

Health care collapses in Bolivia after coup regime reopens economy

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The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Bolivia, which reached 30,676 this Saturday, has tripled since the country began reopening economic activities less than a month ago. The speed of transmission of the disease is reaching increasingly alarming levels, having exceeded a thousand new cases on five different days over the past week.

The Bolivian health care system is collapsing across the board. About two weeks ago, images of at least six people dying of COVID-19 in the streets of cities like La Paz, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz de la Sierra were reproduced in the media.

One of the cases was identified by *El Deber* as Juan Carlos Ch., who died on a street in Cochabamba after seeking aid at seven hospitals and not being admitted. Making the case even more horrendous, after that, three different cemeteries refused to take his body, as they were full.

This same situation has confronted many Bolivian families, who are being forced to keep the bodies of their loved ones for days inside their homes, or to bury them in an improvised manner, threatening to spread the disease even further in the communities.

Over the past few days, a number of treatment centers and a laboratory that processes COVID-19 tests have been forced to suspend their activities after reaching maximum capacity, shortage of supplies or massive contamination among their employees.

Health professionals at the Viedma Hospital in Cochabamba, one of the affected sites, held a protest last Tuesday. The workers held signs demanding: "We don't want life insurance, we want to live." One of them told *Los Tiempos*: "The words of the governor stood in the air. We are the ones buying our protective equipment, the government hasn't given us anything."

Another one declared: "We asked the authorities for

an isolation center, we have several infected colleagues who are in their homes compromising their families. We ask them to perform rapid tests because we don't know who is infected."

The same conditions have led workers to protest at other hospitals in Santa Cruz and La Paz. The absence of safe conditions is leading to substantial deaths of health care workers. Last Thursday alone, four doctors died from COVID-19 in Santa Cruz, bringing the official number of health care workers killed by the disease in the country to 48.

The advance of the infections also threatens the nearly 60 indigenous territories in Bolivia, most of them surrounded by municipalities with registered cases. Several territories have denounced the authorities for having abandoned them without access to health care or government bonuses. According to Miguel Vargas Delgado, director of the Center for Legal Studies and Social Research, the indigenous peoples, without exaggeration, "are at risk of disappearing."

The coup regime led by Jeanine Áñez has responded to the deadly spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bolivia with the escalation of its irresponsible reopening of the economy.

The government announced on Wednesday the creation of the so-called "National Program of Reactivation of Employment," with the declared aim of reactivating the Bolivian economy. It creates a fund of 30 billion Bolivianos (about US\$4.3 billion) to support programs transferring wealth to financial markets and corporations and financing public works and housing loans.

However, the police-state measures that have been implemented by the government under the pretext of enforcing quarantines are not being suspended; on the contrary.

In a June 19 event celebrating the 194th anniversary of the Bolivian Police, Áñez, who was awarded with the order of the “Gran Cruz,” said: “The moment we are approaching will be [the police’s] turn to lead, together with its people, the construction of the necessary environment to reactivate the economy of the country and of Bolivian homes.”

The blame for the social and health catastrophe is being diverted by the government with increasing accusations against its opponents. Áñez attributed the collapse of hospitals to the precarious state of the health care system bequeathed by the administration of deposed President Evo Morales of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). And the growing accusations of corruption over the government’s purchase of 170 ventilators were characterized by Áñez as fruit of “a network of conspiracy” involving the MAS.

These accusations add to reactionary attempts to attribute a “terrorist” character to the political opposition that would justify using force to maintain the regime established with the military coup that overthrew Morales last November.

The protests and blockades erected in May by poor workers in K’ara K’ara, south of Cochabamba, against the government’s starvation policy during the quarantine, have become the target of intense political persecution. Last week, two people were arrested as alleged leaders of the protests in K’ara K’ara, one of them a MAS candidate for deputy, Lucy Escobar, and were charged with assault on public health, terrorism and terrorist financing.

The holding for a few hours of a police officer, who apparently entered the K’ara K’ara blockade by mistake, was characterized by government minister Arturo Murillo as a “kidnapping” personally ordered by “narco-terrorist Evo Morales.” On his Twitter account, Murillo said that Morales “searches for death to convulse” the country.

On different occasions, Murillo and Áñez repeated the slogan that Bolivia has “two possible roads”: the first is that of the MAS and “evismo,” which they associate with terrorism, political violence and the division of Bolivians, and the second is “us.”

The threat of the coup regime remaining in power indefinitely was underscored over the past week. After a series of postponements, Áñez announced June 21 her agreement to hold new elections in September.

However, she affirmed to have made her decision under pressure from her opposition, both the MAS and Carlos Mesa, candidate for Comunidad Ciudadana. “They now should courageously assume the responsibility that they have for demanding with such insistence that there be elections in the middle of a pandemic,” she declared.

But already on Tuesday, hours after the enactment of the election law, the government made a new and contradictory statement. The national head of epidemiology at the Ministry of Health, Virgilio Prieto, said in an interview that, due to the prospects of growth of the pandemic and collapse of hospitals, “we may not even go to the polls.”

Bolivian workers, peasants and the indigenous population are seriously threatened by the criminal policies of Áñez’s reactionary government in response to the pandemic and its efforts to fortify the dictatorial regime.

But opposition to this threat can be mounted only by means of the independent political mobilization of the working class and a break with the political opposition headed by the MAS, which plays the role of paving the way for the reaction. Morales reaffirmed last week that the need of the moment is for a national dialog for reconciliation (with the forces that promoted the coup) and building a post-pandemic economic agenda.



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