

World marks 200 million cases of coronavirus pandemic

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The world this week marked the 200 millionth confirmed case of the coronavirus pandemic, the latest in a series of grim milestones amid a pandemic that has been plaguing humanity for the past 20 months. Alongside that sobering figure, the virus has prematurely taken more than 4.26 million human lives from their coworkers, friends and families.

This week is also the sixth week in a row that daily new cases have increased and the fourth week in a row that daily deaths have risen. As of August 3, there was an average of more than 605,000 new known cases each day, and more than 9,300 fatalities. An ominous warning was given by Dr. Catherine O'Neal, Chief Medical Officer at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, "that these are the DARKEST DAYS of this pandemic."

The three most hard-hit countries are the United States, with 36.1 million cases and 631,000 deaths, India, with 31.8 million cases and 426,000 deaths, and Brazil, with 19.9 million cases and 559,000 deaths, totaling more than 44 percent of the world's cases and nearly 38 percent of official deaths.

Overall, there are 19 countries with more than two million confirmed cases and 12 with more than four million. Twelve countries have also reported at least 100,000 deaths, the aforementioned three and Mexico, Peru, Russia, the United Kingdom, Italy, Colombia, France, Argentina and Indonesia.

The scale of the pandemic across continents is equally revealing. Asia and the Pacific have suffered more than 63 million cases, followed by 52 million in Europe, 43 million in North America, 35 million in South America and nearly 7 million in Africa. In percentage terms, 8.2 out of 100 people in South America have been infected, 7.2 out of 100 in North America, 6.9 out of 100 in Europe, 1.3 out of 100 in Asia, and 0.5 out of 100 in Africa.

And in reality, the figures are far worse when unreported cases and deaths are taken into account. An estimate by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) calculates that, based on excess death counts internationally, nearly 9.2 million men, women and children have lost their

lives to the pandemic. A similar count by the *Economist* found that there are between 8–16 million dead. Given that the average infection fatality rate of the coronavirus is about 0.5 percent, these calculations indicate that the real number of cases stands at about 2 billion, ten times official figures.

That such mass death and colossal social misery has occurred is a damning indictment of the world's capitalist governments and the socioeconomic system which they defend. The world's ruling elites have had ample opportunities to stem the tide, including the chance to stop the spread before it fully took hold around the globe in January and February 2020, to allow the global lockdowns in March and April of last year, which had begun to lower infection rates, to continue, and to the widespread deployment of highly effective vaccines, begun in January 2021.

They have instead done the exact opposite, pursuing ever more openly the homicidal policy of herd immunity. In the United States, then-US President Republican Donald Trump resisted any measures to contain the pandemic until plans had been put into place to transfer trillions of dollars to Wall Street and the major corporations through the CARES Act. Trump then fought viciously to end the lockdowns that had been implemented and to get workers back into unsafe conditions in their offices, plants and factories to pay for the astronomical transfer of wealth to the financial oligarchy.

Trump's policies resulted in just under 427,000 official deaths in the United States during his tenure. Internationally, other world leaders followed suit, leading to nearly 2.2 million dead overall.

These processes have only accelerated under Biden. Another 204,000 people have lost their lives in the United States and more than 2 million around the world. Come the fall, all restrictions on in-person schooling are being done away with, setting the stage for a further acceleration of the pandemic.

The ongoing crisis has been made continually worse by the emergence of newer and more infectious variants. The Alpha variant was first detected last fall in the United Kingdom and

rapidly spread around the world, causing the peaks of cases and deaths witnessed in January. Data from the UK clearly showed that the Alpha variant was about twice as infectious as the wild variant and caused more hospitalizations.

At about the same time, the Gamma variant was first sampled in Brazil and became the dominant variant in South America. It is not only more infectious, but also more deadly, especially among young people. Reports have also emerged that it is capable of reinfecting those who were previously infected by the wild variant, raising the specter of a never ending cycle of infection and death that is not held back by natural immunity.

Now, the world lives under the deadly shadow of the Delta variant. It first emerged in India and was responsible for the skyrocketing of case numbers in that country in April to nearly 400,000 a day, at the time about half of the world's cases. From an epidemiological standpoint, the massive spread is caused by the fact that the Delta variant is 2.5 times as transmissible as the original variant of the disease, a result of the virus mutating and optimizing itself for human infection over the course of the past 18 months and hundreds of millions of cases.

The Delta variant is also at least partially resistant to vaccines, the panacea promoted by the Biden administration as the reason mask mandates and public health measures are no longer needed to end the pandemic. A recently leaked internal report from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns that there are an estimated 35,000 symptomatic cases of COVID-19 each week in the US among vaccinated people.

Those vaccinated can also spread the disease, which has been found to live in the mouth and sinus canals, avoiding the body's immune system for some time, meaning that being vaccinated doesn't automatically remove one from the chain of transmission. This is especially concerning given how infectious the Delta variant is, more easily spread than the common cold.

The sheer virulence of the Delta variant also undermines the effectiveness of vaccines. It is so infectious that, even with the current 50 percent full vaccination rate in the US, the Delta variant is able to spread faster than the wild variant was able to when there was no vaccination. In other words, even with vaccines, the emergence of the Delta variant has induced a spread of the coronavirus that is worse than what occurred in March 2020. That Florida is currently experiencing record hospitalizations must be taken as a warning of the dangers facing the whole population.

In countries with lower vaccination rates, which remains the vast majority of the world, the Delta variant is causing even greater havoc. Multiple countries had very low case rates until April, when the Delta variant reached them and

caused cases and deaths to explode out of control. Thailand, for example, which has a full vaccination rate of less than six percent, had less than 100 coronavirus-related deaths before April, and now has more than 5,300.

And there are more variants on the horizon. The Lambda variant has been shown to be resistant to vaccines and three other variants, Eta, Iota and Kappa, have been described as "potential threats" by researchers looking into the infectiousness and evasiveness of the coronavirus as it mutates.

That variants are emerging that can evade the vaccine is not an argument against vaccination, which remains a scientific triumph against the pandemic. Workers should get vaccinated and fight for an even broader vaccination campaign, both in the US and internationally in order to protect themselves and the world against a deadly plague. This effort must be united with a renewed surge in non-pharmaceutical interventions to end the pandemic: masking, testing, contact tracing, isolation and the closure of non-essential businesses.

The coronavirus pandemic is, however, merely a symptom of a more terminal disease, capitalism. The virus persists not because the medical expertise to end it does not exist, but because immense social and economic forces have dictated policies that place private profits and market considerations over human lives, policies carried out by Trump, Biden and their ilk. It is only through the revolutionary transformation of society, led by the working class in the fight to establish socialism, that the social and political conditions will emerge to eradicate the pandemic once and for all.



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