Lacking oxygen, scores in India suffocate to death as COVID-19 infections reach record high

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Setting yet another grim record, India's new COVID-19 infections surpassed 300,000 for the fifth day in a row yesterday. A further 352,991 cases were reported Monday, the highest single-day total ever recorded in India or, indeed, anywhere.

Officially, India's active case count stands at more than 2.6 million, underscoring the potential for continued exponential growth in COVID-19 infections. This in a country where hundreds of millions live in squalid urban slums or in rural areas where public health facilities do not exist; and where in great metropolitan centres, like Mumbai and Delhi, the health care system has already been overwhelmed by the deluge of COVID-19 cases.

Yesterday, India recorded its highest number of new COVID-19 deaths to date, 2,812. The official death tally since the beginning of the pandemic now stands at 195,123. According to Indian Health Ministry data, 16,257 people died from the virus, during the week ending Sunday, April 25, nearly double the previous week's 8,588 deaths.

India's emergence as the world's COVID-19 epicentre—accounting for more than 40 percent of all new cases worldwide last week—is the direct product of the "profits before lives" policy enforced by Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

As terrible as the official death toll is, it indubitably grossly understates the true scale of the calamity now unfolding in the world's second most populous country. Prior to the pandemic, Indian authorities medically certified less than 30 percent of all fatalities. With the country's ramshackle health care system now collapsing, proper attribution of deaths is in even greater disarray.

India's *Economic Times* reported last Friday that official figures for deaths from coronavirus in Lucknow, the capital city of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, stood at 145 in the six days between April 11 and April 16. But testimony from health and crematorium workers and other witnesses showed that "just two of the city's main crematoriums reported more than 430 or three times as many cremations under COVID-19 protocol" during the same period.

Hospitals in major cities, including the national capital Delhi and in Maharashtra, the second most populous state, have been forced to turn away hundreds, possibly thousands, of extremely ill patients because of shortages of beds, trained personnel, drugs, and oxygen.

Scores of patients have died in recent days gasping for breath after the hospitals in which they were being treated exhausted their medical oxygen supplies, and could not, despite harrowing pleas to government for emergency help, be resupplied in time.

• Twenty patients died at Delhi's Jaipur Golden Hospital died early Saturday morning for want of medical oxygen. Less than 24 hours later, the same hospital sent out a tweet saying that the lives of nearly 200 patients were at stake as the facility had again run out of oxygen.

• On the same day, six patients at Neelkant private hospital in Amritsar, Punjab, died due to an oxygen shortage.

• On April 22, the medical director of Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, one of the premier hospitals in Delhi, said, "25 sickest patients have died in the past 24 hours at the hospital. Oxygen will last another 2 hours." He added, "Ventilators and Bipap not working effectively. Need oxygen to be airlifted urgently. Lives of another 60 sickest patients in peril."

• The previous day, 24 COVID-19 patients died at the Dr. Zakir Hussain Hospital in Nashik, a city in Maharashtra, due to an oxygen tank leak.

The Modi government, reports the *Indian Express*, had weeks' notice of a looming oxygen supply crisis, but failed to take action. On April 1, the Empowered Group-VI, which is tasked with organising "an effective COVID response," warned at a meeting with officials from various wings of the government, including the Prime Minister's Office, "In the coming days India could face a shortage of oxygen sullies." Yet, it was only last week that the central government imposed

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a ban on the supply of oxygen to industrial sites, and the ban only came into effect on April 22.

In an interview with *NewsClick* on April 23, Giridhar R. Babu, head of the epidemiology section at Public Health Foundation, warned that as horrific as conditions already are, the worst is yet to come. With the pandemic's spread increasingly fueled by new, more-contagious and lethal variants, he projected that within two to three weeks, "We will be reaching between four to five lakh [400,000 to 500,000] cases per day in" just five states—Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal.

Responsibility for this catastrophe lies squarely with the BJP government, but also with the Congress Party and the other ostensible opposition parties. Acting at the behest of India's financial and corporate elite, they have all supported the "reopening of the economy," spurned calls for lockdown measures as new cases surged from mid-February on, and refused to make massive investments in India's dilapidated, chronically underfunded health care system.

Brushing aside repeated warnings from epidemiologists and other medical experts that disastrous levels of infections and deaths would develop if restrictions were lifted, the Modi government abandoned any effort to contain the virus following last year's ill-prepared lockdown. Having refused to provide workers and the poor with adequate financial resources to prevent widespread destitution during the shutdown, Modi threw open all sectors of the economy with the aim of protecting the profits and vast wealth of big business and the super-rich.

Boasting about this policy as recently as February, when indications of the rising wave of infections were already present, the Modi government claimed it had "set an example in front of the world for what work can be done during COVID-19."

Even now, when thousands of preventable deaths are being recorded daily, Modi is insisting that the urgent task, to use his words, is to "save" India from another lockdown, not from the virus. What this means in practice is that hundreds of thousands, if not millions of lives should be sacrificed to guarantee the uninterrupted flow of profits to the corporate and financial elites.

Addressing an online forum last Friday on "India's Quest for Economic Power," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman reiterated the Modi government's opposition to even regional or state-wide lockdowns to impede the virus's advance, in the most affected areas, declaring, "Micro containment zones would be the way forward."

Having ruled out any coordinated action to save lives and curb the spread of the virus, Sitharaman turned her focus to reassuring the event's audience of domestic and international business executives and investors that the wave of infections and death will not disrupt or even slow the Modi government's drive to intensify the exploitation of India's workers and rural toilers. "[E]ven if there were one or two centres where lockdowns were to happen," said Sitharaman, "they may not affect our disinvestment (privatisation) programme, or the plan to set up DFI (Development Finance Institutions) or any other institutional reforms that we have announced."

As the *Indian Express*, which co-sponsored the event with the *Financial Times*, bluntly noted, the thrust of the finance minister's speech was that the "second wave" of the pandemic in India "will not affect (the) big reform push" demanded by local and international capital.

While rushing to reassure investors that the BJP will do their bidding, the Modi government is balking at providing free vaccinations to India's poverty-stricken masses. To date, India has provided less than 10 percent of the country's population with one dose. But as COVID-19 cases soared last week and reports emerged from multiple states that the government's immunisation effort was stalling due to vaccine shortages, Modi suddenly announced that everyone 18 and over will be eligible to be vaccinated as of May 1.

However, it quickly emerged that neither the Union government nor the state governments are ready to provide vaccines for free. Rather, impoverished Indians will be asked to pay sums equal to several days' earnings per dose. Cynically, the BJP has promised to provide free vaccinations in the state of West Bengal if it becomes that state's government after the multi-phase state election now underway there. According to an article in Bloomberg, some states "may provide vaccines at subsidised rates, while others "may pass on the full cost to citizens."

Various experts calculate that it would cost between 0.32 and 0.36 of India's GDP or around $3.5 billion to vaccinate all Indian adults. This is only a tiny fraction of last year's $48 billion increase in the fortune of just one of India's more than 130 billionaires, Mukesh Ambani, or the $73 billion India spent in 2020 on its rapidly expanding military.

Mass anger is growing against the Modi government and the ruling class over their failure to contain the virus, provide health care to those infected, and ever-deepening social inequality. *CNN* reported on April 23, "Tens of thousands of people took to twitter with trending hashtags like #ResignModi, #SuperSpreaderModi, and #WhoFailedIndia." Fearing the eruption of popular opposition on a much broader scale, the Modi government asked social media platform Twitter to take down "dozens of tweets, including some by local lawmakers, that were critical of India's handling of the coronavirus outbreak," Reuters reported.

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