

Peru government shaken by vaccine scandal as COVID pandemic spirals

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With the COVID-19 pandemic once again spiraling out of control, Peru's government has been thrown into crisis over reports that the country's ex-president, sitting cabinet ministers and other top officials secretly secured for themselves early shots of the coronavirus vaccine, even as it was being denied to the country's population.

Peru's foreign minister, Esther Elizabeth Astete, resigned on Monday after it was revealed that she secretly received a dose of the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine last September. This followed last Friday's resignation of Health Minister Pilar Mazzetti, who quit after the Peruvian Congress demanded that she account for the secret vaccination of former president Martín Vizcarra and his wife last October.

Vizcarra, who is currently running for Congress, initially insisted that he had secretly taken part in the Peruvian trials of the Sinopharm vaccine, claiming it had been "an act of courage," and that he had remained silent solely to avoid disrupting the "normal development of the trial." Subsequently, however, Peru's Cayetano Heredia University, which had conducted the trial, reported that neither Vizcarra nor his wife were among the 12,000 Peruvians who took part.

Charges have been raised that the acceptance of so-called "courtesy" Sinopharm vaccinations could constitute corruption in relation to the negotiation of the contract signed with the Chinese-based pharmaceutical.

The Peruvian daily *La Republica* reported that at least 50 officials in total received the shots, all of them from the ministries of Health and Foreign Relations.

On Sunday, Peru's Health Ministry (MINSA) reported 212 new COVID-19 deaths and 8,093 new infections, approaching the record numbers reached in

the first wave of the pandemic last year. With 43,703 COVID deaths reported by MINSA, Peru is tied with Mexico in terms of the largest number of fatalities per capita in Latin America. Figures released by the country's National Information System of Deaths (Sinadef) show a sharp increase in non-violent deaths over previous years, indicating that the real toll from COVID-19 may be twice as high as the official numbers.

The spread of the virus has been further fueled by the arrival in Peru of the more contagious and deadly British strain as well as the Brazilian strain, which has made its way up the Amazon from the COVID-stricken city of Manaus.

Peru's health care system is on the brink of collapse, with virtually every intensive care (ICU) bed occupied and patients dying for lack of oxygen, much of which has been bought up by the mining companies for use in production.

Last week, the government announced an extension of a partial lockdown imposed on large sections of the country that are worst affected by the virus until the end of this month, when it is expected it will be extended once again.

The first 300,000 Sinopharm doses for mass vaccinations arrived only last week, with another 700,000 delivered over the weekend. The government said that the first to be vaccinated would be frontline health care workers. At least 105 nurses and some 300 doctors have died of COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic in Peru less than a year ago.

President Francisco Sagasti condemned the actions of his predecessor: "I feel indignant and furious, because this puts at risk the efforts of many Peruvians on the front line against COVID-19. I still cannot understand how some functionaries have not taken this situation

into account.”

Sagasti was installed by the Peruvian parliament last November following mass protests over the congressional impeachment of Vizcarra on unsubstantiated charges of “moral incapacity,” and his brief replacement by the president of the Congress, Manuel Merino, at the head of an extreme right-wing cabinet. Popular demonstrations against what amounted to a congressional coup sharply intensified after police shot dead two youthful protesters.

Sagasti’s posture of indignation and fury is driven by fear that revelations over the illicit vaccinations of Vizcarra and other top government officials will trigger renewed popular upheavals within a population already outraged over the government’s catastrophic mishandling of the pandemic and chafing under rolling lockdowns that have left many without jobs or income, while seeming to do little to stop the spread of the virus.

While touted as a technocrat who would restore confidence in the corruption-ridden Peruvian state, Sagasti, 76, a veteran functionary of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, has seen his popularity plummet during his three months in office.

Beginning last December, his government was confronted with a rebellion by the country’s agricultural workers, who blocked major highways, threatening to cut off food supplies to Lima, the capital and largest city, to press their demand for a survivable wage. Sagasti responded by sending over 700 army troops and armored vehicles to break up the blockades, killing at least five and wounding many more.

Unrest has also risen among the country’s miners, who have suffered large numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the crowded conditions of the mining camps. The Peruvian government exempted the multinational mining firms from lockdown restrictions to assure a continued flow of profits to both the national bourgeoisie and foreign capital. The continued operation of their facilities has helped spread the virus throughout the country as many of the miners return from the camps to their homes. There have been repeated walkouts in the mines over the lack of safety and health provisions.

And in the southeastern Andean city of Cusco, a strike has been called beginning today to protest against an increase in the cost of gas, along with the lack of

jobs and income.

With elections set for April 11, none of the presidential candidates has registered more than 11 percent support in the polls. Every political party and state institution has been thoroughly discredited, not only by the catastrophic handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also by the government’s systemic corruption, with every living Peruvian ex-president implicated in the massive bribery and kickback scandal involving public works contracts awarded to the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht and its Peruvian partners, and half of the members of Congress facing corruption charges.

This holds true as well for Verónica Mendoza, a pseudo-left politician who is running for president. She gave her seal of approval to Sagasti last November, claiming that he would lead “a transitional government ... without coup-makers or corrupt people.”

The uncontrollable spread of the coronavirus, Peru’s deep economic crisis and the ever more naked exposure of vast social inequality are creating the conditions for a revolutionary explosion.



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