

Coronavirus overwhelms mitigation measures across Latin America

Andrea Lobo
13 March 2020

Since the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) was first detected regionally in Brazil two weeks ago, confirmed cases in Latin America and the Caribbean have now exceeded 300 and reached most countries. Three patients, one in Panama, another in Argentina and a third in Guyana, have died.

Despite having nearly two months to prepare for the inevitable arrival of the virus, the governments and ruling classes of Latin America failed to organize any significant response. Travel bans and controls at the ports of entry proved ineffective, with infected travelers being detected days and even weeks after arrival. Now, as countries shift toward mitigation efforts, these are characterized by disorderly quarantines of suspected cases, gradual suspension of classes, and the cancellation of large gatherings.

The late and deficient response in the region is being overwhelmed because it is guided by efforts to cover up, not address, the inequalities in access to testing and health care.

Latin America's rampant poverty and social inequality make it especially vulnerable to the spread and impact of the Covid-19 virus. If anything, recent years have only seen the region become more prone to epidemics, as shown by 2019's Dengue outbreak, the worst in history, with over 3 million cases and an uptick this year.

Nahid Bhadelia, a Boston University specialist on outbreaks in Africa, Asia and Latin America, wrote in the *Atlantic* that the ease of transmission of the Covid-19 "will exacerbate some of the greatest weaknesses of crowded low-resource health care facilities, including their inability to quickly identify and isolate patients who may have early symptoms resembling those of other common diseases."

The public health calamity looming over the region and its economic impact are already making regional currencies and stock markets drop by an order of magnitude. Brazil's main stock market, Ibovespa, has lost nearly a quarter of its value over the course of this week, with trading halted twice because of the speed of the sell-off.

The country has confirmed at least 100 coronavirus cases,

among the most recent being Fabio Wajngarten, the communications director for Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, who is also being tested and is under isolation and medical observation. Both of them recently returned from a five-day trip to the US, where they met with US President Donald Trump at his Florida resort.

The devastating economic impact of the pandemic and its laying bare of Latin America's yawning social inequality can only lead to an intensification of the class struggle. This follows the mass strikes and protests last year in Puerto Rico, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras, Bolivia, Haiti and Brazil.

The most frequent (and panicked) statements by officials and the corporate press have been calls on the population not to panic. Capturing these fears succinctly, *America's Quarterly*, published by the think-tank Americas Society/Council of the Americas, wrote: "What if everybody's Instagram starts to fill up with long lines and patients suffering (or worse) in the hallways of the region's already overwhelmed public hospitals—while the rich get decent treatment in private clinics?"

While the journal adds that "this contrast in treatment could become political dynamite," the situation is even more explosive under conditions in which the privatization of health care and gutting of public facilities have forced large sections of the working class to incur debt in order to access private clinics and laboratories. It takes months to get appointments for tests, consultations and even surgeries in public hospitals, while informal workers are not covered by state insurance. A 2019 study published in the *Lancet* found that 42.7 percent of health care expenditures in Latin America constitute out-of-pocket costs.

The ruling class and imperialism responded to the social upheavals last year by pushing the region to the brink of open dictatorship, including the killing of hundreds of protesters by the Chilean, Ecuadorian, Colombian and Bolivian militaries.

The global economic impact of the coronavirus, moreover, coincides with Latin America's worst economic period in

seven decades, largely due to the slowdown in China, now severely exacerbated by the pandemic. As China became South America's number-one trading partner, and the region became China's second-largest destination for Foreign Direct Investment, the phrase "When China sneezes, Latin America catches a cold" won currency. It has now become a chilling warning.

In this context, the ruling oligarchies will be even more reluctant to dedicate the necessary resources for the containment and treatment of Covid-19 and for compensating workers for lost income. Instead, they are moving to crush all signs of popular protest. This has so far been signaled by the decision of the far-right Guatemalan government to impose a state of emergency, which militarizes public services like hospitals and schools and bans all demonstrations, even before any confirmed cases in the country.

Inequalities between countries are significant, with the Pan American Health Organization (OPS) sending teams of experts to aid the "weakest health care systems"—Haiti, Venezuela, Surinam, Guyana, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Bolivia and Paraguay. But the reality is that no health system in the region is prepared to manage a full-blown epidemic. All regional elites are notorious for their negligence in the face of frequent and predictable natural disasters and epidemics.

While rural and indigenous communities are deprived of even basic medical services, the explosive and disorganized urbanization of the entire region in recent decades has been met with social austerity and privatizations.

Public health systems have been a primary victim of social austerity to pay back financial vultures. As a condition for granting a \$56 billion loan to Argentina in 2018, the International Monetary Fund demanded a 70 percent cut in the budget for prevention of infectious diseases.

The "left" president Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico, where 12 coronavirus cases have been confirmed, has already warned that his government's response to the Covid-19 will be "slow." After carrying out massive cuts to health care, including a 30 percent personnel reduction in the Health Ministry, López Obrador still declared: "We may have the budget, but it's not executed because the government was not built to attend to the needs of the people."

On the other hand, according to a recent estimate by *El País*, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Brazil, which have 1.1 million doctors, could collectively hire 2.2 million more if they eliminated tax benefits for corporations.

Poor social infrastructure is also manifested in the water rationing in major cities and rural towns in Honduras, Peru, Venezuela and Costa Rica, affecting some hospitals without

tanks. With the overnight depletion and overpricing of hand sanitizer, hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants have been left with absolutely no way to protect themselves from the deadly virus. Protesters in working class suburbs in Honduras and Costa Rica have responded this week with roadblocks.

OPS chief Carissa Etienne told a press conference last Friday that the whole region should expect these scenarios: initial outbreak centers, major propagations in closed quarters like prisons, refugee camps and barracks, and a massive community transmission, exacerbated by the flu/rainy season beginning in April in the tropics.

According to the most recent World Bank data, Latin America and the Caribbean have an average of 2.2 hospital beds per 1,000 people, ranging from 0.6 for Guatemala to 5.2 in Cuba.

Any effective response would need to be internationally coordinated to share resources and streamline the production and distribution of medical equipment, tests and vaccines. However, the crisis will only exacerbate the national competition between ruling elites to attract investments, including into the crisis-ridden pension systems, with much to gain from a virus that could wipe out the sick and elderly.

While Latin America's ruling elites aim to unload the costs of the epidemic onto the backs of the working class, the International Committee of the Fourth International is calling on workers to counter with their own independent response, forming rank-and-file committees in workplaces and neighborhoods to ensure that all of society's resources are mustered to actually mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 on the entire population on the basis of social needs, not private profit.



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