

A crime against humanity: COVID-19 has killed an estimated four million people in India

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The real toll of the COVID-19 pandemic in India is between three and five million, ten times the official figure, according to a new study by the US-based Center for Global Development. “True deaths are likely to be in the several millions not hundreds of thousands,” notes the report, “making this arguably India’s worst human tragedy since partition and independence.”

This massive death toll is a crime against humanity, in which the entire imperialist world order is implicated no less than the ruling class of India. Moreover, the massive undercount of cases and deaths in India is no doubt replicated in other countries. This means that the real global death toll from the pandemic, which stands at 4.13 million by official figures, is well over nine million and likely far higher.

The study, released on Tuesday, estimates that there were between 1.5 and 3.4 million “excess deaths” in India during the “first wave” of the pandemic between April 2020 and March 2021. The number of deaths per day was even higher during the “second wave” between April and June of this year, as India’s hospitals collapsed in the face of a tsunami of infections. An estimated 1.4 to 2.4 million people died in these three months, a rate of death three times higher than the previous period.

Basic and necessary equipment to fight the symptoms of the coronavirus, such as oxygen and Remdesivir, were all but non-existent. Families were forced to purchase such supplies themselves from the black market, and often forced to administer care themselves as well. Images and videos of crowds outside hospitals clamoring for assistance, even as their loved ones were dying, burned themselves into the minds of millions around the world.

Such mass death was spurred on by the abysmal social conditions facing hundreds of millions of India’s working poor, who are malnourished, lack access to clean water

and live in cramped quarters and are unable to socially distance. Given these conditions, when the pandemic first emerged, it was all the more important that the government mobilize the necessary resources to contain it.

The Modi government bears responsibility for this catastrophe. Its response was guided at every step by the single-minded aim of preserving the wealth and privileges of the financial elite. It did virtually nothing to contain the pandemic until abruptly calling for a nationwide lockdown on March 24, 2020, ordered with only four hours’ notice, which was later removed before the virus was contained.

No economic assistance was provided for the hundreds of millions of informal workers rendered unable to feed themselves and their families, which induced a mass migration of workers back to rural areas, spreading the virus to every corner of the country.

Even as coronavirus cases and deaths mounted, Modi pressed forward with reopening, proclaiming that the country had to be “saved” from measures to prevent the spread of a lethal and virulent contagion. Speaking for the Indian ruling elite, he infamously declared on April 20, 2021, during a national broadcast, “In today’s situation, we have to save the country from lockdown!”

This horrifying death toll reveals the true meaning of this declaration. In the midst of the largest surge of COVID-19 anywhere in the world, the country had been “saved” from the basic measures necessary to contain the disease, at the cost of millions of lives. According to *Forbes*, in 2020 the wealth of India’s billionaires nearly doubled to \$596 billion. During that same period, an estimated 230 million Indians were robbed of their livelihood and pushed below the national poverty line of 375 rupees (US \$5) a day.

However, direct responsibility for this crime against humanity extends to every capitalist government—and, in particular, the United States and the major imperialist powers. The mass infection in India is the product of the decision to reject emergency measures to stop the pandemic when it first emerged, because these measures impinged on the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.

On February 28, 2020, when there were as yet *only three reported cases of COVID-19 in India*, the International Committee of the Fourth International issued an urgent call for a globally coordinated emergency response to the pandemic. “The response to the coronavirus cannot be coordinated on a nation by nation level,” the ICFI wrote. “The virus does not respect borders or visa immigration restrictions. The global network of transportation and economic integration have turned the virus into a global problem.”

Instead of taking emergency action, however, the major capitalist powers, led by the United States, used the crisis to organize a massive bailout of the financial markets and the rich. This was followed by the campaign to return workers to work and remove all necessary restrictions to stop the further spread of the virus.

The consequences have been devastating for the population of the advanced capitalist countries. In the United States, more than 625,000 people are dead, according to official figures, while the real toll is likely over one million. The failure to eradicate the disease in its early stages ensured that it would spread rapidly throughout the world, including to India.

The massive loss of life, moreover, has been fueled by the policy of “vaccine nationalism,” with the major capitalist governments hoarding vaccines. India, one of the world’s leading producers of pharmaceuticals, has a vaccination rate that is one tenth that of Europe and the United States. According to the Reuters COVID-19 vaccination tracker, only 6.3 percent of the country is fully vaccinated, meaning that about 1.3 billion people are still vulnerable to new and even more deadly variants.

In any rational society, the scale of social misery produced by the “second wave” in India would have evoked an enormous, globally coordinated response. India’s colossal manufacturing capacity would have turned to making equipment and medicine to fight the disease and emergency hospitals would have been erected to care for the sick. An army of testers and contact tracers would have been mobilized and financial resources provided to those who were forced to isolate to protect

themselves and others from the virulent and deadly disease. Non-essential production would have been halted, with full monetary compensation to the workers and small businesses impacted.

The collective resources of global society would have been mobilized to stop the carnage. Instead, the imperialist governments offered a pittance in assistance. Trillions are expended every year on military armaments and nuclear weapons, but almost nothing was provided to save the lives of millions of people. The multinational corporations, moreover, insisted that production continue to churn out profits.

For the capitalist oligarchs, the death of millions of people was considered—and is considered—an acceptable sacrifice.

There will be an accounting for this policy of social murder. The pandemic has exposed, through the deaths of uncounted millions, that all aspects of socioeconomic life are ultimately subordinated to profit, producing the social miseries of poverty, hunger and disease alongside the existential threats of ecological catastrophe, global pandemics and nuclear war.

It has also revealed the fact that the interests of workers everywhere are the same, that the fight for their interests, and for life itself, requires a united struggle against the capitalist system.

With no way forward under capitalism, the implementation of a science-based plan to protect lives and livelihoods requires the independent political intervention of the working class, mobilized as an international social force. The fight against the pandemic must at the same time be animated by a socialist perspective and advanced through the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in India and around the world in a struggle to end both the pandemic and the social order responsible for the disastrous response to the pandemic.



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