Pandemic produced a “catastrophic year” for Middle East and North Africa

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Recent reports testify to the catastrophic impact of the pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the implications for social and political unrest.

Launching Amnesty International’s annual report, Heba Morayef said that the pandemic had exposed the terrible legacy of divisive and destructive policies that had perpetuated inequality, discrimination and oppression and paved the way for the devastation wrought by COVID-19.

The year 2020 “was a catastrophic year for prisoners, refugees, migrants and minorities who are already marginalized and due to COVID-19 have found their situation more precarious than ever. The pandemic has amplified divisions, discrimination and inequalities that already exist in the region.”

The region, home to enormous energy resources that have enriched a tiny, ultra-reactionary layer, has been devastated by decades of wars, conflicts, imperialist interventions, and sanctions, orchestrated by the US and its European and regional allies. Millions of people have been made homeless, forced to live in refugee camps or internally displaced people’s (IDP) camps where even the most basic facilities are lacking. Some 5.8 million refugees and 6.8 million IDPs are children, many going without schooling.

The pandemic has inflicted a horrendous toll, with more than 7.3 million recorded cases and 150,000 fatalities, a pale reflection of the real losses and suffering given the lack of testing and recording systems. Iran has been by far the worst affected, recording around 65,000 deaths, while Iraq and Egypt have recorded about 15,000 and 12,500.

Across the region, the authorities have used the pandemic as a pretext to increase the exploitation of the working class, silence criticism and suppress dissent.

Employers have laid off hundreds of thousands of workers. In Egypt, tens of thousands of private sector workers were dismissed, forced to accept reduced wages, work without protective equipment, or take unpaid leave. Workers and trade unionists have faced arrest for going on strike. In Jordan, renewed protests by teachers broke out last August over the government’s decision to freeze public sector pay due to the pandemic. The government dispatched the police to raid 13 union branches and arrest dozens, while a court ordered the dissolution of the teachers’ union.

Morayef said that health workers had suffered as a result of deliberately neglected health systems and pitiful social protection measures, with authorities in Egypt and Iran threatening or arresting health workers who spoke out against their government’s negligent response to the pandemic. At least nine health workers were detained in Egypt under anti-terrorism laws for criticizing the government. In Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Syria, workers were not provided adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

As protest movements reemerged in Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, after subsiding in the first few months of the pandemic, protesters faced arrest, beatings and prosecution for participating in demonstrations. In Iraq, federal authorities arrested thousands of protesters in the first few months of the year, while Kurdistan Regional Government officials used deadly force against workers protesting unpaid wages and charged others with “misusing electronic devices” in organising a protest last December.

In Lebanon, security forces used rubber pellets in a shoot-to-harm manner in January and February, injuring hundreds of protesters, while in Tunisia, police fired tear gas in densely populated residential areas with canisters landing inside homes and near a hospital. In Iran, security forces used pointed pellets, rubber bullets and tear gas against protesters. In Egypt, small protests last September led to the arrests of hundreds under "terrorism" and protest-related charges.

The security forces’ use of excessive force was carried

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out with impunity. According to the UN's World Food Programme, some 64 million across 12 Arab states, or one in six Arabs, do not have enough food to be healthy. War, conflicts, and sanctions-induced economic crises have made hunger a fact of life, with even stable governments concerned over the rise in global food prices, particularly wheat, under conditions where bread is heavily subsidised.

The situation is most acute in war-torn Syria and Yemen, where around half the population go hungry. In Syria, a basket of basic foodstuffs was more than 200 percent more expensive in February than in the previous year and costs twice as much as the average monthly salary of a public sector worker. Bread, which means queuing for hours at government-subsidised bakeries, constitutes a meal for hundreds of thousands of people. The UN has warned of looming famine in Yemen as aid agencies have been forced to slash their programmes due to shortfalls in funding.

Food prices have risen 400 percent in Lebanon in the last year following the collapse of its currency—collateral damage in the US-led campaign against Hezbollah to undermine Iran and Syria. Fights have broken out over subsidized cooking oil in supermarkets in which one man was killed, forcing some to employ armed guards to distribute subsidised basics.

The World Bank's latest regional economic report points to the political impact of the pandemic and lockdowns. It warned that the rise in poverty, government debt and general indebtedness had further eroded the public's trust in government throughout the MENA region. Its economies had contracted by 3.8 percent in 2020, with the sharpest declines in government revenues in 2020 among the Gulf oil producers and developing oil exporters due to the collapse in oil prices. Oil importing countries expect to see their GDP shrink by 9.3 percent in 2021 compared to pre-pandemic levels, with the oil producers in the Gulf seeing a contraction of 7.7 percent. As a result, the Bank expects the total accumulated COVID-related losses will reach $227 billion by the end of 2021.

While the Bank sought to explain the measures taken by governments throughout the region as expenses incurred to finance health and social protection for their citizens, the exact opposite was the case: they acted—like their counterparts throughout the world—to shore up the profits of corporations and banks.

The average public debt in MENA countries is forecast to rise from about 46 percent of GDP in 2019 to 54 percent in 2021, with debt among the non-oil producers reaching about 93 percent of GDP in 2021. This is expected to rise further, meaning that that much government spending will go on debt servicing, reducing the amount available for the social safety net, healthcare and essential public services.

While the Bank expects a partial economic recovery later this year, it says this is "dependent on an equitable rollout of vaccines"—which is a pipe dream.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), only 14 of 21 countries in the region that extends from Morocco to Afghanistan (excluding Algeria and Israel) have received vaccines—meaning 20 percent at best will be vaccinated by the end of 2021.

Within the Middle East, Israel has vaccinated around 60 percent of the population, and despite having bought more than it needs is denying jabs to the Palestinians who live under its occupation. The smaller Gulf States—Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates—have been inoculating citizens and foreign workers. While the public debate has focused on access to vaccines, distribution to places where there is a lack of food, barely operational health systems or functioning public institutions as in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Libya is even more problematic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global problem, which requires a global solution. This must include a coordinated vaccination programme, the shutdown of all nonessential production until the pandemic is contained, and the seizure of the wealth of the super-rich in the Middle East and North Africa and the major imperialist powers to provide wages for all workers forced to shelter at home and funding for quality health care. It will only be implemented through the mass mobilisation of the working class based on a socialist programme to end social inequality and war, whose source lies in the capitalist profit system.

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