

On eve of crisis election, Peru more than doubles its COVID-19 death count

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Just days before a sharply polarized second-round presidential election, the Peruvian government acknowledged that the country's death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic is at least 2.5 times higher than previously acknowledged.

Based on the advice of Peruvian and international health experts, the number of deaths was revised from nearly 70,000 to 180,000. This makes Peru, with a population of 33 million, the country with the highest fatality rate in the world and the fifth highest in terms of absolute numbers of deaths.

The change in the fatality count was based upon including not just those who died after having tested positive for the virus, but also those who died with symptoms corresponding to COVID-19 or who had "an epidemiological link to a confirmed case."

Even the new number undoubtedly underestimates the real death toll. This is not merely a Peruvian phenomenon. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently declared that up to three times more people may have died from the pandemic than is reflected in official figures. This would put the real global death toll at over 10 million.

The president of Peru's Medical Federation, Dr. Godofredo Talavera, told the BBC that the higher number came as no surprise and was a product of the breakdown of the country's health care system and the policies of its government.

"We believe this occurs because our health system does not have the necessary conditions to care for patients.

"There has been no government support with oxygen, with intensive care beds. We do not have enough vaccines at the moment. The first line of care has not been reactivated. All this makes us the first country in the world in mortality," he said.

Compounding the crisis has been the rapid spread of the more contagious and lethal variants of the virus, including the one that originated in the Amazonian city of Manaus, Brazil, as well as the government's mismanagement of the purchase and rollout of vaccines, with still barely 70,000 vaccinations taking place daily. Former President Martín Vizcarra, who failed to organize vaccine contracts, was embroiled in a scandal after secretly having himself, his wife and closest political associates vaccinated and then falsely claiming they were part of a vaccine trial.

More than half of the deaths have taken place in this year's second wave of the pandemic.

The government's admission of the catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic came just six days before Peruvians are set to go to the polls in one of the most politically polarized elections in the country's history.

In a second-round ballot on June 6, Pedro Castillo, a former teachers strike leader, will face Keiko Fujimori, leader of the Peruvian right and daughter of the former dictator Alberto Fujimori, who is currently serving prison sentences on charges related to corruption and police-state massacres.

According to the latest poll, Castillo is leading Fujimori by 51.1 percent to 48.9 percent. Fujimori has managed to close what had been a two-to-one lead by Castillo in the aftermath of April's first round election, with the bulk of the corporate media echoing her virulent anticommunist campaign, linking Castillo to "terrorism" and claiming his election would turn Peru into another Venezuela.

The right-wing candidate and her supporters also managed to exploit a May 23 massacre of 16 people in the central Amazonian region of Junín. Gunmen killed 16 people in attacks on two bars that reportedly

doubled as brothels.

Without even going to the scene of the crime, the military and police immediately blamed the killings on Sendero Luminoso, the Maoist guerrilla movement that was defeated in a brutal counterinsurgency campaign that left tens of thousands dead in the 1980s. While splinters from the movement have operated in the region in collaboration with drug gangs, there is no history of them carrying out such attacks.

Castillo has appealed to the immense popular hostility to the major parties, including Fujimori's Fuerza Popular, and their ties to the wholesale corruption that has seen every living ex-president charged in bribery and kickback schemes. Keiko Fujimori was herself arrested and jailed on charges of corruption and leading a criminal organization, i.e., her party.

In the face of the anticommunist campaign of Fujimori and the unions, Castillo has repeatedly sworn his allegiance to private property and his support for foreign investment, insisting that his main aims are to improve tax collection and drive better bargains with the transnational mining companies.

The prospect of a Castillo victory has sparked talk of a potential coup by Peru's military or a nullification of his presidency by Congress. There is every indication, however, that if elected Castillo would follow a similar path as former President Ollanta Humala, who ran as a left nationalist and once in office pursued a right-wing, pro-capitalist policy.

The crisis in Peru is mirrored throughout Latin America. The World Health Organization's emergencies chief Michael Ryan said on Tuesday that eight of the 10 countries reporting the highest COVID-19 mortality rates in the last week were in the region.

"The situation in South America right now remains of very high concern," he told reporters. "South America was really in a difficult situation only a couple of months ago, and that situation again is starting to turn in the wrong direction." He noted that death rates have increased by 20 percent in Bolivia and Paraguay over the past week and pointed to stunningly high test positivity rates in a number of countries: 37 percent in Paraguay, 33 percent in Argentina and 30 percent in Colombia.

At the same time, he said, the fact that "case fatality

rates in South America [are generally] higher than in many parts of the rest of the world" was attributable to the deterioration of health care systems on the continent "for a very long time," under the impact of successive IMF-directed austerity measures.

"The transmission of the disease in the region is intense, the health care systems are under great pressure, and this is reflected in the high mortality rates," Ryan concluded.

The pandemic crisis gripping the region has found expression in the chaos surrounding plans for the Copa America soccer championship, which was cancelled last year due to the onslaught of the coronavirus. Initially, Colombia and Argentina were to host the games between 10 South American teams. The Colombian government was forced to pull out in the face of mass popular protests that have continued into a second month, while Argentina withdrew this week because of surging infection rates.

Now an invitation has been extended by the Brazilian government of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, who dismissed COVID-19 as a "little flu" and has presided over the uncontrolled spread of the virus and the second largest recorded death toll, or 463,000, in the world.

Ethel Maciel, the head professor of epidemiology and well-known coronavirus researcher at the Federal University of Espírito Santo, described the announcement that Brazil would host the games as "incredible," noting the new spread of the variant first identified in India. "It is very sad," she said. "It is a great irresponsibility with the lives of Brazilians. Once again, financial questions are superseding questions of public health."

Last weekend, there were mass demonstrations throughout Brazil denouncing the government's homicidal mishandling of the pandemic and demanding the downfall of Bolsonaro.



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