Pakistan government admits “dangerous” third wave of COVID-19 infections

Sampath Perera
15 March 2021

Pakistan’s Islamist populist Tehrik-e-Insaaf government was forced to admit last Thursday that the country is in a “dangerous” situation, due to a fast spreading “third wave” of COVID-19 infections linked to the more contagious B.1.1.7 or “UK” variant.

However, Prime Minister Imran Khan, who in the past has vociferously opposed any measures to fight the pandemic that would impact on Pakistan’s economy, is refusing to order urgently needed social and public health measures to stop the spread of the virus and support the country’s largely impoverished population.

Local authorities are haphazardly attempting to lessen the spike in new cases with limited “lockdowns.” In the face of the federal government’s inaction, seven cities in Punjab, the province that is home to more than half of all Pakistanis, imposed limited lockdowns as of Sunday, similar to the localized measures taken in March 2020. Three sub-sectors of Islamabad, the country’s capital, also began enforcing a lockdown Sunday night.

Daily new cases have surpassed 2,000 for the first time since January with a positivity rate of 6.5 per cent, indicating an already significant presence of the virus.

Official figures show only 607,453 confirmed COVID-19 cases after a year of the pandemic. Just 13,537 people are officially recorded as having died due to the virus. These modest totals conceal a far worse reality in a country where the virus was allowed to spread virtually unchecked and where the health care system was on life support long before the coronavirus arrived.

A major contributor to the vast underestimation of infections by the official statistics is the lack of testing. Only around 173 tests per million people are being performed every day. Cities like Karachi and Lahore are densely populated, with millions forced to live in cramped slums.

Speaking to a March 11 press conference, Planning, Reforms and Special Initiatives Minister Asad Umar said there was “no doubt” that the third wave of the pandemic is underway. Umar heads the government’s response to the pandemic through the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) it established for that purpose. “The phenomenon” that is driving this wave, Umar said, “is the spread of the UK [variant],” which he admitted has now become the “dominant” form of the virus in Pakistan.

The UK or B.1.1.7 variant was first confirmed to be present in Pakistan in late December. At that time, Dr. Faisal Sultan, a special assistant to Prime Minister Khan, downplayed the danger it represented, claiming “even the British authorities don’t have any strong evidence if the virus has become more infectious.” In fact, British health experts were alarmed from the outset, identifying B.1.1.7 as a variant of “concern” in December. Subsequently, the new variant was shown to be both much more contagious and lethal.

Umar has now been forced to contradict Sultan’s earlier complacent and irresponsible claims. He has admitted that the variant is “more transmissible” and will infect more people, leading to more deaths, and that Pakistan now faces a “very dangerous situation.”

The Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) minister and former Engro CEO revealed that Pakistan’s fatality rate is already rising. “Our own statistics from the last few weeks show a sustained increase in our case fatality rate,” Umar said.

Yet Imran Khan and his PTI-led government are refusing to shut down non-essential businesses and provide social support to Pakistan workers and toilers so they can shelter at home, so as not to impede corporate profit-making and impinge on the wealth of the country’s venal capitalist elite.

An emergency meeting of the NCOC held on Saturday merely called for “strict implementation” of various social-distancing guidelines it issued in March 2020. Many of these guidelines are impossible for much of the population to follow, due to cramped living quarters and lack of access to sanitation and clean water. The NCOC said that “further steps for disease control, including expanded lockdowns” are “under consideration.”

The government’s indifference to the development of a third wave of COVID-19 infections is entirely predictable. After all, the brunt of this new stage in the pandemic will be

© World Socialist Web Site

borne by Pakistani workers and their families and the poor.

Pakistan's government also has no plan to vaccinate the country's 216 million people.

Ruling out buying vaccines from the pharmaceutical giants, the government has said Pakistan's vaccination effort will be almost entirely dependent on COVAX, a vastly underfunded World Health Organization (WHO) initiative tasked with providing free vaccines to poor countries. China, Pakistan's closest ally, has pledged to donate a million doses of its Sinopharm vaccine.

National Health Service (NHS) secretary Amir Ashraf Khawaja's revealed that the government has budgeted no money to procure vaccines in a March 4 briefing to the Public Accounts Committee of the National Assembly, the lower house of Pakistan's parliament.

Reporting on Khawaja's comments, *Dawn*, Pakistan's most widely read English daily, observed that the government aims to tackle the pandemic "through herd immunity and donated vaccines as it has no plan to buy vaccines at least during the current year."

Since the initial reports of COVID-19 and the WHO's declaration of a pandemic, the PTI government has shown a callous disregard of its impact on the population. It refused to adopt any lockdown measures, claiming Pakistan is too poor to do so because "people would die of hunger," as Khan infamously put it. However, when a limited lockdown was forced on his government due to pressure from provincial governments and the military, Khan quickly set about spearheading a campaign to re-open the economy in April so as to protect corporate profits and investor wealth. Acting on the orders of the government and the military, the NCOC drafted guidelines known as "special operating procedures" or SOPs to provide a "public health" façade for the reopening of factories and other economic activities regardless of the spread of the virus.

Khan also refused to take even minimal measures to protect the population from the economic impact of the pandemic. Economic assistance was limited to a face-saving measure of four monthly payments of 12,000 rupees (about US$74.50) to 12 million low-income earners. Conservative estimates place the job losses at 20 million during the first months of the pandemic.

Hit by the economic fallout caused by the pandemic and Khan's relentless implementation of International Monetary Fund-championed pro-market "reforms," the country's poverty rate has massively increased during the past year. According to the government's own estimates, poverty has increased by 10 million, meaning that 60 million people live below the poverty line.

Despite relying entirely on donations to vaccinate its people, the Khan government is grandly propagandizing about its "vaccination drive," with the number of times PTI spokespersons invoke the word "vaccine" appearing to be in inverse proportion to the number of Pakistanis actually getting vaccinated.

The government "launched" the vaccination of frontline health workers and the elderly on February 3, following the arrival of 500,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine from China, which has agreed to provide a further 500,000 free doses at an unknown date.

A month after the campaign had begun, Pakistan health authorities had administered just 197,000 doses.

Two-and-a-half million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine that were supposed to be delivered to Pakistan on March 2 as part of the WHO COVAX initiative were delayed "due to unexplained reasons," according to a March 9 report. The authorities now expect them arrive later this month. Pakistan is aiming to source up to 45 million free doses from the COVAX initiative—most, if not all of which, will have been manufactured in India, its arch-rival.

At the same time, the government has allowed the commercial importing and selling of Drug Regulatory Authority-approved COVID vaccines and exempted them from price caps that otherwise would apply to imported drugs within the country. The cost of importing a single dose of China's CanSino is said to be $13 or a little over 2,000 Pakistani rupees, putting it beyond the reach of the vast majority of Pakistanis.

Amid the raging pandemic and an unprecedented economic shock, nuclear-armed Pakistan increased military spending by 12 percent in its 2020/21 budget. Almost a fifth of the entire budget (18 percent) was allocated to the military. The only item to account for a larger portion of the budget was debt servicing. Yesterday, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute ranked Pakistan the 10th largest arms importer in the world during the last 5-year period. Locked in a reactionary strategic conflict with India that has led to four all-out wars and countless war crises, including in 2016 and 2019, Islamabad is expanding its nuclear arsenal and high-tech missile stockpile so as to give it the capability to shower unimaginable destruction on India's cities.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site