World health conference dominated by US-China conflict as coronavirus spreads across the globe

Bill Van Auken
19 May 2020

Amid dire predictions that the COVID-19 pandemic is continuing to spread, threatening to inflict massive death and suffering upon the poor and oppressed countries of the global south, Washington sought to turn Monday's annual conference of the World Health Organization into an arena for its relentless campaign to scapegoat China.

The 73rd annual World Health Assembly, bringing together representatives from the WHO's 194 member states, was held Monday, as the worldwide number of confirmed coronavirus cases stood at roughly 4.8 million and deaths at 317,000, while hundreds of millions of working people across the globe have lost their jobs and incomes.

Under these conditions, the Trump administration delivered a belligerent pre-recorded video from its Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, which doubled down on Washington's unfounded allegations against both the WHO and China.

"We must be frank about one of the primary reasons this outbreak spun out of control," Azar said. "There was a failure by this organization to obtain the information that the world needed, and that failure cost many lives."

Azar's denunciation came amid reports that US President Donald Trump has decided to extend indefinitely a freeze his administration imposed on US funding for the WHO, $400 million that constitutes one-fifth of world health body's annual budget.

Turning his fire on China, Azar echoed the lurid conspiracy theories hatched by the Trump White House casting Beijing's response to the outbreak of the pandemic as a deliberate attempt to infect and debilitate the United States.

"In an apparent attempt to conceal this outbreak at least one member state made a mockery of their transparency obligations, with tremendous costs for the entire world," Azar said. "We saw that WHO failed at its core mission of information-sharing and transparency when member states do not act in good faith."

All of this is nonsense. As WHO chief Tedros Adhanon Ghebreysus made clear in his own speech to the meeting, the WHO "sounded the alarm early, and we sounded it often." On January 30, the WHO declared a global health emergency, its highest level of alert, based on information supplied by China. At the time, there were less than 100 confirmed cases and not a single death outside of China.

The US government decided to ignore the alert, concerned above all to downplay the dangers of the coronavirus in order to keep share prices rising on Wall Street. Its response, once the impact of the pandemic was undeniable, was to direct the overwhelming majority of resources into a massive multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the financial markets.

Washington's criminal negligence and indifference had its inevitable effect, making the US the number one nation by far in terms of the spread of the coronavirus and its mass death toll. With barely four percent of the world's population, the United States has recorded close to a third of the world's confirmed infections and fully 29 percent of the world's deaths.

There could not be a more irrefutable indictment of US policy. The spurious attacks on the WHO and China are aimed at diverting attention from this criminal record, while at the same time advancing US imperialism's pursuit of global geo-strategic interests by escalating the war drive against its main global rival.

While in the United States and Europe, the first epicenters of the pandemic, capitalist ruling classes are attempting to launch a premature "reopening of the economy" in order to resume the unrestrained exploitation of the working class—no matter what the cost in terms of health and lives—the pandemic continues it global spread.

In his remarks to to the global health meeting, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres warned that "the virus has spread across the world and is now moving into the global South, where its impact may be even more devastating."

The WHO's director general, Tedros, made a similar warning stating that "developing states and those suffering from violence and conflict are trying to confront this threat in the most challenging of circumstances."

"How do you practice physical distancing when you live in crowded conditions?" he asked. "How do you stay at home when you have to work to feed your family? How do you practice hand hygiene when you lack clean water?"

These are the conditions that confront the majority of humanity, leading to the most explosive growth of the pandemic in the former colonial and historically oppressed countries.

In **South America**, the number of confirmed cases has risen to over 443,000, and the number of deaths to over 23,000. Brazil, the continent's largest country, accounts for well over half the confirmed cases, more than 244,000, while studies indicate that the real number is likely 15 times higher. The number of confirmed deaths stands at over 16,000.

In Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city and the epicenter of the country's COVID-19 outbreak, the mayor has admitted that the city's public hospitals are "near collapse". Already filled to 90 percent capacity, they will have to turn away new patients within two weeks.

© World Socialist Web Site

As the number of cases and deaths soar, Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro has demanded an unrestrained resumption of capitalist production, urging the country's financial and corporate oligarchy to go to "war" against even the limited social-distancing measures imposed by state governments. He has also signed a decree granting full immunity to public authorities for any "mistakes" made in dealing with the pandemic.

Even as Bolsonaro and his supporters within the military move to consolidate ever-more authoritarian forms of rule to enforce the herding of workers into unsafe factories and workplaces, there has been an explosive growth of protests and strikes by health care workers, who have suffered the highest death toll in the world, with 116 nurses dying since the outbreak of the pandemic.

South Asia is also suffering one of the highest rates of increase in coronavirus infections on the planet. India's confirmed cases have risen to over 100,000, and deaths to over 3,000. The deadly virus is taking its greatest toll in the slums of Delhi and Mumbai. While the far-right Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has imposed one of the most extreme lockdowns in the world, the country's ramshackle health care system is not prepared to deal with the outbreak. The country spends barely 1 per cent of GDP on health care. The result is disease, hunger and police violence and brutality for the masses of workers and oppressed.

The impoverishment and hunger are being utilized to push workers back into factories, while the government exploits the crisis to push through a massive privatization and economic restructuring program aimed at attracting corporate and financial investment away from China.

On May 18, Sri Lanka's number of confirmed coronavirus cases reached 986 with nine deaths. Despite the danger of spreading the virus, the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has reopened the country's economy beginning on May 11, ending its lockdown. Although Colombo and the adjoining Gampaha district remain under curfew, all public and private sector enterprises have been allowed to function all over the island, with one third of their normal work force. At the same time, in line with its policy of utilizing the pandemic to intensify its militarization plans, the Rajapakse government has deployed soldiers in Colombo and inside trains, train stations and bus terminals, supervising public movements.

The Philippines has recorded 12,718 confirmed cases and 831 deaths. President Rodrigo Duterte has extended a lockdown until June. Duterte has intensified his crackdown on democratic rights under the cover of the pandemic crisis. His government has shut down the country's biggest television network, ABS-CBN, under the flimsy legal pretext of the expiration of its franchise. But the real reason was the network's critical attitude toward Duterte's authoritarian moves.

Afghanistan has emerged among the hardest hit countries in South Asia. Devastated by the nearly two-decades long US• imperialist war, the COVID-19 outbreak has only intensified the suffering of its population. Currently, Afghanistan has 7,072 confirmed COVID-19 cases and about 173 people dead due to the virus. With little testing, these numbers are unquestionably a fraction of the real toll of the virus.

Africa as of Monday saw its confirmed cases rise to nearly 87,000, with close to 2,800 deaths. With Lesotho reporting its first infection, every one of the 54 countries on the continent has become part of the global pandemic. With its impoverished health care systems the least able to confront the deadly virus, the WHO has predicted that some quarter of a billion Africans will become infected and as many as 190,000 will die within the first year of the pandemic.

South Africa had 15,515 confirmed cases and 264 deaths as of Monday. The country's Western Cape has seen the highest rate of community transmission of the virus, concentrated in its poor and densely populated townships like Khayelitsha, Cape Town's largest informal settlement.

The highest number of confirmed deaths in Africa—630—have been recorded in Egypt, which has reported 12,229 confirmed cases. The US-backed dictatorship of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has exploited the pandemic to escalate its police state repression, rounding up journalists for writing articles questioning the regime's figures and its handling of the crisis.

Sharp increases in case numbers have also been reported in Nigeria, the continent's most populous nation, with nearly 6,000 confirmed cases and 182 deaths. With only 28,000 tests having been done, resulting in 21 per cent positive results, the real numbers are unquestionably vastly higher.

Ghana has also seen a sharp increase in its cases, with more than 500 workers at a fish processing factory having tested positive for coronavirus.

Since May 1, South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana have all seen their numbers of coronavirus cases double, even as the governments of all three countries introduced a phased reopening of businesses and production.

In the **Middle East,** the number of COVID-19 cases rose to over 465,000 on Monday. The highest number of cases—150,000—has been recorded in Turkey. Iran has over 122,000 cases and the highest number of confirmed deaths in the region, 7,057. It reported its steepest one-day increase in cases on Monday, with 2,294 more people testing positive. The government began reopening the country's economy late last month, easing quarantine restrictions.

While the deadly virus is also spreading through Syria, Libya and Yemen, three countries whose social infrastructures have been decimated by US-backed imperialist interventions, the lack of testing by local authorities or international organizations has left the scope of the crisis unknown.

All over the world, from the US and Western Europe, to Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and intensified the previously existing conditions of pervasive social inequality, the transfer of wealth from the masses of working people to a ruling financial oligarchy, a hollowing out of democratic forms of rule and an increasing turn toward authoritarianism, and the buildup toward imperialist war.

With the lives of millions of people all over the world hanging in the balance, the battle against the pandemic emerges ever more openly as a political struggle that can be waged successfully only by means of the independent political mobilization and international unification of the working class in the fight for socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site