Aid group warns of 3.2 million COVID-19 deaths, 1 billion infections in war-torn countries

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30 April 2020

The rapid worldwide spread of the coronavirus pandemic threatens to kill as many as 3.2 million people and infect one billion in countries that have been ravaged by war and the displacement of masses of refugees, an international aid group has warned.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) warned that even as the worldwide number of coronavirus infections exceeds 3.2 million and the global death toll approaches a quarter of a million, far more deadly consequences are inevitable in what it refers to delicately as the "fragile" countries.

"These numbers should serve as a wake-up call: the full, devastating and disproportionate weight of this pandemic has yet to be felt in the world's most fragile and war-torn countries," the IRC warned.

Chief among these "fragile" countries, according to the aid agency, are Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, all of them societies that have been decimated by direct US military interventions and proxy wars.

The IRC's projections are based on epidemiological modeling and data produced by the Imperial College London and the World Health Organization, which are based in large part on mortality patterns recorded during the early outbreak of the pandemic in China.

On this basis, it acknowledges that its horrendous death toll projections "may be conservative at best." It states: "The ICL/WHO model uses the best available mortality data, from China, which presupposes that levels of medical care available therein would be available elsewhere. As the IRC has previously warned, fragile states have nowhere near the healthcare capacity provided in China."

It points out that in Venezuela, which has been subjected to a US sanctions regime that is tantamount to a state of war, more than half of the doctors have left the country and 90 percent of hospitals are plagued by shortages of medicine and critical supplies.

Moreover, the report states, the refugee camps of the Middle East and South Asia are 8.5 times more densely packed than the Diamond Princess cruise ship, where transmission of the virus was up to four times faster than in Wuhan, China. In these camps, social distancing is a patent impossibility.

Among the countries most threatened by the spread of the coronavirus, according to the IRC report, is Yemen, where the first confirmed expansion of the virus was reported on Wednesday, going from one port worker who was infected to five Yemenis with the disease. As in every one of the war-ravaged countries covered in the IRC report, these figures are less than the tip of the iceberg under conditions in which there is no significant testing of the population.

The cluster of new cases in Yemen was detected in the port city of Aden, which has become a focal point for a further escalation of the military conflict that has raged in Yemen since Saudi Arabia invaded the country in 2015 in an attempt to reimpose the unelected US-backed puppet government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Islamist forces in the Southern Transitional Council, backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have seized control of Aden, proclaiming an independent southern state, opening the prospect of a new round of fighting with forces loyal to Saudi Arabia and Hadi. The UAE is pursuing its own interests in the conflict, seeking to cement its hold over the Horn of Africa where it has considerable commercial interests.

Meanwhile, despite a self-proclaimed truce by the Saudi monarchy, airstrikes by the Saudi-led forces against areas controlled by the Houthi rebels in northern Yemen increased by 30 percent last week, according to the

Yemen Data Project, which monitors the war.

Saudi air strikes—some 257,000 of them since 2015—are carried out with US-supplied warplanes, bombs and missiles, and facilitated by logistical support from the Pentagon. With this US support—implemented under the Democratic Obama administration and continued and deepened under the Republican administration of Trump—they have decimated hospitals in Yemen, leaving the country largely defenseless against the spread of the coronavirus.

The five-year-long war has killed at least 110,000 Yemenis, while leaving hundreds of thousands more wounded. An estimated 75,000 children under the age of five have starved to death since the onset of the war, while at least 14 million people are on the brink of starvation. On top of this, both the US and the UN have slashed aid to the impoverished and war-ravaged country. The death toll from the coronavirus in the country would be fueled by comorbidities that include hunger and the worst cholera epidemic in history.

A similar threat is posed in Libya, which once boasted one of the most advanced health care systems in Africa but was left decimated by a 2011 US-NATO war for regime change that toppled and murdered the country's former leader Col. Muammar Gaddafi. Since then, Libya has been a battlefield between opposing militias, backed by rival powers seeking control over the country's oil reserves, the largest on the African continent.

The IRC warned that a response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Libya has been severely undermined by continuing fighting which has included the targeting of health care infrastructure. Two field hospitals were shelled on Wednesday, wounding five paramedics. The Al Khadra Hospital in Tripoli was also hit three times over the past month, forcing the shutdown of one of the only facilities designated for the treatment of patients with COVID-19. In the past week, four other hospitals were forced to suspend operations because of the fighting.

Most at risk in the country are some 700,000 refugees and migrants, subject to brutal persecution and many of them imprisoned in terribly overcrowded detention camps through which the virus can spread like wildfire. At least 80 percent of them have no access whatsoever to healthcare.

Similar conditions prevail in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, whose combined death toll from nearly two decades of US wars of aggression numbers well over one million. All of them have seen basic social infrastructure, including health care systems, decimated.

In these countries, as all over the planet, the coronavirus is exposing and cruelly exacerbating conditions that had already been created by capitalist exploitation and imperialist aggression.

Despite the shocking warnings of the IRC report, the agency's recommendations for confronting the danger are strikingly inadequate and spineless. They include the plea, "Donors should ensure immediate COVID-19 response financing reaches frontline responders," and a call for governments to "limit restrictions on the movement of humanitarian personnel, humanitarian and COVID-19 supplies, essential medicines, and food."

Unmentioned is the Pentagon's involvement in ongoing military interventions in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, the slashing of US aid to the affected countries, Washington's decision to cease funding the WHO and the sanctions regimes that have cut off vitally needed supplies to Iran and Venezuela.

This is hardly surprising given the composition of the IRC. The New York-based agency is headed by David Miliband, the former British Labour Party foreign minister. Its board of overseers includes no less than four former secretaries of state and war criminals: Henry Kissinger, Madeline Albright, Gen. Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, as well as CEOs of various US banks and corporations, including Goldman Sachs, Bank of America, Citibank, Morgan Stanley, American Express and PepsiCo. The agency's supposedly humanitarian operations are an instrument of and totally subordinated to the strategic interests of US imperialism.

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