

US imperialism exploits coronavirus as a weapon of war

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In a speech delivered Thursday announcing that the number of confirmed coronavirus infections worldwide had risen to 200,000, the director of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, stated that “the only way we can defeat this pandemic, as we have always been saying, is through solidarity. Solidarity, solidarity, solidarity ... We’re one human race, and that suffices actually. This is an invisible enemy against humanity.”

The solidarity of humanity across the planet is not merely a noble ideal, but a life-and-death necessity in combatting a deadly virus that threatens to infect hundreds of millions of people as it spreads to every corner of the globe. This ideal, however, stands in stark opposition to the reality of a world capitalist society riven by unprecedented levels of social inequality and characterized by the pursuit of geo-strategic interests through the means of murderous violence.

Alongside the “invisible enemy against humanity”, the coronavirus, there stands another quite visible one, world imperialism.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the increasingly desperate conditions confronting Iran and its population of nearly 83 million. The country has the third highest number of fatalities after Italy and China, and nowhere is the mortality rate greater, as the number of infections continues to rise sharply each day.

Iran’s Health Ministry spokesman Kianush Jahanpur announced Thursday that 149 people had died over the previous 24 hours, bringing the death toll from the virus to 1,284. During the same period, another 1,046 cases of infection were reported, raising the total number to 18,407. Both numbers are believed to be serious underestimations of the ravages of the disease.

“Based on our information, every 10 minutes one person dies from the coronavirus and some 50 people

become infected with the virus every hour in Iran,” the spokesman said.

Rather than human solidarity, Washington’s response to this crisis has been a deliberate attempt to intensify it at the cost of countless lives of Iranian working people. The pandemic, rather than being seen as an enemy to be eradicated in every country, is viewed by the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA as a new weapon of war that must be integrated into imperialist planning.

This is the inescapable conclusion from the Trump administration’s imposition Thursday of yet another round of punishing economic sanctions against Iran, targeting companies based in the United Arab Emirates that are accused of buying petroleum from the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). This follows by only two days, another set of sanctions announced by Washington’s bully-boy Secretary of State Mike Pompeo against nine separate entities in China, Hong Kong and South Africa. The blacklisted companies were charged with engaging in “significant transactions” involving Iranian petrochemicals.

Casting the pandemic in nakedly aggressive and xenophobic terms, Pompeo told a State Department press conference, “The Wuhan virus is a killer and the Iranian regime is an accomplice.”

In the same breath, he claimed that Washington was prepared to carry out “humanitarian efforts” to “help the Iranian people stay healthy.”

The level of lies and hypocrisy is breathtaking, even by the Trump administration’s standards. US sanctions, which have blacklisted the country’s central bank, make it impossible for Tehran to buy basic medicines and medical supplies supposedly allowed under the “maximum pressure” regime. This has condemned tens of thousands to early and preventable deaths well before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Now,

according to one estimate by an Iranian physician, the country's death toll from COVID-19 could reach as high as 3.5 million.

This human suffering is not collateral damage from Washington's "maximum pressure" sanctions regime, it is its direct purpose. Through brutal collective punishment, hunger and the spread of disease, US imperialism seeks to foment regime change in Tehran with the aim of eliminating a regional obstacle to its hegemony over the oil-rich Persian Gulf while, in turn, preparing for war with China. The coronavirus pandemic is seen as yet one more weapon in the US arsenal.

As the January 3 drone missile assassination of Gen. Qassem Suleimani at Baghdad's international airport made clear, US imperialism is prepared to carry out a direct war of aggression to achieve its aims. With the same order authorizing the illegal murder of Suleimani, Trump authorized the Pentagon to carry out bombing raids against Iranian ships, air defense systems and other targets, paving the way to a catastrophic military confrontation.

The level of desperation of Iran's bourgeois-clerical government as it confronts the spread of the coronavirus is expressed in its appeal to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), with which Tehran has not had relations for more than four decades, for a \$5 billion emergency loan to pay for urgently needed medical supplies.

With Washington holding the deciding vote within the IMF, the loan request will likely be rejected. A similar request from Venezuela, another oil-rich country that has faced a tightening noose of "maximum pressure" sanctions as it confronts the spread of the coronavirus, was turned down. The IMF board cynically claimed it could not release the money because it did not have "clarity on recognition" of the government of President Nicolas Maduro. As if the US puppet Juan Guaidó and the small band of CIA-backed, right-wing conspirators who surround him could organize efforts to contain and mitigate the disease! Meanwhile, Washington's right-wing allies in Latin America have rejected any collaboration with Venezuela in combating the spread of the coronavirus, again with the hope of using countless thousands of deaths to topple the existing government and impose a US puppet regime.

The effects of these criminal policies will not be confined to the targeted countries. The coronavirus has already spread from Iran into much of the Middle East and South Asia. The Pentagon has even been forced to lock down occupation troops in Afghanistan for fear that their return home could spread the virus.

In its March 17, 2020 statement "How to fight the COVID-19 pandemic: A program of action for the working class", the National Committee of the Socialist Equality Party (US) raised the demand to "End all sanctions and trade war measures." It stated: "The response of Iran, Venezuela and other countries is being crippled by economic sanctions that prevent them from acquiring basic medical equipment. Trade war measures implemented by the United States and European countries must be halted. The coronavirus is a global disease that requires a globally coordinated response."

The worldwide coronavirus pandemic has exposed once again in the most clear-cut manner that the most basic interests of the working class and the very survival of humanity are incompatible with imperialism. The solidarity required to defeat this disease and save the lives of millions around the planet can be forged only through the unification of the working class across national boundaries in a common fight for socialist internationalism.



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