

Swine flu ravages India

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At least 1,911 people have died from swine flu in the past four months and a further 33,000 have contracted the disease, according to information provided by the Indian Health Ministry on March 21.

This outbreak is the latest in a series of annual outbreaks of this deadly viral disease, which first ravaged India back in 2009.

The 2009-10 swine flu epidemic that progressively spread to at least 74 countries in the world killed, according to United States' Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates, at least 284,000 people over a course of a year-and-a-half, with India suffering at least 2,700 deaths.

No confidence can be placed in the numbers being released by the Indian Health Ministry, which has been underfunded for decades and essentially crippled by steep budget cuts this year.

Under the pro-business Hindu-communalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government allocation for health care in the 2014-15 fiscal year was just \$4.8 billion. This translates to an annual expenditure of a derisory \$4.36 per person. It is no exaggeration to say that India has no health care system for the vast majority.

Many healthcare observers and scientists have decried the feeble and haphazard monitoring of the current swine flu outbreak and believe that the numbers of both dead and infected are significantly higher. The extreme incompetence of the Health Ministry is also attested to by the fact that it has no policy for procuring and stockpiling anti-swine flu vaccine, leaving its availability entirely to the whims of the "market."

Even going by official statistics, the progressive increase in the number of fatalities from week to week has been staggering. For example, the Health Ministry reported that as of March 13 the death toll had reached 1,674 with a further 29,000 infected, but a week later the number of dead had crossed 1,900 with over 32,000

infected.

Exposing as a fraud Prime Minister Narendra Modi's boast that he delivered "good governance and development" while he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, his home state tops the list of number of dead. It has reported at least 410 dead with over 6,300 infected. Other states near the top of this tragic list include Rajasthan with at least 375 dead, Maharashtra with over 280 dead and Madhya Pradesh, long ruled by the BJP, with 230 dead.

The disease has spread rapidly across the country with little effort made by the state authorities to contain it. Even in the national capital, Delhi, swine flu has infected over 4,000 people and at least 11 have died. Three other Indian states have experienced over 50 fatalities: 71 in Karnataka, 69 in Telangana, and 51 in Punjab.

Despite the intensity of the outbreak and the rising death toll, the Health Ministry, without having performed any proper scientific investigation, has ruled out that this could be due to a new more form of influenza virus, more virulent and deadly than the better known H1N1 strain.

In a blow to this cynical indifference on the part of the Indian health authorities, scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the US, found that "the recent Indian strains carry new mutations in the hemagglutinin protein that are known to make the virus more virulent."

MIT biological engineering Professor Sasisekharan told *IndiaSpend* in an e-mail interview that in its genetic structure the virus is similar to the 1918 Spanish flu virus, which killed more than 40 million people.

The MIT scientist called for better surveillance and collection of scientific data in India and showed his frustration at the lack of seriousness of Indian authorities. Said Sasisekharan, "When you do real-time

surveillance, get organized, and deposit these sequences, then you can come up with a better strategy to respond to the virus.”

Even elementary measures of protection are out of reach to the vast majority of Indians, who are desperately poor. As Srikant Sharma, a doctor at the Moolchand Medcity health care center in New Delhi, commented to the media, "Swine flu spreads through respiratory droplets that are transmitted by coughing, sneezing or inhaling. A simple mask can provide 62 per cent protection against these particles, compared to 98 per cent protection with a professional-grade N95 mask with 14 layers." These masks which should ordinarily cost Rs. 2 and Rs. 90 respectively are being sold by private pharmacies for Rs. 50 and Rs. 350.

Even the vaccine—which at a price of Rs 500 (\$8) to Rs. 1,000 (\$16) is prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of Indians, who eke out an existence on less than \$2 per day—is not readily available due to shortages.

According to the *Hindu*, over 63 million Indians are driven into poverty every year due to health care expenditure. This is a damning statistic, especially when read with the fact that 18 per cent of all households face catastrophic health expenditures (health expenditure greater than 10 per cent of total household consumption expenditure or 40 per cent of total non-food consumption expenditure).

The few dilapidated public hospitals that exist are often in indescribable condition. With the public hospitals failing to provide the urgent medical tests needed for diagnosing swine flu, private hospitals are exploiting the fear and suffering of the people to make quick profits.

Despite India suffering yearly social devastation from swine flu since 2009, neither the previous Congress Party-led UPA government nor the present BJP government have taken any preventive steps to arrest future outbreaks. They have essentially left the masses to fend for themselves.

India is home to fully one third of the world's poorest people. Public spending for health care is, as noted earlier, essentially non-existent. India's public health care spending amounts to a mere 1 per cent of its gross domestic product.

Last year when the Congress party led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government presented an

interim budget for the 2014–15 financial year, allocation for health care was reduced by 9.7 percent from the 2013-14 budget, to Rs. 337 billion (\$5.4 billion).

After the Modi-led BJP government came to power in May 2014 a further Rs. 60 billion (\$948 million), was slashed. In contrast this reactionary regime increased military spending by Rs. 50 billion from the amount allocated by the outgoing UPA government's interim budget, raising it to a gargantuan Rs. 2.27 trillion (\$38.35 billion).

Yet the current government claims that due to "fiscal strains" it is again compelled to slash the allocation for healthcare and other social spending in the 2015-16 fiscal year. The BJP's electoral promise to provide "equal opportunities" for health care has proven to be nothing but a gigantic political fraud.

What the current swine flu epidemic reveals is an Indian ruling elite that is willing to spend vast amounts of public funds on the military to realize its great power ambitions, while it presides over a damning social reality characterized by mass poverty and a non-existent public health care system.



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