

COVID-19 pandemic threatens millions in war-torn Libya and Syria

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With well over a million infected and the number of dead soon to reach 100,000, the worldwide spread of COVID-19 threatens the lives of millions worldwide. In particular, it is threatening war-torn countries like Libya, Syria and Yemen, where imperialist-backed wars have led to devastating humanitarian crises and destroyed critical health infrastructure. Millions of refugees, many living in crowded and unsanitary refugee camps, are desperately vulnerable to the virus.

Libya and Syria, both targeted by wars launched by the NATO imperialist powers after the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution in 2011, are desperately trying to avert a devastating mass outbreak. While Libya has 19 confirmed COVID-19 cases so far, including one death, Syria has 19 cases and two deaths. However, their shattered health systems are in no position to properly monitor the outbreak, let alone treat and halt it.

The health catastrophe facing Libya and Syria again expose the fraudulent “humanitarian” pretexts that pseudo-left academics and parties like France’s New Anti-capitalist Party used to justify their support for these imperialist wars. They presented NATO military interventions as wars for “democracy” and to protect the population of these countries from their dictatorial governments. In fact, these wars of plunder shattered the lives of tens of millions and now could cost hundreds of thousands more lives lost to COVID-19.

Treating the COVID-19 pandemic requires an internationally coordinated campaign to deploy critical food and health supplies to Libya, Syria and other war-torn countries around the world. This requires the mobilization of the mass anti-war sentiment in the working class internationally, as such a coordinated response is impossible under the domination of imperialist powers still intervening to fan the flames of war in these countries.

In Syria, the NATO imperialist powers armed various Islamist terrorist militias and later backed ethnic-Kurdish militias as proxies in a bid to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The war has claimed more than 500,000 lives and displaced up to 10 million internally while over 3 million fled abroad. NATO-backed militias looted pharmaceutical factories during the war and attacked hospitals, leaving Syria’s essential health infrastructure in ruins.

The confirmed cases in Syria are the “tip of the iceberg,” said UN aid official Mark Lowcock in a briefing to the UN Security Council last week. “Judging from other places, that is the tip of the iceberg. The virus has the potential to have a devastating impact on vulnerable communities across the country,” he warned. “Syria’s health services are extremely fragile. Only around half of its hospitals and primary healthcare centers were fully functional at the end of last year.”

Without a massive international inflow of resources to allow for social distancing and proper hygiene, a disaster threatens. More than 11 million people inside Syria require humanitarian aid, including nearly five million children; and nearly eight million lack reliable access to food. “We are for example seeing increased rates of stunting—a consequence of child malnutrition, from which it is rarely possible fully to recover,” said Lowcock, who added that 30 percent of displaced children in northwest Syria suffer from it. “They will live with the consequences for the rest of their lives.”

Thousands of refugees live in overcrowded camps in horrific conditions in Idlib province, where Syrian government forces are fighting NATO-backed Islamist militias to retake the area. As many as 10 people reportedly share small tents—sleeping, eating and living together at close distance, with no access to clean water

and only a small number of toilets.

As for Libya, it is, according to the Global Health Security Index report published last month, one of the 27 countries “most vulnerable to emerging outbreaks.”

NATO’s bombing of Libyan cities in the 2011 war was followed by a devastating civil war since 2014 between the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in the capital, Tripoli, and warlord Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) to the east. Fighting has intensified since Haftar launched an offensive last April on Tripoli. Essential services are unavailable in Libya, whose oil industry has collapsed, devastating its economy.

Cash shortages in every part of the economy mean that Libya cannot purchase medicines to keep hospitals running or pay the salaries of medical staff, of which there is an acute shortage. Before the war, Libya had foreign doctors and nurses from Egypt and the Philippines, but they left the country starting in 2011, and especially after 2014. Last month, Badereldine al-Najar, the head of the Libyan National Center for Disease Control (NCDC), told Reuters: “In light of the lack of preparations, I now consider Libya not in a position to confront this virus.”

War has left Libya with “limited financial resources and shortages of basic equipment,” while the “pandemic represents an additional challenge,” the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) declared.

In recent years, Libya has become a hotspot for immigrants desperately trying to reach Europe.

The United Nations has warned that the pandemic constitutes a “truly catastrophic” danger for the internally displaced people and about 700,000 refugees and migrants in Libya.

In a bid to stop refugee flows, the European Union (EU) has financed the construction and upkeep of prison camps controlled by the rival militias inside Libya. In those camps, reports by CNN and UN officials have revealed that refugees are subject to horrific torture, rape, murder and sale into slavery. Detention centers and prisons are reportedly overcrowded with unhygienic and inhumane conditions, while suffering shortages of food and drinking water.

These immigrants are at a great risk of being contaminated by the virus. Tarik Argaz, a spokesman

for the UNHCR in Libya, told Al Jazeera: “Detained asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable and exposed. They are staying in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions [in detention centres] and have access to very limited health assistance. Many centres are located in areas close to fighting.”

Al Jazeera cited Amira Rajab Elhemali, national field operations assistant for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), saying “The conditions are dire. Hundreds of people are locked in crowded hangars with no access to proper sanitation facilities. Many of them have been detained for months or even years. Worry is all they know.”

The COVID-19 pandemic now ravaging the imperialist centers of America and Europe is an urgent warning. The wars in Libya and Syria must be ended, the imperialist powers’ supply of weapons and financing to their proxies cut off, and social resources mobilized to fight the pandemic, not to fight wars. Fighting the pandemic requires the provision of tens of billions of euros of international emergency assistance, including for the purchase of food and medical supplies.



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