

South America a “new epicenter” of COVID-19 pandemic, WHO warns

Bill Van Auken
23 May 2020

The South American continent has become a “new epicenter” of the global coronavirus pandemic, Dr. Michael Ryan, the executive director of the World Health Organization’s Health Emergencies Program, said Friday at a press conference in Geneva.

He added that while “We’ve seen many South American countries with an increasing number of cases ... certainly the most affected is Brazil at this point.”

As of Friday, the total number of confirmed cases on the continent had risen to 578,187, with 29,361 recorded deaths. Brazil, the continent’s largest country, accounts for 320,000 of the confirmed cases and over 20,000 of South America’s deaths. Brazil is now reporting over 1,000 new deaths a day.

Ryan pointed to the concentration of cases in both the state of São Paulo and in Amazonas, where he said the infection rate had reached 450 people for every 100,000 inhabitants, one of the highest in the world.

The WHO’s assessment constitutes a warning of the social catastrophe that is threatening the entire continent of 430 million people, where imperialist oppression and capitalist exploitation have created the most socially unequal conditions on the planet.

Brazil

In Brazil, as elsewhere in Latin America and internationally, the number of confirmed cases and deaths is a fraction of the real toll of the deadly virus. According to one recent study based on the small amount of testing done in the country, the government is likely counting only one out of 20 cases. Meanwhile, there are reports of people dying in their homes and even in the streets in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

The disease is spreading even more rapidly in the more impoverished areas of Brazil’s interior. In the case of Amazonas, this involves remote villages, some of them two hours by river from any hospital, where indigenous populations are threatened with extermination.

In terms of total reported infections, Brazil has overtaken Russia to become the second highest country in the world—after the United States—even as its acknowledged death toll is nearly seven times higher than that of Russia.

The country’s healthcare system is on the brink of collapse. In the city of São Paulo, the six public hospitals are reporting they already have 100 percent of their ICU beds occupied, even as the number of cases continues to rise. Those who are packing the emergency rooms are in many cases workers in their 30s and 40s, who have been forced to continue working despite the pandemic.

Healthcare workers in Brazil are suffering the ravages of the disease more than anywhere else in the world, with 137 nurses killed by the virus and many thousands more infected. The intolerable conditions in the

hospitals and healthcare centers have triggered strikes and protests by nurses and other healthcare professionals across the country. These workers are demanding adequate personal protective equipment, staffing and medical equipment, including ventilators. They have also demanded that they be paid for risking their lives daily.

The answer of Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro has been to announce a change in the government’s protocol for the use of hydroxychloroquine, the antimalarial drug that has also been promoted by his political ally, US President Donald Trump. Bolsonaro said that the drug would now be recommended for even mild cases of the disease, whereas before it had been restricted to those hospitalized with extremely serious cases.

There is no scientific evidence that the drug has any efficacy in terms of combating the coronavirus, while studies have indicated that those taking it have a significantly higher risk of death, including from cardiac arrhythmia.

Bolsonaro, who previously dismissed the coronavirus as a “little flu,” defended his prescription, while acknowledging that there is no scientific evidence to support it. He declared, “We are in a war. Worse than being defeated is the shame of not having fought.”

After two of his health ministers resigned over disagreements with his policies, the ex-captain installed an army general in the post, while military officers have taken over at least a dozen of the most important positions in the ministry.

The promotion of hydroxychloroquine as a miracle cure goes hand in hand with the Brazilian government’s criminal drive to end quarantines and resume production, with workers being herded back into auto plants, meatpacking houses and other industrial facilities to produce profits for the ruling class at the cost of their lives.

Meanwhile, cemetery workers are struggling to dig enough graves to handle the thousands dying each week.

Peru

In Peru, which has the second highest number of confirmed coronavirus cases after Brazil, over 111,000, with more than 3,100 recorded deaths, President Martín Vizcarra announced on Friday that a 68-day state of emergency and quarantine will be extended until June 30, with some “modifications and flexibilities.” The announcement triggered scattered protests in poor neighborhoods, where workers dependent upon the “informal sector” have been left without any income and are confronting growing hunger.

Among the “flexibilities” introduced by the Vizcarra government are those in the mining sector, which is dominated by transnational corporations and constitutes the principal source of the country’s

earnings. Operations have continued and, as a result, the companies themselves have reported 603 Peruvian mine workers infected with the virus, with the real number undoubtedly far higher.

Indications of the real extent of the death toll in Peru have been provided by the minister of interior, who reported that 106 police officers have lost their lives to the virus, and a statement by the country's prison authorities acknowledging that 182 inmates have been killed by the disease. The uncontrolled spread of the virus in the country's prisons has led to uprisings, including one in which nine inmates lost their lives.

A report in the *Financial Times* established that some 8,000 deaths from COVID-19 have not been counted by the Vizcarra government. A government spokesman did not dispute the report but denied that there was a deliberate attempt to undercount the deaths. He claimed that the "anachronistic instruments" used to keep track of the dead led to delays in keeping up with the toll.

As elsewhere, the healthcare system is collapsing under the weight of the virus's spread. "It's like a horror movie, inside (the hospital) it looks like a cemetery for cadavers; patients are dying in their chairs or in wheelchairs," Miguel Armas, a nurse at Hipólito Unanue Hospital in Lima, told AFP.

Chile

Chile has the third largest number of infections, over 61,000, and one of the fastest rates of increase in the spread of the virus, reporting more than 4,000 new confirmed cases and 45 more deaths on Friday. With 90 percent of intensive care beds occupied, the right-wing government of President Sebastián Piñera has ordered the army to open up field hospitals to deal with the overflow of patients, while 1,000 new graves have been dug in Santiago to handle the rising fatalities.

At the end of April, Piñera announced that the country had passed the peak of the virus and urged the reopening of the economy, including the retail sector. Since then, the number of cases has soared.

The government's failure to provide social support for the masses of workers and poor under quarantine has led to an outbreak of protests and confrontations with the country's brutal militarized police force, the Carabineros. Workers in the El Bosque area on the southern edge of Santiago took to the streets again on Friday, after previous clashes with the security forces. "This isn't against the quarantine, it's against hunger," one of the protesters told a Chilean news broadcaster.

The protests in El Bosque have spread to other parts of the country, raising the prospect that the government's abject failure to combat the coronavirus or provide support for the millions left without jobs or incomes will reignite the mass uprising against social inequality that brought millions to the streets in October of last year.

Ecuador

While Ecuador trails Chile in the number of confirmed cases—largely as a result of less testing—it ranks third in the number of deaths. As of Friday, there were some 36,000 confirmed cases and 3,056 deaths. The country's largest city, the Pacific port of Guayaquil, was the gruesome scene in March and April of overflowing hospitals and bodies left in people's homes and lying in the streets. While the number of deaths has declined in Guayaquil, it has increased in the highland capital of Quito, where people have died in the streets.

The right-wing, pro-US government of President Lenín Moreno has exploited the pandemic to push through further austerity measures designed to meet the demands of the IMF and foreign capital. Packaged under the cynical guise of a "Humanitarian Support Law," the government has lifted subsidies on fuel prices and imposed cuts in the hours and salaries of workers. The major unions, peasant associations and social groups have called for mass protests on Monday.

Colombia

Colombia has also seen a surge in coronavirus cases and deaths, with 18,330 and 652, respectively, confirmed as of Friday. Healthcare workers took to the streets of Bogotá on Thursday in protests against the failure of right-wing President Iván Duque's government to provide adequate supplies and equipment for the country's hospitals. The National Health Institute has reported the deaths of 12 health care workers and the infections of nearly 1,000. Protesters reported the lack of personal protective equipment and also denounced the government for failing to pay them for months.

Case numbers and deaths are also rising sharply in Argentina and in Bolivia. In the latter, the dictatorial government installed last year in a US-backed coup is embroiled in a corruption scandal over the purchase of unsuitable respirators at double their real cost by a health minister who is a close political ally of unelected President Jeanine Áñez.

Alongside the savage loss of life to the coronavirus is the devastating economic impact of the pandemic on the masses of working people in Latin America. The UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has predicted that poverty will engulf 34.7 percent of Latin America's population, 215 million people, with 13 percent, 80 million, reduced to extreme poverty.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that the number of unemployed on the continent will rise to 305 million in the second quarter of 2020. The 158 million people working in the informal sector of Latin America and the Caribbean, 54 percent of the working population, will see their incomes reduced by more than 80 percent as a result of the crisis.

Drastically intensifying the conditions of capitalist exploitation, imperialist oppression, social inequality and authoritarian rule that existed before the coronavirus pandemic, the present crisis is creating the conditions for revolutionary upheavals throughout the hemisphere. The crisis is revealing ever more openly that the decisive question in the struggle against the pandemic and its impact on masses of people is the independent political mobilization and international unification of the working class in the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact