

Paraguay's health care system collapses as government tries to quell protests

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Protests continue across Paraguay demanding the ouster of the fascistic administration of President Mario Abdo Benítez over its refusal to take measures to contain a massive surge of COVID-19 infections.

In recent days, however, the crowds have significantly diminished, largely due to the collapse of the health care system.

The government continues to oppose the demands by demonstrators and doctors associations, including the Pneumology Society, for a return to lockdown measures, including the shutting down of all nonessential activities and schools.

The surge in cases since early February has been exponential, with the seven-day average rising from 700 daily infections to 1,730. According to Our World in Data, Paraguay has the highest rate of new infections in the world, with 44.6 percent of COVID-19 tests coming out positive.

On Sunday, the specialist in infectious diseases Tomás Mateo Balmelli raised the prospect that, given the current trend, the health care system will remain "collapsed" for the rest of the year. He pointed to the dangers of a rise in flu and Dengue cases, as well as the new and more transmissible coronavirus variants.

Several health care experts have suggested that the recent surge is being dramatically worsened by the new strains from Brazil, after thousands of Paraguayans traveled there for vacations. The rapid surges in Brazil, Paraguay and much of Europe, fueled by the new variants, are a major warning for the rest of the world.

The surge has saturated ICU beds in Paraguay's public hospitals and led to shortages of medicines, which have in turn increased the death rate to 25 a day. At the same time, infections have translated into guaranteed bankruptcies for working class families.

On Sunday, in unprecedented scenes, the broadcaster

GEN interviewed long lines of family members of patients outside the public hospitals, as they waited for doctors to send them on frantic searches for the medicines needed to save their loved ones.

While appreciative of the care by the medical staff, a woman whose uncle is being treated for COVID-19 at the Clínicas Hospital said the family has spent about 10 million guarani (\$1,520) out of pocket in one week of intensive care. This is the equivalent of more than two years of the average salary in the private sector in Paraguay, the second poorest country in South America.

At the IPS Ingavi public hospital, a woman said she spent two million guarani for her father, who has been intubated for five days. She explained, "We are spending the nights here because they will call you constantly for anything, for some report or medicine. We have to stay. We just don't know what to expect." Midazolam, for pain and anxiety, has been particularly requested.

It was precisely the protests by nurses and doctors in Asunción over the lack of supplies and vaccines, along with partial strikes by teachers against the return to in-person learning, that detonated the wave of mass demonstrations earlier this month. Reports of extreme exhaustion among medical personnel were widespread.

In this context, vaccinations have barely begun. Besides the 4,000 doses previously received from Russia, out of an order of one million doses, the government claims that 20,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have arrived from Chile and 3,000 from the UAE.

Less than 4,500 of these doses have been administered in total, according to Johns Hopkins University. When the UN-led Covax program promised 4.3 million doses to Paraguay, this news was used to

defend the continued reopening of businesses and schools. Yet, to date, none of these vaccines have arrived.

Four ministers, including the health care and education chiefs, were dismissed during the first week of protests. Nevertheless, the crowds only grew larger, reaching a peak on March 5, when thousands marched in the capital Asunción, and thousands more joined roadblocks and other actions across the country.

This showed that social anger is only mounting, despite the smaller size of the protests last week.

Last Friday and Saturday, a few hundred demonstrators took to the streets of Asunción, mostly students and youth, accompanied by existing protest groups focused on anti-corruption demands and oriented to the main political parties. Several demonstrators minimized the danger of COVID in their signs and statements made during an “open-mic.”

Appeals were also made to the police to join them, as well as to the trade union bureaucracy, which is entirely integrated into the state and reliant on its handouts. Only about six percent of workers are affiliated to a union, almost exclusively among education, medical, energy and transportation workers in the public sector.

A more amenable tone in the coverage by the corporate media outlets also registered this change in the composition and political orientation of the demonstrations in recent days. For instance, the right-wing *ABC Color* reported that “the citizenry demonstrated conviction and perseverance,” while *Diario Hoy*, added: “The demonstration without incidents stood out.”

At the same time, the continued resistance among teachers and the public condemnations by health care experts compelled the government to suspend in-person learning starting on Thursday in 23 districts on “red alert.”

The Abdo administration has also declared a curfew from 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., enforced by the military and the police. Its only conceivable intention is to intimidate the population and prepare a crackdown against potential unrest late into the night. This was made clear by an exception until midnight for indoor restaurants and bars for employees and those with receipts or reservations.

Interior Minister Arnaldo Giuzzio stated on Monday that the demand by the health care sector for “phase

0”—a full lockdown—is “not possible” and indicated that the new measures will be reevaluated in two weeks.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Party and the pseudo-left Frente Guasú have sought to channel the growing social anger behind an impeachment motion against Abdo and Vice President Hugo Velázquez. This has allowed the supposed “opposition” parties to feign support for the demonstrations while focusing their appeals on the ruling Colorado Party itself, which they absurdly blame for “not listening” to the protesters’ demands.

While composed of two large factions, one led by Abdo and the other by the former President Horacio Cartes, the Colorados have so far remained together in opposing the impeachment drive, which has only secured 29 of the 53 votes needed to proceed in the lower chamber of Congress. The Colorado legislators have been refusing to attend sessions to prevent a quorum and forestall any debate of the pandemic crisis.

On March 10, the Frente Guasú released an equally futile appeal for Abdo and Velázquez to resign and call presidential elections. This was accompanied by a seven-point program demanding medicine, supplies, vaccines, a halt to evictions and an end to corruption. What their document shows, above all, is a hostility no different than that of the Colorados to implementing any of the urgent measures needed to contain the virus that impinge upon the interests of the financial and corporate elite.



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