Coronavirus pandemic surges across South Asia, even as governments push for a return to work

Our correspondents
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The global coronavirus pandemic, which has recorded over 3 million cases and more than 210,000 deaths worldwide, is rapidly spreading throughout South Asia. The response of governments in the region to this emergency underscores the contempt of the rival national bourgeois ruling elites for hundreds of millions of working people and rural toilers.

Given the region's densely populated urban centres—including Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai and Kolkata in India; Karachi and Lahore in Pakistan; Dhaka in Bangladesh; and Colombo in Sri Lanka— the appalling state of its public healthcare systems, widespread poverty and lack of universal access to clean water and sanitation, the disease threatens to kill millions, even tens of millions, of people in South Asia alone.

Yet despite this very real danger, South Asia's governments have failed to take any substantial measures to effectively combat the pandemic. Their response has largely been limited to social distancing measures, including lockdowns, and travel bans. All of South Asia's governments have strictly rationed COVID-19 tests, thereby covering up the true extent of the pandemic.

As of yesterday, **India** had reported 29,451 confirmed cases with 939 deaths.

All of India has been under a lockdown since March 24. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi implemented this shutdown without warning and without any serious plan to provide basic necessities to the impoverished masses, who make up the vast majority of India's population. The lockdown, which was initially slated to end on April 14, has since been extended a further 19 days through May 3.

The Modi government is now preparing to restart the economy in line with demands from big business and investors to secure their profit interests. Last week, the manufacturing and farming sectors were allowed to start operating, but without any measures taken to ensure worker safety. The Home Ministry announced Friday that small retail shops outside "hotspots" and cities under quarantine could reopen. However, they will only be allowed to operate with half of their staff. Customers must maintain social distancing, and wear masks and gloves.

The reckless and sudden imposition of the lockdown by the Modi government proved disastrous for hundreds of millions of working people and the rural poor. No mechanism was put in place to support the vast majority of workers in the so-called informal sector, who were left without wages and now face hunger and starvation. Modi is cynically exploiting the plight of these workers to justify his plan to reopen the economy.

Although Modi announced, some 36 hours after the lockdown began, a stimulus package of 1.7 trillion rupee ($US22.5 billion) allegedly to benefit the poorest 800 million Indians, a large portion of the funds were effectively recycled, linked to previously announced programs. The per capita amount is a pittance, about US $28.25 or 2,150 rupees, much of it in aid to be paid weeks and even months hence. Moreover, because of various bureaucratic hurdles and government incompetence hundreds of millions of desperately poor people have been unable to access even this famine-type relief.

The Modi government has consistently rejected calls it initiate mass testing, and has failed to provide significant additional funding to strengthen the health care system. It has also refused to make available the necessary protective gear for doctors and other medical staff treating infected patients.

In **Pakistan**, Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) government have extended their half-hearted lockdown measures until May 9. The provincial governments and military all but forced the central government to impose the shutdown, which Khan, whose government has been imposing brutal austerity measures, cynically first opposed, on the grounds people would "die of hunger."

The government's primary aim in subsequent adjustments, which it claims have now given Pakistan a "smart lockdown," has been to rapidly restart commercial activities, especially export industries.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases currently stand at 14,612, with 312 deaths. These figures undoubtedly mask the true extent of the pandemic due to a severe lack of testing. As of Monday, only 150,756 tests had been performed in a country of more than 200 million people. Like the health care systems in other countries in the region, Pakistan's barely accessible health

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services are on life-support due to a shortage of acute-care beds, equipment, trained staff and personal protective gear.

In spite of his crocodile tears for the people, Khan has allocated funds equal to just 1.2 percent of gross domestic product to counter the health crisis and its economic fallout. Yet even conservative estimates suggest that nearly 40 percent of the population is in poverty and in dire need of assistance.

In taking a $1.4 billion emergency "anti-COVID-19" loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Khan and the PTI government re-committed to the pro-investor "reforms" they agreed to under an existing $6 billion IMF loan.

The fact that the military has come forward with a strategy to assist the implementation of Khan's "smart lockdown" is a warning to the working class. The military's "Test, Trace and Quarantine" plan is a smokescreen to drag workers back to work, especially in export-oriented industries, in a desperate effort by the ruling elite to prevent the economy from plunging into an even deeper crisis.

Khan, exploiting decades of promotion of the religious right by the military and ruling elite, came to power in August 2018 as a "born-again Muslim" promoting "Islamic values." Ignoring the warnings of medical experts, he has refused to impose restrictions on religious gatherings during Ramadan. According to one estimate, this alone could result in an additional 70,000 COVID-19 patients by May 15.

In **Bangladesh**, there have officially been 6,462 cases and 155 COVID-19 deaths. But Bangladesh media have reported more than 200 additional deaths during the past month-and-a-half of people who had coronavirus-like symptoms yet were never tested. As of last Friday, only 39,776 tests had been carried out in a country which with 165 million people has a population-density nearly three times that of India.

National health services are nearing collapse and medical staff and workers are struggling due to a shortage of PPE, with available items often of poor quality. At least 156 doctors and 180 nurses have been infected. One doctor has died, and around 450 doctors and 600 nurses are currently in quarantine.

The country's lockdown has been extended until May 5. However, since Sunday the government has permitted garment industry bosses to reopen their factories so they can meet foreign orders and manufacture coronavirus-related masks and other products. At least 600 factories have resumed production to date. Given the terrible record the factory owners have of ensuring worker safety in normal times and the complicity of the government in greenlighting sweatshop exploitation, it is to be expected that all the promises that workers' safety will be protected will prove a dead letter.

In **Sri Lanka**, there were 611 confirmed COVID-19 cases and seven deaths as of Tuesday evening.

Under conditions of a significant growth in new cases in recent days, the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse prolonged the weeks-long nationwide lockdown (or curfew in Sri Lankan parlance) into the beginning of this week. The lockdown is to continue at least until early May in three districts in the Western Province–Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara–and in Puttalam district in the island's northwest.

Rajapakse's government, in line with the ruling elites in the US and Europe, is aggressively moving to reopen the economy. Fourteen Free Trade Zones (FTZs) have already reopened with reduced workforces, amounting to about one third of the usual number of workers. This indicates that companies will seek to carry out job cuts so as to place the burden of the economic crisis intensified by the pandemic onto the backs of workers. Meanwhile, those workers who have been called back to garment manufacturers and other FTZ industries are being forced to work in unsafe conditions. The plantation sector has also resumed work.

The government has announced the opening of offices and other workplaces in the private and public sectors beginning May 4. The decision to lift the lockdown amid a raging pandemic will put the lives of millions of workers at risk. The government is leaving it up to workers to organise their own infection protection. Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi and other government officials have repeatedly insisted that although the economy is being reopened, the threat remains, and people must be responsible and stick to social distancing measures. However, due to the poor state of the public transit system, which most workers must use to reach their jobs, maintaining these hygiene requirements is almost impossible.

President Rajapakse has used the COVID-19 emergency to provide a cover and pretext for a series of authoritarian actions. In a particularly menacing step, he has ordered the deployment of a large contingent of military personnel to Colombo. Although the publicly declared aim of this move is to impose social distancing and other health measures to contain the pandemic, the real aim is to suppress the inevitable opposition within the working class that will emerge due to the government's reckless back-to-work policy and imposition of IMF austerity measures.

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