Modi feigns concern for regional cooperation to fight coronavirus, as pandemic spreads across South Asia

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At the urging of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the heads of government of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) held a video-conference Sunday with the ostensible aim of developing a "joint strategy" for "combating COVID-19."

The video-conference, the first time the SAARC leaders have met since 2014, was a sham, a sham made all the more deplorable because the poverty and squalor to which capitalism has condemned the vast majority of South Asia's 1.9 billion people makes the region exceptionally vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Modi and his BJP government had two main goals at Sunday's hastily organized video-conference: to use the pandemic to assert the Indian ruling elite's claim to "regional leadership," and second, and even more importantly, to distract attention away from their manifest failure to fund and mount a systematic nationwide effort to halt the spread of the coronavirus.

At the conference Modi sought to present India as a model in the fight against the pandemic, claiming that New Delhi's mantra since the coronavirus outbreak was first identified in China has been "Prepare, but don't panic." In reality, the Indian state, which for decades has spent 1.5 percent of GDP or less on health care while lavishing tax cuts and other favors on big business, has refused to mobilize resources to protect the population from the scourge that is the coronavirus.

India's so-called fight against the coronavirus has consisted almost exclusively of travel bans, limited screening of overseas arrivals at airports, and more recently school, cinema, and other closures ordered by state and territorial governments.

Testing has been restricted only to persons showing symptoms who recently arrived from abroad and those who came into direct contact with them and manifestly appear to have contracted the virus. To date, in a country of more than 1.3 billion people, Indian authorities have tested just 11,500 people.

No less fraudulent were Modi's claims to be altruistically coming to the aid of India's even poorer and less technologically advanced neighbours. As was spelled out in pretty frank terms in a spate of laudatory Indian newspaper editorials and op-eds, Modi's SAARC COVID-19 initiative was a means of expanding New Delhi's strategic influence.

Since its founding in 1985, SAARC has been riven by bitter conflicts among its eight member states: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In recent years, the reactionary rivalry between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan—a rivalry the US has inflamed by its drive to build up India as a military-strategic counterweight to China—has reduced SAARC to little more than a nameplate.

India forced the cancelling of the 19th SAARC summit, planned for Islamabad in November 2016. It did so after blaming Pakistan for a terrorist attack on a military base at Uri, in India-held Kashmir, and mounting an illegal "surgical strike" inside Pakistan that brought the two states to the brink of all-out war. Since then Indo-Pakistani relations have remained near the boiling point and SAARC in effective limbo.

Only after the leaders of the six other SAARC states had all agreed to Modi's proposal, first publicly revealed last Friday, did Pakistan agree to participate in Sunday's video-conference. But Pakistan's acceptance of the invitation came with a sting, as Prime Minister

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Imran Khan delegated his Health Minister, Zafar Mirza, to attend in his stead.

India's headline announcement at the hour-long meeting was that it was ready to give a derisory US $10 million, or about half a US cent per person, as its "initial offer" to a South Asian "COVID-19 Emergency Fund." This fund, said Modi, could be based on "voluntary contributions from all of us."

Modi also claimed New Delhi is "assembling a Rapid Response Team of doctors and specialists in India along with testing kits and other equipment" that will be "at your disposal, if required." "Our neighborhood collaboration," he fatuously concluded, "should be a model for the world."

Islamabad, for its part, sought to puncture New Delhi's attempt to cast itself as South Asia's leading power by raising at the conference India's seven-month long security clampdown in Indian-held Kashmir. Noting that there are COVID-19 cases in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Mizra told the SAARC video-conference, "Opening up communication and movement would facilitate dissemination of information, allow distribution of medical supplies and allow containment to proceed unimpeded."

To suppress popular opposition to its illegal abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomous constitutional status, Modi and his BJP have deployed tens of thousands of additional security forces to the region. They also suspended virtually all cellphone and internet access in the Kashmir Valley for months, and have detained thousands without charge, including several former J&K Chief Ministers.

Following the meeting, Indian officials complained bitterly in unattributed remarks that Pakistan had soiled the pitch by "politicizing" the fight against the coronavirus.

Pakistan's venal bourgeois elite, no less than its Indian rivals, has abused and manipulated the Kashmiri people since the reactionary 1947 communal partition of South Asia.

Modi's ignorant and cynical claims at Sunday's video-conference and the petty wrangling between Islamabad and New Delhi during and following it only exemplify the criminally negligent response of all the region's ruling elites to the coronavirus.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases in the region are now approaching 500. This includes 237 in Pakistan;142, including three deaths, in India; Sri Lanka, 44; Afghanistan, 22; and Maldives, 13.

However, because of the lack of testing and the limited access of the poor to health facilities the true number of infected people is undoubtedly higher, likely far higher. Most ominously there are mounting cases in both India and Pakistan of community transmission that go beyond the immediate family of persons recently returned from abroad, or those who came into direct contact with tourists who had contracted COVID-19.

In recent days a growing number of Indian medical experts have spoken out against the Modi government's testing policy, warning that India's apparent low rate of infection most likely masks a growing spread of the disease.

Dr. Gagandeep Kang, the director of the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute, told Associated Press, "Given the pattern of disease in other places, and given our low level of testing, then I do think that community transmission is happening."

"Community spread is very likely," added Dr. Anant Bhan. "But the only way to know for sure is through more expansive testing."

The government and Indian health authorities have advanced various spurious arguments to defend their self-avowed "stringent testing" policy. But undoubtedly the cost of each test to the state, 5,000 rupees or about US $67, is the determining factor.

All of the states of South Asia are marred by mass poverty and decrepit to nonexistent health infrastructure. India, Bangladesh and Pakistan also have mega-cities with teeming cramped slums whose poorly nourished populations are highly susceptible to disease.

Confirmed coronavirus cases in Pakistan have rapidly increased to 237 since late last week. Pakistan's health care system is on life support after years of IMF imposed austerity.

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