

# Bolivia's coup regime extends COVID-19 quarantine amid repression

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Bolivia's self-proclaimed "interim president," Jeanine Añez, announced Tuesday that the quarantine imposed in response to the coronavirus will be extended until April 30.

As of April 14, the number of people reported to have been infected with COVID-19 in Bolivia was 354, with 28 deaths. These low official numbers for infected and deceased coronavirus victims obscure the alarming threat to South America's poorest country. An indication of the potential rapid spread of the disease came on Tuesday with a report from Oruro, the traditional mining center of Bolivia, that the number of cases had doubled in 24 hours from 14 to 27, while another 111 suspicious cases were reported and 37 more were still waiting for test results.

Añez, who was installed by a US-backed military coup and fascist violence that overthrew the government of President Evo Morales and his Movement toward Socialism (MAS) government last November, has exploited the pandemic to militarize the country and postpone elections that had been set for May.

In her televised address Tuesday, Añez offered another pittance to Bolivia's impoverished workers and peasants, a "universal bonus" of 500 bolivianos (less than \$73). This meager benefit will be offered only to those who did not receive similar paltry handouts offered earlier, including a "family bonus," also worth 500 bolivianos for families with young children, and a "family basket" of just 400 bolivianos for older adults surviving on state pensions, low income mothers and people with disabilities.

How much of this thoroughly inadequate aid will actually get into the hands of Bolivians is in serious question.

Añez also said that within one week she would announce a decision on whether to ease the quarantine in different regions of the country. She is responding to the demands and profit interests of Bolivian and international

capital, which supported the coup that brought her to power.

Newspaper coverage indicates that Bolivia is presently at risk of widespread hunger, due to failing food supply chains, especially in working class cities such as El Alto.

According to the newspaper *El Alto*, "Two weeks after the [March 22] quarantine was put into place, neighbors from different areas in El Alto began to worry about the lack of resources from the lockdown imposed upon them and the lack of food ... neighbors are aware that they cannot take to the streets to carry out their activities normally, they claim that 'money is already finished.'"

One woman interviewed by *El Alto* said: "Since the quarantine has been issued, we no longer go out to sell with my husband, everything we have earned before quarantine is gone; on the street there's everything, gas, vegetables, fruit, but there's no money."

For its part, the main union confederation, the Bolivian Workers' Central (COB), which has collaborated with the coup regime, has proposed that it distribute half of the minimum wage of 2,122 Bolivianos (\$320 per month) to the population, a half-hearted measure which has also been rejected.

As for the country's health infrastructure, it is woefully inadequate to address the onslaught of the pandemic.

Doctors at the largest public hospital in La Paz issued a statement Monday warning that they lack even the basic supplies needed to deal with COVID-19 patients. "We do not have the minimum supplies such as caps, chinstraps, boots, glasses, gowns, and even less high-end supplies such as intensive care medicines. They send us to war without weapons, condemning us to fight under unfavorable conditions," they said.

Bolivia is sorely lacking in such critical equipment as ventilators, and cannot compete with wealthier nations on the world market to purchase them.

The coronavirus threat is particularly worrisome in the country's overcrowded jails. Inmates at the San Pedro prison in Oruro rioted last Saturday. "We have come to serve a sentence, not to lose our lives," said one of the inmates interviewed by *La Patria* newspaper.

Under the national quarantine first imposed on March 22, many public and private activities have been suspended or severely curtailed, and only one person per family is allowed to make minimum and indispensable trips in the vicinity of the family residence during the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 12:00 for the purpose of acquiring food and other necessary supplies.

As of March 17, all borders were ordered closed and international flights were suspended. Interdepartmental and interprovincial land transport was also suspended, allowing only for the transport of merchandise.

More than 480 Bolivians who managed to reenter Bolivian territory, mostly workers returning from Chile where they had lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 shutdown there, originally were concentrated in camp "Tata Santiago," in the town of Pisiga, and subjected to various health protocols. Lack of food and overcrowding was reported, including insufficient bathrooms.

Tents of 3 x 3 meters were used to house 15 people per unit, each granted a single blanket in the midst of bitter cold. Without electricity, they were effectively held incommunicado since they could not charge their cell phones.

Those who complained of mistreatment by the Bolivian military were reportedly threatened with being thrown back across the border into Chile and having their national identity cards taken.

At least another 800 Bolivians remained trapped on Chile's northern border with Bolivia, blocked by Bolivian troops from returning to their country.

Desperate after being left there for two weeks, several hundred of them attempted to force their way back into Bolivia last week, only to be repulsed with beatings and tear gas.

The Bolivian coup regime has attempted to blame the incident on the former chief minister in the Morales government, Juan Ramón Quintana, who is trapped in the Mexican Embassy in La Paz, denied safe passage out of the country. The government held a press conference Monday claiming—without presenting a shred of evidence—that Quintana had orchestrated the rebellion of the desperate migrant workers on the Chilean border from behind the embassy's walls.

Within Bolivia, the regime has enforced the quarantine

with brutal police-military repression. On March 25, the Ministry of Justice and Institutional Transparency issued a statement warning that people who failed to comply fully with the quarantine would be punished with "one to 10 years in prison for committing crimes against public health."

*La Razon* quoted the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Gen. Carlos Orellana, as reporting that, as of April 11, "Military troops arrested 9,917 people who violated the restrictions of the total quarantine in the country."

Añez concluded a recent speech by threatening brutal repression against anyone who violates the quarantine, which would bring down the "active participation of the Armed Forces and the National Police."

Añez's March 25 decree that extended the nationwide lockdown until April 15 included the threat that "individuals who incite non-compliance with this decree or misinform or cause uncertainty to the population will be subject to criminal charges for crimes against public health," punishable by between one and 10 years imprisonment.

The language allows for the intensification of the crackdown waged by the regime since it seized power last November, launching a "pacification program" that bloodily suppressed workers' protests and arresting journalists on charges of "sedition" for reports criticizing the government, calling them "communication terrorists."

Añez, who initially claimed that she would serve only as a transitional head of state until elections were held, has since announced that she will run for the presidency. She has urged voters not to allow "the savages" to return to power, a transparent reference to the indigenous heritage of Morales and many of his supporters. Polls, however, have shown the MAS presidential candidate, Luis Arce, as the favorite in the now-postponed elections.

While the MAS, a bourgeois nationalist party, has sought to accommodate itself to the coup regime, recognizing its legitimacy and agreeing to bar Morales from running for re-election, the military-backed government, backed by Washington, has responded only with increased repression.



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