

Indian government grants more powers to the military as popular anger over COVID-19 catastrophe mounts

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As popular anger mounts across India over the authorities' utter failure to curb the tsunami of COVID-19 cases, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right, Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government are granting more powers to the military in the name of controlling the disease. The BJP's principal concern, however, is not suppressing the virus. It is strengthening the military and boosting its public image in preparation for suppressing social opposition to its criminal mishandling of the pandemic and push to "revive" India's economy through a battery of "pro-investor" reforms.

Yesterday, India officially recorded 3,780 deaths from COVID-19, setting a new one-day record, while the total number of recorded infections since the start of the pandemic crossed the 20 million mark. Of these, more than 7.75 million or close to 40 percent have been recorded since April 1. However, due to a chronic lack of testing and the ramshackle state of India's health care system, both the official death and infection numbers are widely seen as gross underestimates of the true scale of the calamity.

On April 30, the BJP government granted the Armed Forces "emergency access" to funds in order to enable them to set up and operate quarantine and treatment facilities and hospitals for COVID-19 patients. According to officials, the Vice Chiefs of the Armed Forces, including the Chief of the Integrated Defence Staff, the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC), Officer Commanding-in-Chiefs (GOC-in-Cs) and equivalents of all three services have been granted these procurement powers from May 1. Under this arrangement, "Corps/Area Commanders will now be able to get Rs 50 lakh (\$US 67,675) per case and Division/ Sub-Area Commanders Rs 20 lakh per case to set up COVID quarantine and treatment facilities," *India Today* reported.

While refusing to spend additional resources on India's desperately underfunded hospitals, the government is handing over funds intended for fighting the pandemic to the armed forces.

Working class anger towards the BJP government and the entire ruling elite began building prior to the pandemic. Last year, two general strikes in January and November drew tens of

millions of workers onto the streets to protest against the economic restructuring and onslaught on workers' wages and conditions spearheaded by Modi. In recent months, a series of militant strikes have been waged, including by transport workers and Toyota autoworkers in Karnataka, and hundreds of thousands of farmers have mounted a months-long agitation against the Modi government's pro-agribusiness reform laws.

The BJP government and ruling elite are concerned that the upsurge of workers' struggles over speed-up, poverty wages, privatisation and precarious contract employment could intersect with and be further fuelled by outrage over the collapse of the health care system. Yogi Adityanath, the fascistic BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous state with 225 million residents, told a video conference attended by select journalists on April 25 that he had asked senior administrative and police officials to "crack down" on hospitals that "discharge patients citing an oxygen shortage or complain to the media about the crisis." Following this meeting, UP's Additional Director General (Law and Order), Prashant Kumar, issued a letter to all police officials in the state saying, "misleading information" is being shared on social media "to create panic." He demanded they "take strong action against unruly elements of society."

According to the *Hindu*, as of April 25, the UP police had already arrested 42 people on such charges. Among them is 26-year-old Shashank Yadav, who posted a desperate appeal on Twitter for oxygen to be given to his dying grandfather. He was charged by the UP police with spreading "rumors" over oxygen shortages. His supposed offence is "intent to cause...fear or alarm."

Far from being "rumours," reports of oxygen shortages are all too real for millions of people across India. Hundreds of patients have died in hospital wards in recent weeks due to the expiration of oxygen supplies.

The BJP government is attempting to prohibit media outlets from reporting on these horrifying developments and their bitter outcome—overflowing crematoriums and the piling up of dead bodies in the streets.

The district magistrate of Kanpur, UP's largest city, sent a

letter to a local Hindi-language newspaper, *Amar Ujala*, that denounced its April 23 report on excess deaths in the city as “misleading.” The authorities demanded the issuing of a “clarification for this story.” The *Wire* news site explained that *Amar Ujala* had reported that “there had been 476 cremations across different cremation grounds in the district on April 22.” However, the state government’s figures for the day showed “only nine COVID deaths.”

Reports from numerous cities and towns of rows of burning pyres, crammed crematoriums and huge crowds of the bereaved, as well as a significant and growing number of statistical studies by health experts and journalists, make clear that the official death count is a grotesque understatement. An analysis for the *Financial Times* suggested deaths during India’s “second wave” may be eight times the official tally. Last month, India officially recorded 45,862 deaths, which accounted for 22 percent of India’s overall deaths throughout the pandemic as of April 30.

Late on April 28, Facebook temporarily prevented its users around the world from searching for content through the “ResignModi” hashtag. Amid mounting criticism from Facebook users, the social media giant lifted the ban. Spokesperson Andy Stone claimed it had been a “mistake” and had not been carried out in coordination with the Modi government. Given Facebook’s notorious role in censorship in collaboration with capitalist governments around the world, this denial stretches credulity.

Facebook’s move coincided with reports that the Modi government asked Twitter to remove all tweets critical of the Prime Minister’s handling of the Kumbh Mela, the world’s largest religious festival, which attracts millions of devotees to Haridwar. Despite warnings from medical experts, Modi allowed the festival to go ahead, resulting in major virus outbreaks.

The increased role granted to the military by the BJP government is in keeping with the vast expansion of India’s armed forces undertaken by successive governments, including those led by the opposition Congress Party. The main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—have also endorsed the boosting of India’s military’s prowess to counter its geo-political rivals, Pakistan and, above all, China.

With a massive military budget of \$72.9 billion, India was the world’s third largest defence spender in 2020, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Even as tens of thousands fell victim to COVID-19 and hundreds of millions were left destitute due to a lack of financial support from the government during last spring’s lockdown, India increased its defence spending by 2.1 percent.

All establishment parties are agreed that increased military spending is essential to bolster India’s predatory regional and global power ambitions, including its anti-China military-strategic alliance with Washington. By contrast, they view

spending on health care as a drain on resources that could be used to purchase weapons of war or enrich the financial elite. This is why the Indian state—the national and all state governments combined—have spent no more than a meagre 1.5 percent of GDP on health over recent decades.

Millions of people in India are increasingly realising that the Modi government and Indian ruling elite have totally abandoned them to their own fates. With hospitals shutting their gates due to a lack of oxygen, ventilators, beds and medicines, and desperate relatives finding nowhere to bury or cremate their dead loved ones, social anger towards Modi and the entire ruling class is reaching a boiling point.

It is increasingly understood that Modi and the BJP government deliberately ignored the warnings of epidemiologists about the risk of a devastating pandemic surge so they could keep India’s economy “open” and boost corporate profits and the fortunes of the country’s 130-plus billionaires.

At the World Economic Forum in late January, Modi asserted, “India has saved humanity from a big disaster by containing corona effectively.” Even as infection rates began to surge from mid-February on, and as warnings of disaster from health experts on the government’s own advisory committees grew, the BJP government persisted in its refusal to impose any new public health restrictions.

On April 20, by which time the daily death toll was well over 2,000 and daily infections were approaching 300,000, Modi declared in an address to the nation that it was necessary to “save India from lockdown,” not from COVID-19. Two weeks on, after millions of further infections, and with reports of multiple new, more-infectious and potentially lethal Indian strains of the virus, the government remains adamantly opposed to shutting down non-essential businesses.

As part of its homicidal strategy of prioritising the profits of India’s industrialists and financial elite over the protection of human lives, the Modi government has largely abandoned even some of the limited improvements made in health care during the pandemic’s early stages. Analysing the government’s data on the number of oxygen-supported beds, ICU beds and ventilators in a May 4 report, *India Today* noted a “drastic decrease” of these medical facilities between September of last year (when India saw the peak of its first wave) and the end of January (just before the second wave started).



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