

As coronavirus cases surge in Pakistan, its prime minister preaches “no need to worry”

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Pakistan is seeing a surge of COVID-19 cases, with the number of confirmed victims of the virus rising from fewer than 30 to 495 in the span of less than a week. There have been three COVID-19 deaths to date.

The rapid spread of the deadly virus will be catastrophic for millions of people in this poverty stricken South Asian country of more than 200 million.

As of now, Pakistan reports the highest number of confirmed cases in South Asia. Despite severe COVID-19 outbreaks in neighbouring countries, including China to the east, the initial epicentre of the virus, and Iran to the west, Pakistani authorities did little to nothing to prepare for the inevitable spread of the coronavirus to the country.

While the government attempted to delay the spread of the virus by refusing to evacuate its citizens from China's Hubei province and imposed air travel restrictions, no significant measures were taken to mount a medical response to the outbreak. According to reports, most initial tests were conducted on patients who had become infected while traveling in Iran.

Despite the rapid increase of cases, the government has allocated only a paltry 5.4 billion rupees (\$34 million) to deal with the pandemic.

The actual infection numbers are certainly far higher than reported, given the severe lack of testing. Prime Minister Imran Khan's Islamic populist Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) government hurriedly convened the National Security Council March 13 amid reports indicating an unchecked spread of the virus. Following the military-government huddle, it shut down schools and the country's borders while enforcing restrictions on air travel. However, fearing a backlash from an increasingly powerful Islamic right, the government did not ban prayers or large religious gatherings.

As panic built throughout the country, Reuters reported Wednesday that there was a “growing dispute in Pakistan between federal and provincial authorities.” Provincial

authorities were scrambling to secure coronavirus testing kits, according to the report. Additionally, the central government has been blamed for its failure to test and quarantine those returning from abroad.

The criminal indifference of Pakistan's ruling elite to the well-being of the masses was illustrated by Khan in an address to the nation on Tuesday. As the government is increasingly coming under criticism for a severe lack of testing kits in public health facilities and the prohibitive cost of the test in private medical centres, Khan demanded only those with “intense symptoms” to go to hospitals. “There is no need to worry,” he claimed, demagogically declaring, “We will fight this as a nation. And God willing, we will win this war.”

Pakistan's public medical facilities are dilapidated, having been ravaged by decades of IMF austerity, and are utterly inadequate to fight a highly contagious and novel virus like the coronavirus. The medical crisis is enormously exacerbated by the poor living and hygienic conditions that the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie imposes on the majority of the population.

In the major cities, where whatever available social infrastructure is concentrated, health facilities were on life-support even before the arrival of coronavirus cases. In rural areas, including in the two most populous provinces, Punjab and Sindh, medical facilities are hardly existent. The situation is even worse in the war-ravaged former Federally Administered Tribal Areas that are now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and in Balochistan, where the military is brutally repressing a longstanding nationalist-separatist insurgency.

The cost for the coronavirus test in a private facility, 7,900 rupees, or more than US \$49, is about equal to the monthly income of most Pakistanis. With extreme poverty, food insecurity and widespread malnutrition among children, the consequences of the virus spreading widely in Pakistan will be catastrophic and far reaching.

Further worsening the current health emergency is the 20.4 percent cut the Khan government made in health expenditure from the 2018-19 financial year, in order to appease the IMF and Pakistan's other creditors

The impact of the gutting of health care spending is exacerbated by skyrocketing inflation, which has been running at double-digit levels since July. Public health facilities face severe shortages of medical supplies and personnel, neglected maintenance of equipment and facilities, and a shrinking capacity to meet even the usual needs of the population, not to mention a highly contagious pandemic.

Pakistan only provided 0.6 beds per 1,000 people in 2014, the latest statistic available from the World Health Organization. According to the country's representative for the WHO, the federal and provincial governments have made only 2,000 isolation beds available to deal with the current pandemic.

While utterly indifferent to the horrendous social conditions and virtually non-existent health care services available to the vast majority of the population, Pakistan's ruling elite fears the pandemic could trigger an economic collapse, which would threaten their wealth and potentially ignite a social explosion.

Speaking to Associated Press, Khan appealed to the "world community" to consider "some sort of a debt write-off for countries" like Pakistan, while voicing concern that the virus outbreak and the measures to arrest its spread could trigger an "unstoppable slide backward" of the economy.

In his address Tuesday, Khan argued against shutting down daily life in the country's cities with the claim, "people are already suffering" and if they were to be "saved from corona [virus]" by such means, then "they'll die of hunger."

The PTI government, as its negligent response to the pandemic and the policies it has pursued in its year and a half in office demonstrate, is chiefly concerned with protecting the wealth of the super-rich.

Khan and his PTI won election in July 2018 by cynically promising an "Islamic welfare state." Predictably, no sooner did they take office than they pivoted to imposing further austerity and began to lay the groundwork for seeking a new IMF bailout. Khan has increasingly staffed his government with prominent members of the former dictatorial regime of General Pervez Musharraf, which, in addition to making Pakistan the logistical linchpin of the US war in Afghanistan, carried out a wave of privatization and other "pro-

investor" neo-liberal reforms.

Pakistan's coronavirus outbreak has overlapped with the Khan government's negotiations with the IMF over a further round of austerity and economic "reforms" so as to secure another \$450 million tranche of the current \$6 billion bailout package. According to reports, the IMF has agreed not to aggregate coronavirus related expenditure towards the budget deficit. Otherwise, the government is expected to fulfil its pledges to the IMF to cut social spending and raise taxes and electricity rates, further increasing the economic burdens on the poor.

When massive floods in 2010 put millions of people at risk of starvation, disease and financial ruin, the government, then led by the Pakistan People's Party, dutifully followed the diktats of the IMF and refrained from providing any substantial aid to the suffering masses.

Khan's rise to power in 2018 was facilitated by the country's nuclear-armed military, which, having ruled the country for decades with Washington's backing, continues to wield effective control over foreign and military policy, and internal security

While Khan justifies his government's negligent response to the coronavirus pandemic by claiming the state is bereft of resources, it is spending massive sums on Pakistan's armed forces, amid dangerously escalating war tensions with India. In February 2019, the reactionary strategic conflict between India and Pakistan came to the brink of all-out war, after their air forces engaged in a dog-fight over disputed Kashmir.

The PTI government has allocated 16 percent of all state expenditure for defence. But this figure excludes pensions for retired military personnel, and never publicly revealed spending on major procurements and strategic programs.



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