

Coronavirus spreads to Turkey, risking a rapid outbreak

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As of Sunday night, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Turkey rose to 18 from the six reported previously. At least 3,000 people are under quarantine, according to Health Minister Fahrettin Koca's report on the latest caseload statistics.

Though all of Turkey's neighbors except war-ravaged Syria had reported cases of coronavirus in recent weeks, and neighboring Iran is an epicenter of the pandemic, with thousands of cases and hundreds of dead, Turkey had not officially reported any cases until last Wednesday. Koca then confirmed during an emergency press conference that a Turkish man with a high fever and cough had been diagnosed as having the virus and had been isolated.

On Tuesday, the health minister had told the press: "Europe is very late in taking measures and it is still being done too slowly," adding: "It is highly likely this outbreak is currently in Turkey. There are no confirmed cases of this virus." However, no serious measures have been taken inside the country.

The border with Iran was simply closed. All passengers arriving from abroad were screened, and all flights to and from Italy, China, South Korea, Iran and Iraq halted. Officials pointed to their use of thermal cameras at international airports, but the health ministry only advised those coming from high-risk areas to self-quarantine for 14 days upon their return.

Koca declared on Wednesday that the "infected individual contracted the virus after returning from Europe," asserting that he and his family members and those who came into contact with him were under surveillance. The minister refused to give details about him, such as his location, age, etc.

While Koca was claiming that "Our country is prepared for this, all necessary measures to prevent the spread [of the virus] have been taken," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan boasted that "no virus is stronger than our measures."

The developments following these pronouncements demonstrated that the Turkish government, like its counterparts in the US and across Europe, was not prepared for an outbreak that has already infected more than 150,000 and killed at least 5,800 worldwide. While Turkish officials claimed they would develop and also export their own testing kit, no large-scale testing has taken place to prevent a rapid spread of the disease.

"One reason for the delay in recorded cases inside Turkey is the smaller number of tests conducted," Dr. Özlem Azap, an infectious disease researcher at Bağkent University in Ankara, bluntly told *Al-Monitor* after the first case. Azap went on: "South Korea performed nearly 2,000 tests per one million people, Italy 400 per million people, while Turkey has performed 11 tests per million people as of last week, and these figures haven't increased much in recent days." As of Sunday, only about 5,000 people in Turkey had been tested for the coronavirus.

Despite every indication that the coronavirus was already in Turkey, the government waited for the diagnosis of the first case before taking more extensive measures, thus wasting critical time. On Thursday, presidential spokesman İbrahim Kalın reported new measures following a five-hour meeting presided over by Erdoğan in Ankara.

Primary, middle and high schools will close for a week beginning March 16, after which "students will continue their education through the Internet and television through remote education system." There is no proposal as to who will take care of these children at home while their parents go to work. Universities will also be closed for three weeks. Kalın added, "All sporting events in the country until the end of April will be without fans."

On Friday, the health minister announced the second case—and then more three cases. All five cases were directly related. He also said Turkish citizens who have

visited foreign countries “will have to take 14 days off from work and spend the time in self-isolation as of Monday.” In fact, many infected people coming from abroad will unintentionally spread the virus under conditions where there is no obligatory quarantine.

At the same press conference, Transport and Infrastructure Minister Cahit Turhan said Turkey had suspended flights to nine more European countries: Germany, France, Spain, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Austria, Sweden and the Netherlands.

The condition of the sixth infected individual, who returned from an *umrah* [pilgrimage] to Mecca and was not connected to any of the previous cases, sparked particular concern and criticism on social media: at least 15,000 more people returned from pilgrimages last week without being put into quarantine. Although they were advised to stay at home for 14 days, officials of Erdoğan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) met with some *umrah* travelers, posting photos on social media. It is now widely suspected that the coronavirus has already spread across the country.

After bitter criticism on social media of this obvious blunder, the health ministry placed a group of more than 3,000 people who began returning on Sunday into quarantine.

Meanwhile, students living in public dormitories in Ankara and Konya were evacuated at midnight to make room for the newly quarantined, though there are many empty public or private places available. Reportedly, several public dormitories in Istanbul will be evacuated today for thousands newly arrived from abroad. In addition, 57 Turkish citizens coming from Baghdad were also moved to a quarantine location in Ankara on Saturday.

Public allegations that some patients have not been tested because they had not contacted anyone from abroad raise questions about the state of Turkey’s health care system. Though the government has proclaimed its readiness in the event of an outbreak, the country’s public health system has been systematically gutted and privatized over the past two decades. The Erdoğan government has cut funds for public hospitals and promoted private ones, and also special forms of health insurance.

Although there is national health insurance that is supposedly universal, it does not cover millions of unemployed workers. Moreover, officials in Turkey’s public health care system had already sounded the alarm before the coronavirus pandemic, and a growing number

of working-class families have to go to private hospitals to get high-quality care—though it is very expensive.

While the European epicenter of the pandemic, Italy, has 3.2 hospital beds per 1,000 people, Turkey has just 2.8 hospital beds per 1,000. In Istanbul, a city of more than 15 million, this figure is just 2.5. Moreover, one fifth of these approximately 250,000 beds in Turkey belong to private hospitals.

According to the latest official health ministry figures in 2016, Turkey has only 33,000 beds in its intensive care units, and these units already have an 80 percent occupancy rate. On Friday, the health ministry declared there were only 25 hospitals across Turkey where patients could be tested for the coronavirus. The ministry designated three hospitals in Istanbul, but all were overcrowded before the pandemic even began.

Given the inadequacy of Turkey’s health care infrastructure for an entirely predictable pandemic, these health care conditions and the government response threaten to inflict a preventable catastrophe on millions of working people.

In addition, nearly 10 million workers in Turkey work in 1.8 million workplaces where there are no official safety conditions, risking a very rapid spread of the virus.

While wildcat strikes erupted across Italy to demand the idling of plants during the pandemic, discussion of strike action was also spreading among working people in Turkey. In recent days, many have used the “paid leave or strike” or “paid leave against corona” hash tags on Twitter to demand paid sick leave for all workers, rejecting the demands of employers that they continue to work despite the danger of catching or spreading the disease.

Providing high-quality health care for all and taking the necessary measures to halt the pandemic’s spread requires a political mobilization of the working class in Turkey and internationally.



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