Turkish government rejects lockdown as pandemic spins out of control

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As a result of the "herd immunity" policies implemented by President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government in the interests of the ruling class, the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey is out of control. Turkey has become an epicenter of the pandemic, like India and Brazil. According to Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, at least 85 percent of new cases in the country are due to the more contagious UK or B.1.1.7 variant.

Despite limited measures announced on April 13, the number of daily cases remains over 60,000, sometimes more than in the United States. Proportionally to its population, Turkey (85 million) has more than tripled the rate of reported cases compared to India (1.4 billion people and nearly 300,000 daily cases). The test positivity rate is nearly 20 percent. According to Ministry of Health data, 362 people died on Wednesday.

These figures vastly underestimate true losses. While Turkey has surpassed the United Kingdom in terms of total number of cases with nearly 4.4 million, at 37,000 deaths it seems far behind countries like the UK (127,000), France (102,000) and Italy (118,000) in total mortality. According to investigative filmmaker Güçlü Yaman's calculations, however, there had been 98,000 excess deaths in Turkey by early March 2021.

Last week, an anonymous physician caring for coronavirus patients in Istanbul told the daily *Cumhuriyet*: "Even if a PCR test is positive, COVID-19 is not written on the death certificate if the intensive care patient dies after an average of 15-20 days after he/she tested positive."

This ongoing slaughter is the direct result of the Turkish ruling class seeing mass deaths and the sickness of millions as "acceptable."

As the pandemic erupted out of control as the predictable consequence of the "opening up" policy in early March, the Erdo?an government announced last week limited measures to calm growing social anger and prevent a collapse of the health care system. However, it kept nonessential production and some grades in schools open.

"In the economy, things are going very well on the production side," Erdo?an blithely declared, claiming that his government has been very successful against the pandemic.

He made clear that businesses' profits and competitiveness in global markets guided his government's response to the pandemic, not saving lives. "We need to reduce the numbers of infections below the general average in the world, especially in countries with which we have close relations. Otherwise, we may run the risk of not being able to take advantage of economic opportunities brought before us by the pandemic."

The impact of the "gradual normalization" policy in early March is quite clear. The number of COVID-19 deaths in Turkey was 66 on February 28, when the number of seriously ill patients fell to 1,191. However, the official daily death toll has risen six-fold to nearly 400, while the number of seriously ill patients surged to 3,400.

The government rejected calls from health experts and scientists to close down nonessential production for 28 days, strengthen social distancing measures and accelerate vaccination. It adopted limited measures, like starting curfews at 7:00 p.m. rather than 9:00 p.m. on weekdays. However, almost all workers are exempted from curfews so nonessential production can continue. Restaurants and cafés cannot accept customers inside until May 16.

The irrationality of state policy is manifested in the implementation of strict curfews, but only for those over 65, many of whom have been vaccinated, or the prohibition of intercity travel by private car, while there are no restrictions on crowded public transport by plane or buses.

After the government announced these limited measures, Dr. Cavit I??k Yavuz of Hacettepe University in Ankara emphasized yet again that containing the pandemic requires large-scale lockdown measures. "At this stage of the pandemic, you need to take the highest and broadest restrictions you can get by supporting society in social and economic terms. Otherwise, you have no chance of containing this pandemic."

Since reopening schools to in-person education in March,

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at least 31 teachers have died of COVID-19. Children have not only spread the disease but begun to be more severely affected. However, the government kept kindergartens open in order to ensure that parents can go to work and generate profits for their employers.

Professor Dr. Sinan Çavun from Bursa's Uluda? University tweeted on Wednesday: "The reasons why the third wave [of the pandemic] is so bad are as follows: 1) Our vaccination rate is low, 2) Schools are re-opened, 3) Uncontrolled congresses [of Erdo?an's ruling Justice and Development Party, AKP in March], 4) Thousands of workers continue to work in factories, 5) The risk of contamination is very high in public service and transportation, 6) Continuation of home meetings."

Turkish Intensive Care Society chair Professor ?smail Cinel warned, "The last wave is like no other. Younger patients come with more tissue destruction. Our pediatric patients are also on the rise."

The Turkish Medical Association (TTB) called nationwide protests on April 15 under the slogan, "We do not give up our right to life. Stop deaths!" On April 12, TTB Chairwoman Prof. Dr. ?ebnem Korur Fincanc? said, "Our hospitals are filled with COVID-19 patients, even newly opened services are not enough to meet the needs, and there is no room in intensive care units."

She emphasized that patients with serious diseases other than COVID-19 are also at risk. "Not only COVID-19 patients but also non-COVID-19 patients are aggrieved because of this picture; they cannot access the required care for problems that cannot be delayed."

Health Minister Koca recently announced that intensive care occupancy rate in Istanbul, the epicenter of the pandemic in Turkey, was 71.4 percent. Health care workers told the daily *Evrensel* that many Istanbul hospitals have stopped elective surgeries.

Istanbul Medical Chamber officials announced that there is almost no room in intensive care units in Istanbul state hospitals, a situation private hospital bosses turned into an opportunity. Some private hospitals demand up to 15,000 Turkish liras (nearly US$1,850) for a day from COVID-19 patients. Turkey's monthly minimum wage is only 2,800 Turkish liras.

Ankara Medical Chamber Chair Ali Karakoç explained the dire situation in the capital, where COVID-19 patients needing hospitalization "are unfortunately kept on stretchers or in their homes. Either a patient needs to be discharged or die; new places are opened only this way. … Every place is full in Ankara, including the intensive care units of private hospitals."

According to official data on weekly caseloads in cities, the number of cases per 100,000 in Istanbul between April 10 and April 16 increased to 920. In Istanbul, with a population of about 16 million, this means nearly 145,000 cases per week and 20,000 cases per day. This means that the city of Istanbul alone has more daily cases than any European country except France.

Only 7.9 million people, less than 10 percent of Turkey's population, are fully vaccinated; the more than 5 million refugees in Turkey from war-torn countries of Africa and the Middle East are not included in this statistic.

The devastating consequences of this "social murder" policy are also reflected in rising deaths among health care workers, despite their having received the Sinovac vaccine. TTB Family Medicine Branch Chair Emrah K?r?ml? told *bianet*: "We did not get any news of COVID-19 deaths among health workers for some time. But we have started to get death news from them again." According to TTB data, 12 health care workers have lost their lives so far in April. Overall, 410 have died in Turkey since the beginning of the pandemic.

K?r?ml? added, "More importantly, mutations have been on the increase. We know Sinovac's COVID-19 vaccine is less effective in the face of coronavirus variants. While mutations are so widespread, one must consider vaccinating health care workers again."

This tragic report does not lessen the need to vaccinate the population, as all the vaccines have demonstrated their effectiveness at limiting the contagion. However, it indicates the urgency of mobilizing workers in Turkey and internationally to fight for a halt to nonessential production and schools until the pandemic is contained. This is essential, together with full compensation to all affected workers and small businesses, together with other social distancing measures and a rapid, global vaccination campaign free of charge.

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