

Millions of lives in danger as COVID-19 spreads across South Asia

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The COVID-19 pandemic is surging throughout South Asia, home to a quarter of the world's population, with more than 34 million cases and nearly 480,000 deaths reported so far. The real figures are doubtless several times of these numbers, which are notoriously under-counted. The main responsibility lies with capitalist governments, who keep the economy open to guarantee big business profits, despite warnings from medical experts and epidemiologists.

Despite the spread of the pandemic fueled by the more dangerous Delta variant, governments are abandoning measures to control the virus, including lockdowns, mass testing, or contact tracing. Even under limited so-called lockdowns, non-essential businesses are allowed to carry on daily work, with factories open, forcing workers to go to work under unsafe conditions, leading to further spread of the virus. With underfunded public hospitals overflowing with COVID-19 patients and lacking oxygen and other crucial supplies, the death toll may rise by millions more.

While the official figures show more than 422,000 lives have been lost to COVID-19 in India, the actual figures are likely ten times higher, between three to five million, according to a study by the US-based Center for Global Development. The public health system is so run-down that most Indians rely on the private hospitals and have to pay about 63 percent of their medical expenses from their personal income. Without health insurance, a mountain of medicals bills is drowning ordinary Indians in debt.

On top of this, the pandemic has pushed 230 million people into poverty. Ordinary people are now starting to sell their gold jewelry after failing to find another job or to start a small business. This is especially the case in rural India. The Indian middle class has shrunk by 32 million in 2020, and inequality is soaring. Even before

the pandemic, in 2019, the top one percent of India controlled 21.7 percent of the national income, while the bottom 50 percent had 13 percent. The pandemic has further intensified these obscene levels of social inequality.

A new wave of the pandemic is underway. A recent Massachusetts Institute of Technology study predicted that by the end of 2021, India will be the worst-affected nation with 287,000 new cases per day. With the public health care system already strained and almost non-existent in rural areas predicted to be badly hit by the pandemic, a catastrophe is looming.

Pakistan also faces another wave of death, as it passed the one million COVID-19 cases mark last Friday. Already, 23,087 deaths had been officially recorded by Tuesday, the second-highest in the Indian sub-continent. Hospitals are at capacity or turning patients away as COVID-19 infections surge in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and its industrial and financial center. The Centre for Chemical and Biological Sciences at the University of Karachi found that the Delta variant is dominant in Karachi, accounting for as many as 92.2 percent of infections.

The health crisis in Karachi shows what could rapidly engulf other Pakistani cities if the virus is allowed to spread unchecked. Even Pakistan's strained urban health care systems are absent in suburbs and rural areas. Amid the global crisis in vaccine production and distribution, only two per cent of the 216 million Pakistan population have been vaccinated.

The disaster in Pakistan is due both to the criminal negligence and indifference of the major imperialist powers who have controlled vaccine production, and the contempt for workers and toilers of the Pakistani regime in Islamabad. Prime Minister Imran Khan has refused to allocate funds and resources crucial to

effectively controlling and suppressing the virus. Instead, his government has limited itself to calls to wear masks, and other limited measures.

Even official figures show that Bangladesh's situation is very severe. It recorded a record toll of coronavirus, with 15,192 infections and 247 deaths on Monday morning. On Sunday, at least 228 deaths were reported. The total number of cases now stands at over 1.2 million and deaths over 20,000. If the pandemic maintains its current pace, there will soon be no space left in hospitals for patients, the Dhaka government warned on Sunday.

Bangladesh's health care system is already overwhelmed and facing a shortage of key supplies, such as medical oxygen, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and ICU beds. Oxygen demand is about to exceed national oxygen production capability, and hospitals are struggling to treat the unprecedented surge of patients. Vaccination is very slow: *Al Jazeera* noted on July 27 that only 2.6 percent of Bangladesh's 165 million population had been vaccinated with both doses.

The pandemic has intensified the already appalling social crisis in the country. Over the last year, a further 20 million were added to the 40 million people who lived below the poverty line before the pandemic hit Bangladesh. An alarming rise of dengue fever has also been reported.

In Nepal, more than 688,000 are infected with COVID-19, and the death toll has reached 10,000, according to official figures. About four percent of the country's 28 million population has been fully vaccinated so far; only 2.61 million Nepalis had received their first doses by July 8.

The pandemic has led to the collapse of Nepal's economy, which relies heavily on remittances from migrant workers and tourism. On July 19, the *Kathmandu Post* wrote that the "central bank Governor Maha Prasad Adhikari warned that external sector stability remained precarious due to an exponential rise in the trade deficit coupled with the unavailability of means to curb it in the near future."

In Sri Lanka, the official death toll is over 4,000 and COVID-19 cases have exceeded 300,000, though the real figures are no doubt much higher. President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government keeps lifting health restrictions, even as the Delta variant spreads in

Sri Lanka. It is ignoring repeated warnings by the medical professionals that the country faces a "fourth wave" of the virus. Facing massive debts and a crisis of its foreign currency reserves, it is desperate to boost exports and has pressed industries to continue operations, putting profits before lives.

Not only South Asia, but the entire Asian region is severely hit by the pandemic. This region was home to the 51 percent of the world's 688 million malnourished people last year. A report by the World Health Organization and UN agencies showed that the number of food-insecure Asians doubled to 265 million in 2020, mainly due to under-investment in social protections.

It noted that most the world's 74.5 million stunted children under age five live in South Asia. Even before the pandemic, in 2019, nearly 350 million people in South Asia faced severe food insecurity.



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