

Pandemic rages across South Asia as total cases near 1 million

Our correspondents
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South Asia has recorded over 970,000 COVID-19 cases and is likely to surpass the grim milestone of 1 million infections today, as the pandemic rages out of control across the region.

As of yesterday, the total death toll stood at 23,761, according to official figures provided by the region's eight governments. However, due to the disastrous state of health care across South Asia the real number of fatalities is likely many times higher.

The pandemic is concentrated in South Asia's three most populous countries: India, with a population of 1.37 billion; Pakistan, with 212 million inhabitants; and Bangladesh, with a population of 161 million. Collectively these three countries account for 88.5 percent of the total cases and nearly 97 percent of South Asia's COVID-19 deaths.

Home to roughly one-quarter of the world's population, South Asia is characterised by mass poverty, high-population densities, and chronically underfunded, ramshackle health care systems—all of which have contributed to the rapid spread of the virus. The calamitous response of the region's governments to the pandemic has gravely exacerbated its impact on working people's lives and livelihoods.

After doing next to nothing to stop the pandemic's spread, the region's governments were forced to implement belated, ill-prepared lockdown measures in late March. However, determined to place the profit interests of big business ahead of the lives of workers and rural toilers, the ruling elites soon moved to reopen the economy, effectively abandoning any systematic attempt to combat COVID-19.

The social consequences of the pandemic for the impoverished masses are horrific. In a recent report, UNICEF noted that "the lives and future of children across South Asia are being torn apart" by COVID-19. While children "may be less susceptible to the virus itself," they are being "profoundly affected by the fallout, including the economic and social consequences of the lockdown and other measures taken to counter the pandemic."

The report projects that the crisis will negatively impact the futures of 600 million South Asian children. The number of South Asian children in poverty could rise by 120 million to more than 360 million within six months, the report predicts. "Already half a billion people in South Asia are categorised as food insecure," the report adds.

The UNICEF report also cites research by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, which warned "an additional 2,400 children in South Asia could die every day from the indirect consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic."

"In the worst-case scenario," the UNICEF report went on, "South Asia could see the additional deaths of as many as 881,000 children aged 5 or under and that of 36,000 mothers over the next twelve months."

India

India is the epicentre of the pandemic in South Asia. It has the fourth highest number of cases in the world, behind only the United States, Brazil, and Russia.

On Tuesday, India had 566,844 total cases, including 18,522 new infections in the previous 24-hour period alone, which is not far off the daily record of 19,906 cases set on Sunday. The official death toll stands at 16,893.

The pace of the pandemic's spread continues to accelerate. Over the past seven days, 110,657 new cases have been recorded and a further 2,554 deaths.

The sharp rise in cases is due to the government's homicidal back-to-work policy initiated in late April, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered the reopening of industrial worksites despite the extreme danger this poses to workers' lives. India's total COVID-19 cases on May 1 stood at 35,365 with 1,152 deaths. This means that almost 94 percent of all cases and 93 percent of deaths have been reported during the last two months (May 1-June 30).

Modi's reckless "Unlock 1" phase, which allowed religious sites and restaurants to open from June 8, only added fuel to the fire. Three weeks into "Unlock 1," there have been an additional 310,229 COVID-19 cases—equivalent to 54.7 percent of all India's coronavirus cases since the first infection was reported on January 30.

This makes clear the utter failure of Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

While boasting that they were implementing one of the "most stringent" COVID-19 lockdowns in the world, Modi and the Indian ruling elite did nothing during the more than two-month long lockdown to strengthen India's woefully inadequate health care system. The scenes from Delhi and Mumbai of overcrowded hospital wards, corpses piling up in hospital hallways and trash cans, and health care workers demanding PPE (personal protective equipment) after seeing colleagues become gravely ill and die are the inevitable products of this criminal inaction.

Nor did Modi or anyone else in the political establishment take adequate steps to provide for the social needs of the hundreds of millions of workers and their families left with no income or basic necessities of life during the lockdown. Around 10 million migrant workers, who were kept in jail-like refugee camps during the lockdown period, were returned in May and June to their native states and villages without being tested for COVID-19 or treated for symptoms. The result has been the rapid spread of the pandemic in the

rural districts of such states as West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand.

In India's cities and towns public health care facilities are in a ruinous condition, as a direct consequence of the Indian state's refusal over many years to spend more than a derisory 1.5 percent of GDP on health care. In much of rural India, where some two-thirds of the country's population resides, health care facilities are non-existent.

Even as the virus spreads out of control, the Modi government is today launching "Unlock II," the next stage of its reopening policy. This approach is motivated by the disastrous policy of "herd immunity," i.e. allowing the virus to spread freely through the population. This will have deadly consequences for large numbers of people, including the one in 11 Indians who suffer from diabetes and are thus at a higher risk of severe symptoms and death from the coronavirus. In India, 73 percent of COVID-19 deaths have been linked to co-morbidities including diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.

The scope of the pandemic's spread is likely much greater than official figures indicate. India has performed less than 9 million coronavirus tests. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the test rate for India is just over 6,000 per million inhabitants, one of the lowest rates among the worst-impacted countries.

Pakistan

Pakistan surpassed 4,300 deaths and 200,000 confirmed cases last weekend. Since the government started lifting its half-hearted lockdown measures on May 9, hospitals across the country have reported a flood of new infections.

Despite being among the countries with the highest number of new daily infections, the government of Imran Khan has rejected the WHO's appeal to re-impose lockdown measures. Instead, authorities have blockaded neighbourhoods with large numbers of cases.

Studies from experts at the Imperial College London and the University of Washington cited by Germany's public broadcaster, Deutsche Welle, project that the actual number of cases in Pakistan could be anywhere between three to 10 times higher than the official figures indicate.

Responding to widespread criticism of his handling of the pandemic, Khan, a demagogue who proclaimed himself a born-again Muslim, insisted Pakistan cannot afford a lockdown and urged the masses to "live with the virus."

Less than 25,000 tests are being performed daily. The overwhelming of the barely existent health care system is exacerbated by the increasing number of medical professionals falling ill with the virus. At least 65 medical workers have died and 5,000 have been infected so far, mainly due to the government's failure to provide PPE.

Instead of increasing funding for health care, Khan is accelerating a privatisation programme his government agreed to implement under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Economists estimate that more than 18 million jobs will be wiped out by the unfolding crisis. Hell bent on implementing the IMF's austerity program, the government has vowed to reduce the fiscal deficit from 9.4 percent to 7 percent of GDP in the budget for the financial year beginning in July. With the poverty rate at over 40 percent and

malnutrition spiking—38 percent of children under five are stunted—the Khan government has allocated 41 percent of spending for external debt servicing and 18 percent for defence, amounting to a 12 percent increase over the last year.

Bangladesh

As of Monday, Bangladesh had registered 141,801 COVID-19 infections with a death toll of 1,783.

Within a 24-hour time period ending on Monday morning, 4,014 new cases were detected, a daily record. Infection rates have continued to rise since the government abandoned lockdown measures in early June. Since June 14, daily new infections have remained consistently above 3,000.

With the economy and industry reopening, working people are bearing the brunt of the new infections. Four hundred seventeen workers from 174 factories were infected, with five deaths, as of June 21, according to a report in the *New Age*.

Bangladesh is currently performing fewer than 20,000 tests per day and has refused to increase testing, although the positive rate has consistently exceeded 20 percent. In terms of tests per 1 million people, Bangladesh has the lowest rate in South Asia. It has performed just 4,452 tests per million inhabitants, compared to Sri Lanka's 4,727, Pakistan's 5,715, India's 6,086, Nepal's 17,597 and Bhutan's 31,766.

The official deaths figures are also a gross undercount, since deaths of persons with "COVID-19 like symptoms" but who were never tested are excluded from the official death tally. A study by Dhaka University's Centre for Genocide Studies found deaths from "COVID-19 like symptoms" stood at 1,271, as of June 20. On June 24, the *New Age* reported that two COVID-19 volunteers said they had buried 475 people who had COVID-19 like symptoms just in the port city of Chattogram (formerly Chittagong).



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