

Police in Pakistan beat and arrest health care workers protesting over Coronavirus safety concerns, lack of PPE

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Police officers beat and arrested protesting doctors and health care workers in Quetta, Pakistan on Monday, prompting outrage across the country.

The clash occurred after several hundred medical staff had marched to protest the authorities' failure to provide them with personal protective equipment (PPE) in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Across Pakistan, over 4,000 cases and 60 deaths have been recorded so far, figures which are certainly underestimates due to the shambolic state of the country's health care system.

The arrests and beatings occurred after health workers rallied near the city's main hospital and marched to the Balochistan Chief Minister's house. Police aggressively used batons to disperse the march and arrested 150 health workers. Responding to the arrests, health workers went on strike.

The Young Doctors Association (YDA) warned in a press briefing that most services will not be provided until they are given the necessary equipment and PPE to tackle the surge in coronavirus cases. YDA has denounced the government for not following World Health Organisation guidelines, forcing medical staff to protest in defence of their right to safety and life itself.

The lack of PPE is an issue common to all health care workers on the frontline of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic across the world. The protest by doctors and other staff in Pakistan comes as protests and criticism of governments' lack of preparedness have mounted across North America and Europe.

Pakistan's government claimed the medical workers were arrested for violating Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which bans gathering of more than five people, and holding a procession. Facing a wave of

public criticism, Prime Minister Imran Khan later expressed his "dismay" over the arrests.

Quetta is the capital of Balochistan, Pakistan's poorest province, and the 10th largest city in the country, with a population of well over one million. The province, which has long been the scene of an ethno-separatist insurgency, is virtually under Army control, and dominated politically by a tiny kleptocracy. They preside over dilapidated public infrastructure, including totally inadequate health facilities. This is reflected in the fact that in Balochistan, which is home to some 12.3 million people, less than 4,000 coronavirus tests have thus far been conducted. To date there have been 206 confirmed COVID-19 cases and two deaths.

Monday's protest was driven by the mounting toll the virus is taking on health care workers. Underscoring the disastrous impact of the absence of PPE, 19 doctors and health workers in Balochistan have tested positive for COVID-19. Thousands of suspected cases are not tested for COVID-19 due to the lack of test capacity and essential medicine.

The situation across Pakistan is little better. All medical facilities in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar are dealing with a severe shortage of ventilators, gloves, masks and respirators. Health workers in Sindh have also warned the government that they will take strike action if their demands for PPE are not met.

The most vulnerable are the residents of villages and rural areas bordering Iran, which are economically dependent on Iran and have been completely ignored by the central government and Balochistan provincial authorities.

This state of affairs has been created by the hoarding of billions of rupees by the super-rich, venal bourgeois elite, which has displayed its utter contempt towards the masses by refusing to take the most elementary measures to effectively combat the coronavirus.

The terrible social conditions facing the masses are worsening by the day. Many can no longer afford basic food items due to skyrocketing prices and the devaluation of the rupee. While the Balochistan government has extended a lockdown till April 21 in an attempt to slow the spread of the coronavirus, this has further exacerbated the social crisis for working people, many of whom now find themselves unemployed and without income-support. Neither the Balochistan provincial government, nor Khan's federal government have taken adequate measures to protect Pakistan's impoverished masses from the catastrophic social and economic impact of the pandemic.



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