

Child malnutrition and hunger skyrocket in Haiti as COVID-19 infections spike

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At least 86,000 children are at risk of developing “severe acute” child malnutrition this year in Haiti, according to sources connected to the United Nations Children’s Fund. The number of children projected to suffer from starvation this year has doubled as the impoverished nation continues to grapple with extraordinary political and social crises exacerbated by the pandemic.

According to a UN survey, there are now 217,000 children currently suffering from acute malnutrition. Acute malnutrition had been steadily rising in the child population for several years before the pandemic triggered a massive food crisis that raised the total by 61 percent in 2020. In an interview with the *Miami Herald*, Bruno Maes, Haiti’s UNICEF representative, said that nearly 5 million Haitians are affected by malnutrition and struggle to obtain daily nourishment.

In the first three months of this year alone, the number of admissions of severely acute malnourished children in health facilities has increased by more than 26 percent compared to a year ago. Jean Gough, the UNICEF Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, pointed to the significant danger facing a large portion of small children if the crisis continues unabated.

“We can’t look the other way and ignore one of the least funded humanitarian crises in the region,” declared Gough in a UNICEF press release. Gough warned that without “urgent funding in the next weeks,” treatment against malnutrition “will be discounted and some children will be at risk of dying.”

Meanwhile, Haiti has been left dangerously unprepared for the onslaught of COVID-19. Despite being noticeably unaffected at the onset of the pandemic in 2020, Haiti has witnessed in recent weeks an alarming acceleration of infections and deaths, with its dilapidated medical infrastructure completely unequipped to handle a significant outbreak.

On May 6, the Ministry of Health reported 13,245 COVID-19 infections and 268 deaths. Exactly one month later on June 6, the number of infections had ballooned to

more than 16,079, while confirmed deaths rose to 346. These numbers, however, are surely gross undercounts, as the healthcare infrastructure needed to perform contact-tracing and identify all coronavirus-related deaths is all but absent.

New cases are already starting to stretch hospital capacity and the country’s oxygen supply. Antiviral treatments and other crucial supplies remain, for most of the population, out of reach. Reports are emerging every week of at least one hospital in the country’s capital and most populous city, Port-au-Prince, running out of beds and denying admission to COVID patients.

Haiti remains the only country in the Western Hemisphere that has yet to administer any vaccines to its population. A shipment of 132,000 AstraZeneca vaccine doses from the UN-backed COVAX program was supposed to be sent to the country on Monday, but has been delayed indefinitely, according to the Pan American Health Organization.

The Biden administration belatedly announced this week that it plans on delivering a significant number of US vaccine doses to the country. A White House official said the administration was “actively engaging” with the Haitian government on how best to conduct a national vaccination program. The official made this declaration before admitting that no plans had been finalized on how exactly vaccines are to be delivered or when they would arrive.

Behind the inability of the poorest countries of the world such as Haiti to procure necessary vaccines is the noxious nationalism and profit-gouging of the governments of the US and other more advanced capitalist countries, which have systematically sabotaged all international efforts to deploy vaccines outside their national borders.

Dr. Richard Frechette, a health practitioner working in St. Luke Hospital, which runs one of the few COVID-19 treatment centers in Port-au-Prince, spoke on the contradiction between the supposed generosity of the Biden White House and Haiti’s hospitals receiving expired vaccines due to constant delays. Frechette said it was “totally absurd from every humane point of view and

justice.” St. Luke is one of many hospitals running low on oxygen tanks and beds.

Haitian doctors have stressed that the \$16 million the US Agency for International Development said it is donating is grossly insufficient for combatting the massive influx of COVID-19 patients. In many hospitals, doctors are seeing so many patients that anywhere between 400 and 500 oxygen tanks a day are required, which dwarfs the 50 oxygen concentrators the USAID is proposing to distribute to a dozen or so facilities.

The surge in the pandemic has also intensified Haiti’s staggering food crisis. More than one in four Haitians is facing acute food insecurity. This includes at least 1.9 million children, according to Integrated Food Security Phase Classification and UNICEF estimates. UNICEF reports that it is desperately seeking US \$48.9 million to meet the humanitarian needs of 1.5 million people and 700,000 children, a situation which has been significantly exacerbated by COVID-19.

In 2020, UNICEF and the Haitian government had to treat well over 33,000 acutely malnourished children through the UN’s Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food program, which provides live-saving assistance to the most poverty-stricken communities. UNICEF has warned, however, that it has begun to run out of funds to support the program and needs at least \$3 million to purchase supplies to carry out preventative treatment.

The food crisis engulfing the Caribbean nation is just one manifestation of a global spike in malnourishment and famine. In a Global Report on Food Crises released by the World Food Program last month, at least 155 million people in 55 countries were found to have faced acute hunger in 2020—20 million more than 2019.

Blame for the hunger crisis and the surge in COVID-19 cases in Haiti and other underdeveloped countries lies squarely with the profit-driven capitalist system, which has prioritized the enrichment of the world’s ruling classes at the expense of saving lives. In stark contrast to the surge in malnourishment for the world’s poor, the world’s richest billionaires increased their wealth from \$8 trillion to \$13 trillion while the pandemic spread and claimed 3 million lives.

Haiti’s ultra-wealthy oligarchy and their political henchmen like authoritarian President Jovenal Moïse have presided over a social crisis where Haitian households have seen their income drop by more than 60 percent. The Moïse regime has spent the past year shrugging off the danger of the pandemic and ignoring the need to adopt preventive health measures against outbreaks.

Moïse’s government has been at the core of a political crisis that has gripped the country for months after his

attempts in February to upend the constitution and establish a presidential dictatorship.

Backed by the United States and other imperialist powers, Moïse remained in power after his five-year term as president expired in early February. His government has orchestrated plans to hold a referendum that would effectively grant him sweeping dictatorial powers. The referendum proposal included removing the prohibition on presidents serving more than two consecutive terms, which was instituted after the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986.

The president was forced to backpedal on his plans after tens of thousands of people carried out protests in Port-au-Prince and other cities against his right-wing agenda. Police responded to the groundswell of social opposition by attacking protesters with tear gas, rubber bullets and other means of repression. Popular anger against the government had been rising since early 2020 when Moïse refused to hold constitutionally required parliamentary elections after the terms of deputies in the legislature expired, thereby ruling by decree. Moïse has since dismissed all the country’s mayors and handpicked his own reactionary loyalists to fill critical positions in the police and federal agencies.

Moïse stated Thursday that there was “nothing to worry about” about in terms of the country holding its parliamentary, local and presidential elections scheduled to take place September 21.

These comments are aimed at deflecting the international bourgeoisie’s growing unease over the protest and strike movements that have erupted in Haiti against homicidal pandemic policies, obscene levels of social inequality and the lurch towards dictatorship. The only way that the tragic and life-threatening crises facing the Haitian people can be resolved is through a revolutionary socialist movement, led by the working class and allied with workers across the globe, aimed at overthrowing capitalism and ending the centuries-long legacy of imperialist oppression.



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