

Pakistan “reopening” much of its economy as COVID-19 cases and deaths spike

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Pakistan is among a growing list of countries whose governments, at the urging of big business, are willfully flouting the World Health Organization’s warnings against a premature return to work.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that Pakistan’s three-week coronavirus lockdown, which was effectively imposed on the Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) government by the provinces and the country’s powerful military establishment, is being extended until April 30. But Khan emphasized that this will only be a “partial lockdown,” adding that the “construction industry and other sectors will be opened from today in phases.”

Subsequently, the government announced that more than a dozen economic sectors are being allowed to resume at least partial operations, including mines, cement, chemicals, fertilizer, and most manufacturing. The government is especially keen to have major exporters like the garment industry back in production.

Claims that the government will ensure that workers’ safety will be protected are a cynical fraud. The authorities’ true attitude to workers’ health and safety was exemplified by their ordering police last week to viciously attack medical staff in Quetta, Balochistan who were protesting the government’s failure to provide them with masks and other safety equipment. (See: Police in Pakistan beat and arrest health care workers protesting over Coronavirus safety concerns, lack of PPE)

A 2019 report found that seven years after the Ali Enterprises factory fire in Karachi that killed almost 300 people, Pakistan’s garment workers continue to face “unsafe” working conditions, with whatever safety regulations exist on paper flouted by employers and un-enforced by the state.

Pakistan’s precipitous return to work threatens to

greatly amplify the COVID-19 pandemic in a densely-populated, impoverished country of more than 200 million, with a public health system in ruins.

As it is, the novel coronavirus pandemic is anything but under control. The official figures show that since the beginning of the month the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases have almost tripled, from 2,291 to 6,383. Deaths, meanwhile, have risen from 31 to 111.

But these figures are in all likelihood reflective of the lack of testing more than anything else. To date, just 73,349 tests have been administered.

Last Saturday, Sindh province reported a 20 percent positive rate from the approximately 500 COVID-19 tests it had been able to perform over a 24-hour period. Most of these came from Karachi, the country’s commercial capital and home to over 20 million people living in squalid and extremely crowded conditions.

An adviser to the Khan government for commerce and investment, Abdul Razak Dawood, told Bloomberg late last week that companies with export orders will resume work, albeit with “precautionary measures including calling in only essential employees and ensuring regular disinfection.” Bloomberg reporters failed to ask who would be considered “non-essential workers” in factories producing for the world market under a regime of super exploitation.

Dawood’s comments were corroborated by Information Minister Firdous Ashiq Awan, who stated last Friday, “We are going to resume key sectors that employ millions.”

Even before Khan’s Tuesday announcement that the “lockdown” is being lifted for much of industry, factories that supply such global brands as Nike and Puma had resumed production. Last week, the PTI-led Punjab provincial government gave the green light for the reopening of 117 factories engaged in food

processing, textiles, leather and auto parts manufacturing.

The PTI government's rallying behind business' call for the "reopening" of construction, manufacturing and other industries comes amidst mounting fears in ruling circles over the impact of declining exports on Pakistan's ability to pay for imports or service its external debt.

With its foreign reserves rapidly depleting, the government has already appealed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an emergency \$1.4 billion bailout. This is apart from a \$6 billion loan already in place.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Khan has been outspoken in his opposition to taking urgent action to stop the spread of COVID-19, callously prioritizing business profit over the lives of the country's workers and toilers.

Feigning concern for the tens of millions of urban and rural poor, he has repeatedly proclaimed that a lockdown will condemn them to "die from hunger."

But it is Khan's government that has been waging a ruthless class war against Pakistan's workers and toilers, imposing brutal IMF-dictated austerity measures and pro-investor "reforms." Even before the pandemic, the poverty rate was projected to rise to 40 percent by July from 31.3 percent a year earlier, due to low economic growth, double-digit inflation and the impact of the IMF-measures.

Throughout the pandemic, the real concern of Khan and his PTI government has been the impact that the measures needed to control and contain the spread of COVID-19 will have on business profits and the wealth and investments of the capitalist elite.

According to figures presented by the Pakistan-based *Business Recorder*, the country's external debt is \$110 billion and growing, with \$13.5 billion in loan payments to be paid in 2020. Foreign portfolio investments that the government was banking on to ease the pressure are "no more the case," the report highlighted. The IMF emergency loan, if approved, would prop up foreign reserves only temporarily.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva was quick to remark that the Khan government "reaffirmed their commitment to the reform policies included in the current arrangement," as soon as Pakistan requested emergency financing from the IMF's COVID-19 fund.

Her remarks refer to a spate of highly unpopular pro-investor measures, including privatization, regressive tax increases and the scaling back or elimination of price subsidies.



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