

Modi extends India's coronavirus lockdown till May 3

Wasantha Rupasinghe, Keith Jones
15 April 2020

In an “address to the nation” yesterday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that his government’s hasty, ill-conceived 21-day countrywide anti-coronavirus lockdown will be extended till May 3.

Speaking on the day the lockdown was originally supposed to end, Modi offered only demagoguery, in remarks that were laced with right-wing nationalist and Hindu communalist appeals.

He offered no serious plan to deal either with the health emergency—which given India’s mass poverty and ramshackle public health system threatens to result in a catastrophic loss of life—or the socio-economic calamity triggered by the sudden, unplanned lockdown.

As the result of the lockdown, hundreds of millions of workers and toilers, who had little to no savings, have been left jobless and without any income. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), in the first week of April, just three in every 10 Indians of working age were employed.

Yet, even as India’s prime minister extended the lockdown for a further 19 days, he provided not a single rupee in additional aid for working people!

The 1.7 *lakh crore* rupee (US \$22.5 billion) relief package that the far-right, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government announced on the lockdown’s second day, March 26, amounts in per capita terms to less than 1,250 rupees (US\$ 16.45). In other words, India’s already impoverished masses have been placed on famine rations.

Moreover, much of this “aid” will only be available weeks and even months hence, and many of the most vulnerable, including most migrant workers, will not be able to access it. This is because they are not enrolled in the existing poverty alleviation programs through which the state relief is being distributed.

While Modi, with consummate cynicism, claimed in yesterday’s speech to be concerned and moved by the plight of India’s workers and toilers, all he would do for them was make a hollow appeal for others to provide them with charity. Adopting the tones of a Hindu priest, this servant of

India’s rapacious capitalist elite beseeched, “Take as much care of poor families as you can. Especially try to fulfill their food requirements.”

What Modi had to say about addressing the health emergency was equally hollow.

He once again lectured the populace on the need to practice social distancing, but failed to say how this could be done in the teeming slums of India’s major cities, where people often live five and more to a room. Nor did he explain how the urban and rural poor can regularly wash their hands, when hundreds of millions don’t have running water in their homes, and more than one in 10 Indians, according to a 2018 Water Aid India study, “lack access to clean water *near* their home” (emphasis added).

Modi began his address by baldly asserting India’s fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is “moving ahead with great strength and steadfastness.”

He went on to boast that due to his government’s “holistic approach and quick decisions” India “is in a well-managed position” in combating the pandemic, “better” than “many developed nations.”

This is all lies. Apart from imposing travel restrictions, the Modi government did essentially nothing to halt the spread of COVID-19 for the first two months after the outbreak in China had been identified as a potential major threat. Yet Indian and international epidemiologists and other scientists have long recognised that India would be especially at risk in any global pandemic.

In its 2020-2021 budget, presented at the beginning of February, the Modi government allotted a derisory 69,000 crore rupees (US \$9 billion) to providing health care for India’s 1.37 billion people, or less than \$7 per person.

Not until March 24—that is the very day Modi was compelled to abruptly shift from claiming India was a model to the region, even the world, in containing the coronavirus to imposing an unprecedented India-wide lockdown—did the government announce emergency funding to fight the pandemic.

Even then, the promised amounts are a pittance given the

shortages of trained medical personnel, personal protective equipment (PPE), and ventilators, and the ruinous state of India's public health infrastructure, which runs the gamut from dilapidated (in the major urban centers) to non-existent (across rural India.) The promised 15,000 crore rupees (\$1.97 billion) is on a per capita basis less than 110 rupees (\$1.45)—this when a single COVID-19 test reportedly costs more than 5,000 rupees (about \$67).

As for Modi's claims about India being in a "well-managed" position, these are belied by:

- the hunger, distress and suffering inflicted on working people across India by the lockdown;

- the makeshift internal refugee camps to which millions of migrant workers who sought to return to their villages because the government's ill-prepared shutdown left them jobless, and in many case homeless, have been confined;

- the many medical facilities that have had to be temporarily shut because so many staff became infected with the virus because they lacked proper PPE, including even face masks;

- and, last but not least, by the surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths.

On the day the lockdown was announced, India had 564 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 10 deaths attributable to the virus. By yesterday, the number of confirmed cases had increased more than 20-fold to 11,393, and the death toll had reached 393.

Prioritising money over human life, Indian authorities have administered less than 250,000 COVID-19 tests, one of the lowest per capita test rates in the world. Even now, people who present with COVID-19-type symptoms are only being tested if they can be directly tied to a cluster of previous confirmed cases or, since revised testing criteria were announced late last week, live in a small number of previously identified "hotspots."

Based on the skewed results produced by its test-rationing, New Delhi, despite worried warnings from health experts that the true number of infections is likely many times higher, continues to insist that there is no "community transmission" in India.

In reality, everything indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to explode across the world's second most populous country in the coming weeks.

Nevertheless, even as it extends the lockdown, the BJP government is conspiring with big business to reopen at least

15 economic sectors, including the auto, steel, rubber, telecom equipment, agro-chemical, and construction industries (see: "As COVID-19 pandemic surges across India, business presses for quick return to work").

Modi announced yesterday that the lockdown would be intensified for the better part of the next week, especially in "hotspots," but that after April 20 there will be "graded relaxations."

Modi invoked the desperate plight of India's workers and toilers in trying to justify what—under conditions of the absence of systematic mass testing, contact-tracking, and an entirely revamped health care system—can only be a premature and precipitous return to work that will amplify the pandemic and the consequent loss of life many times over.

"Provision of this limited exemption" in the areas that are to be identified by the 20th will be done, asserted Modi, "keeping in mind the livelihood of our poor brothers and sisters. Those who earn daily, make ends meet with daily income, they are my family. One of my top-most priorities is to reduce the difficulties in their lives."

Migrant workers lost little time in giving their answer to the claim of Modi, who was propelled to power by big business to dramatically intensify the exploitation of the working class, to be their "brother."

In Mumbai more than a thousand jobless migrant workers were attacked yesterday afternoon by lathi-wielding police after they had congregated at the Bandra Railway Station to demand that they be transported home. Later in the day, textile workers in Surat, Gujarat, staged their third protest in recent days to likewise demand that they be allowed to return to their villages, rather than being forced to survive on thin gruel rations.

Surat Municipal Commissioner Banchhanidhi Pani told the *Economic Times* that NGOs and the municipality are currently "feeding around six lakh three thousand (603,000) people per day," in Gujarat's second largest city.

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