

Peru in COVID-19 lockdown as new Brazilian variant exposes murderous “herd immunity” policy

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Peru’s government imposed another two-week lockdown on January 31 in an attempt to counter a renewed collapse of the country’s health care system. Family members of COVID-19 patients have been left waiting in the streets for up to three days to fill life-saving oxygen cylinders, and the daily death toll has risen to over 180 in a country of just 32 million inhabitants. Late January figures show 600 excess deaths in the country when compared to January, 2020, pointing to a vast underestimation of the already alarming rate of COVID-19 deaths.

The new lockdown involves a total ban on land and air travel in or out of 10 of the 26 regions in the country, including the capital, Lima. It allows each person to leave their home for just one hour a day. Before the second wave of the pandemic spread in the northern hemisphere with the murderous maintenance of an “open economy” for the holiday season, Peru had sustained the world’s highest per capita death rate, a situation the renewed lockdown backhandedly admits may be repeated in the next months.

Peru has thus far recorded over 42,000 official COVID-19 deaths and roughly 1.2 million cases. Among the hardest hit are Peruvian health care workers, with nearly 300 doctors having died from COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, along with over 100 nurses.

The medical consensus is that the real number of infections and deaths is far higher, as the country has a test rate of only 200,000 tests per million inhabitants.

This rate is just one fifth that of the United States, which itself suffered open sabotage by the Trump administration in order to hide the extent of the pandemic’s spread. At the same time, the Peruvian test rate is much higher than in neighboring countries such as Brazil and Argentina, where it stands at just 140,000 per million, and Mexico and Bolivia, where the rate is under 50,000 per million.

The capital of the Peruvian Amazon, Iquitos, was left out of the lockdown, after already having registered cases of the new Brazilian variant first found in travelers from Manaus. This new variant is suspected to be a major factor in the horrific collapse of the health infrastructure in Brazil’s Amazonian capital. Authorities are being forced to fly no less than 1,500 patients out of Manaus to avoid more deaths from the lack of oxygen. Peru’s department of Huánuco and the capital Lima have also registered cases of the Brazilian variant. In neighboring Bolivia, more than

100 cities had their COVID-19 alert status raised to maximum last week, but no lockdown has been announced yet.

Parallel to the surge in cases in Latin America is the unprecedented surge in the demand for medicinal oxygen, which now stands at almost triple the production and distribution rate in Manaus, and has surged by more than 700 percent in Mexico from December 20 to January 20, according to local authorities. In both Mexico and Peru, pandemic profiteers have tripled the price of oxygen cylinders.

With a rolling average of more than 1,000 deaths and 45,000 new cases in Brazil for 18 days now, the lack of oxygen is already threatening Brazil’s largest and richest city, São Paulo, which has taken in patients from around the country. The leading medicinal oxygen producer, White Martins, has notified local authorities in the city that it will retrieve oxygen cylinders from 3,000 home users in order to avoid a collapse in distribution to hospitals. From the north to the south of Brazil, nine states have more than 80 percent of COVID-19-dedicated ICUs occupied, while expansion capacity is hindered by hospitals struggling to treat patients who avoided or were unable to find medical care during the pandemic, leading to the onset or aggravation of other diseases.

The new Brazilian variant, named P.1 by the expert community, shares many genetic characteristics with the UK and especially the South African variants, which are believed to be more contagious than the original Wuhan strain. In the case of the South African variant, clinical trials have already found a dramatic decrease in the efficacies of two of the newest vaccines, from Novavax and Johnson & Johnson. The Novavax vaccine had its efficacy reduced from 89 percent in the UK to just 50 percent in South Africa, where the new strain is already dominant, while the Johnson & Johnson vaccine saw its efficacy drop from 72 percent in the US to just 57 percent in South Africa.

The P.1 variant was originally detected in Japan, after the genetic sequencing of samples taken from SARS-CoV-2 carriers coming from Manaus. Japanese authorities notified their international counterparts on January 10, and by January 27, eight countries, including South Korea, the United States and a number of European countries, had already registered cases of the new variant. Brazilian researchers have concluded that the new variant now accounts for at least 91 percent of cases in Manaus, up from 50 percent in December.

The resurgence of COVID-19 in the Amazon region connecting Brazil and Peru is the direct product of the murderous herd immunity policies pursued by the ruling classes internationally, and underscores their utter bankruptcy. Manaus was the stage for some of the most terrifying scenes internationally in the pandemic in mid-2020, with pictures of hundreds of fresh graves being dug seen around the world.

In September, a preliminary study estimated that 76 percent of the population in the city had already contracted COVID-19. The local authorities boasted that the city had achieved “herd immunity,” using this as the pretext for reopening schools and sending 110,000 pupils back to their classrooms—5 percent of the city’s population. The Manaus study was accepted for publication in the prestigious *Science* magazine, but appeared only in January, when the city was already seeing a 600 percent jump in COVID-19 deaths from December.

The same January 15 *Science* issue in which the article on the Manaus infection rate appeared, published a piece in the magazine’s Perspectives commentary section by British health experts Devi Sridhar and Deepti Gurdasani, reviewing the Manaus data. They warned bluntly in their headline, “Herd immunity by infection is not an option.”

They wrote: “What the findings of Buss et al. definitively show is that pursuing herd immunity through naturally acquired infection is not a strategy that can be considered. Achieving herd immunity through infection will be very costly in terms of mortality and morbidity, with little guarantee of success.” The article concluded: “Even a mitigation strategy whereby the virus is allowed to spread through the population with the objective of keeping admissions just below health care capacity, as is done for influenza virus, is clearly misguided for SARS-CoV-2.”

The same conclusion was reached almost in parallel by another team of Brazilian experts that had their work published in the *Lancet* on January 27. Titled “Resurgence of COVID-19 in Manaus, Brazil, despite high seroprevalence,” the article also raised the possibility that the Manaus surge could be related to the new variants evading previously acquired immunity. The *Lancet* paper also raises the crucial point that the same infection rate—or “attack rate,” as it is termed by immunologists to differentiate it from active infections—was found in the Peruvian Amazon capital, Iquitos. At the time, the EFE Spanish news agency posted a report titled “The strange case of the Peruvian city where the coronavirus ‘disappeared,’” also raising the dangerous and unsubstantiated prospect that “herd immunity” had been achieved in the city.

Lucas Ferrante, the lead author of an August 7 *Nature Medicine* article, titled, “Brazil’s policies condemn Amazonia to a second wave of COVID-19,” told the *Intercept* on February 3 that the new Brazilian strain may turn Manaus into the epicenter of a deadly international third wave of the pandemic. Expressing with utmost clarity the scientific understanding of the dynamics of the breeding of new variants, he said that the new variant was “caused by the second wave” his team had warned about in August. He concluded: “Either a lockdown is imposed now, or Governor Wilson Lima and President Bolsonaro will be responsible for the impact of additional infections and deaths in the republic and around the world.”

Even at this point, Manaus’ authorities are refusing to shut down non-essential services. On Monday, Ferrante stressed to *Estado de S. Paulo*: “It is unthinkable to return to in-person learning in any part of Brazil right now, in order to avoid the further spread of the new variant. We also recommend the shutdown of factories in the Manaus Industrial District,” adding this could be done “without pay cuts for workers.”

In fact, the city has been a central target of Bolsonaro’s herd immunity policy. The president and his sons—especially Eduardo, the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Brazilian House who was a special guest at Trump’s White House in the lead-up to the January 6 putsch—celebrated the “liberation” of the city in late December, when authorities decided to “reopen the economy.” This followed a small, and largely staged, protest against restrictions by a handful of Bolsonaro loyalists. This had the same character as the staged anti-lockdown protests attended by right-wing militias in Michigan and other US states.

The reopening of Manaus was the most blatant act in what has been recently described by law scholars at the University of São Paulo (USP) as an “institutionalized strategy for virus propagation” by the Bolsonaro administration. A legal team coordinated by USP’s Global Health and Ethics expert, Deisy Ventura, in collaboration with the Conectas advocacy group, was able to document a timeline of actions taken by the Bolsonaro administration, including federal decrees, the promotion of quack cures and the undermining of any measure that restrained the economy.

This timeline, together with the unchecked spread around the world of deadlier new variants of SARS-CoV-2, stands as testimony to the essential unity of the ruling classes internationally in promoting the spread of the virus in the name of “herd immunity,” despite the somewhat more polished language of some European leaders, the incoming Biden administration or Bolsonaro’s local rivals in Brazil. Against clear scientific requirements, one state after another is pressing ahead with reopening schools, with the São Paulo government boasting of “leading” the back-to-school drive by enforcing the return of pupils in face of a strike by teachers.

Manaus stands as Bolsonaro’s pandemic Guernica. Just as the punitive bombing of the small Spanish town by the fascists in 1937 previewed the horrors of World War II, the murderous policy pursued in the Amazonian capital exposes the cruelty of the ruling classes and the pandemic carnage that is being unleashed worldwide.

Workers around the world must take the struggle against the herd immunity in their own hands, organizing a shutdown of non-essential services with full compensation for workers and ruined small businesses to stop the spread of the virus until effective vaccines are available worldwide.



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