pon Commune in Dien Bien District, she said.

"Dien Bien is in dire need of second-hand clothes for kids between kindergarten to 10 years old. They have gone into centralized isolation, but with only one set of clothing," read a message from Tuan received on May 20 by Pham Dinh Quy, an engineer with many years' experience fundraising and building schools for highlands students.

"I feel very sorry for the children who have to sleep in isolation camps far from the embrace of their parents," he said after staring mutely at a photo accompanying the message.

On the morning of May 21, Quy contacted donors and called for support for Nam Po District and Dien Bien District's Muong Pon Commune. After he shared the story on his personal Facebook page, many friends and sponsors from all over the world joined hands to help.

Someone provided 500 boxes of milk and 250 sets of clothes while someone else sent money through his charity fund to support the children of Dien Bien.

"At first, Tuan told me there were about 120 children to be quarantined, but by the end of the day, there were nearly 1,000," Quy recalled.

Some people think children should not be left in such extreme isolation, but according to him, to ensure Covid-19 prevention, **everyone must strictly comply with Ministry of Health guidelines.**

"All we can do now is buying clothes, food and necessities for the children. Whether during or after the epidemic, Nam Po and Muong Pon still suffer many difficulties," he said.



Preschool children in Dien Bien Province undergoing 21-day centralized quarantine. Photo acquired by VnExpress



Children sleep on mats in the same set of clothes from the day they had entered centralized quarantine. Photo acquired by VnExpress