

India to provide pittance in “compensation” to families of COVID-19 dead

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has announced that a paltry 50,000 rupees (about US\$670) in disaster relief compensation will be paid to the families of Indians who have died from COVID-19.

The compensation plan, which the government only brought forward after being sued in court, is akin to rubbing salt in a gaping wound.

Millions who watched in horror as their relatives died during India’s second pandemic wave last spring because of shortages of hospital beds, oxygen, drugs, and trained personnel will now have to jump through various bureaucratic hoops to prove to the satisfaction of Indian authorities that they succumbed to COVID-19. And all for a princely sum that in most cases will not even cover a fraction of their loved one’s medical and cremation (or burial) expenses, let alone provide them compensation for the loss of a breadwinner or their mental anguish.

The 50,000 rupee payment is one-eighth of what disaster victims are entitled to under India’s National Disaster Management Act, 2005. Yet on Monday, Indian’s Supreme Court gave its approval to the compensation scheme. Grotesquely, Indian’s highest court went out of its way to praise the government’s generosity and its calamitous response to the pandemic. “We are very happy that something is being done to wipe out the tears of those who suffered,” declared Justice M.R. Shah. “We have to take judicial notice of the fact that what India has done, no other country could do.”

In reality, Modi and the Indian ruling class have perpetrated a crime against humanity. Officially, India with just under 450,000 COVID-19 deaths has the world’s third highest COVID death toll. But a spate of scientific studies of excess deaths in India during the pandemic have demonstrated that COVID-19 has killed 5 million or more Indians.

Like the North American and European imperialist powers, Modi and his BJP government have systematically prioritised corporate profits over saving human lives. In the spring of 2020, they imposed a short-lived, ill-prepared lockdown which, by depriving tens of millions of migrant workers of any livelihood overnight, helped spread the deadly virus across rural India, where most of the population lives. They then pivoted to recklessly reopening the economy and continued to do so as

infections and deaths rose exponentially for the next five months.

India’s even more devastating second wave of the pandemic, from March through June 2021, was, if anything, even more manifestly criminal. For weeks, the government dismissed the warnings of scientists, including its own medical experts, about the emergence of the Delta variant and a burgeoning tsunami of new infections, and bitterly resisted calls for urgent measures to halt the virus’s spread. As India was setting new records for daily infections and deaths, Modi went on national television to vow he would “save” the country “from lockdown,” not COVID-19.

The Modi government has vehemently condemned the studies that show India’s COVID-19 fatalities are a gross—and it should be added, deliberate—undercount. In this they have been assisted by the corporate media, which has helped it bury the issue, and the opposition parties, which have implemented the profits-before-lives policy wherever they form the state government.

However, as part of its efforts to get the Supreme Court to sanction compensation payments one-eighth the statutorily mandated amount, New Delhi has agreed that payments should be made to more than just the families of those who have COVID-19 or mucormycosis (black fungus, a COVID-related disease) listed on their death certificates as the cause of death. Under the court-approved plan, the families of anyone who died within 30 days of a positive COVID-19 test will be eligible for the meagre 50,000 rupee payment.

No doubt this was based on a macabre calculus—that to somewhat expand the eligibility for a “compensation” payment that is only one-eighth the legally mandated sum of 400,000 rupees (\$5,345) will prove less costly than paying the full amount to the families of those currently recognised as having died from COVID.

The government knows full well that its expanded eligibility criteria will make little difference to the families of the vast majority of the 5 million COVID-dead. Even in pre-pandemic times, proper death certificates were issued in less than one in four deaths. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of those infected were never tested by India’s dilapidated health care system, which has been systematically underfunded by

successive governments, whether headed by the BJP or Congress, for decades. According to seropositive studies carried out by health authorities, just one in every 100 infections were detected in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, and just one in 120 in Bihar, the third most populous.

Cynically, the National Disaster Management Agency, which is personally headed by Modi, cited the likelihood that the number of COVID dead will grow to argue that compensation payments should be slashed. "Financial prudence," it wrote, "demands that we plan in a manner that assistance can be provided to larger number of people should the number of deaths rise."

This is, in effect, an admission the government knows that its current drive to remove what few COVID restrictions remain and reliance on a disorganised vaccine rollout as the sole defence against the virus are creating conditions for a massive third wave of infection and deaths.

On May 25, in the wake of India's disastrous second wave, advocates Gaurav Kumar Bansal and Reepak Kansal petitioned the Supreme Court to order the government, which had declared the pandemic a national disaster under the National Disaster Management Act, to provide the 400,000 rupee compensation stipulated in the Act's Section 12 (iii) to all families of those who had died from COVID or mucormycosis. By rejecting their petition, the Supreme Court has created a precedent that will allow India's government to reduce compensation payments to families affected by future disasters.

Time and again, India's highest court has given its legal imprimatur to the Modi government's authoritarian actions and Hindu communalist provocations, from its August 2019 constitutional coup stripping Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, of its semi-autonomous status, to the building of a temple to Lord Ram, on the site of the razed Babri Masjid mosque. But even more fundamentally, the court is a bulwark of capitalist rule. The court's sanctioning of the government's sham COVID-19 compensation scheme is part of a series of judgments it has made that have upheld and enforced the Indian ruling elite's criminal pandemic policy.

Even if the court-sanctioned 50,000 rupee payment were made to the families of all 450,000 official COVID-19 dead or for that matter such compensation paid for all 5 million of India's pandemic deaths, it would still represent little more than a drop in the ocean compared to the vast wealth accumulated by India's super-rich during the pandemic.

In the first case, such compensation would total barely US\$300 million, and in the latter US\$3.35 billion. By contrast, the wealth of India's billionaires has increased by several hundred billion dollars since March 2020.

Syrus Poonawalla, who heads the Serum Institute of India, India's largest vaccine manufacturer, is a case in point. According to the Hurun India 2021 Rich List, which was published last week, he has seen his fortune shoot up by over

\$9 billion over the past year—a 70 percent increase. Much of this increase is attributable to the BJP government's decision not to use India's state-owned medical sector to manufacture vaccines and its stubborn months-long refusal to provide free COVID-19 vaccines to all, forcing people to pay for the life-saving jab out of their own pockets and for a higher price.

Hurun reports that over the past year, the ranks of India's billionaires swelled by 58 to 238. Earlier in the pandemic, Oxfam's "Inequality Virus Report" released at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, showed that India's billionaires had increased their wealth by 35 percent or US\$185 billion, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the Modi government, which has pumped billions of dollars into the banks and financial markets, helping pave the way for the massive increase in the wealth of India's rich and super-rich, it is unthinkable to appropriate even a tiny fraction of these ill-gotten gains to support the millions of people who have been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While state funds have flowed seamlessly into the bank accounts and stock portfolios of the super-rich during the pandemic, the Modi government is ensuring that the process of accessing the derisory COVID-19 disaster compensation payments will be as cumbersome as possible. It has ordered the state governments to provide the ex-gratia assistance from the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) rather than allocating money from the National Disaster Relief Fund. This will put an additional burden on the already cash-strapped states.

This decision has been denounced by some states governed by opposition parties. In Rajasthan, Congress Party state president and Minister of State for Education Govind Singh Dotasara told the *Indian Express*, "You can't impose [the ex-gratia payment] on states. ... It should be done by the Centre through their relief fund. ... It's not that only one state has been affected by it, it's a pandemic. It should be covered under the National Disaster Relief Fund."

The truth of this statement is itself a damning indictment of Congress, which has marched in lockstep with Modi in the implementation of a "herd immunity" pandemic policy. While Congress politicians may squabble with the Centre over who should pay the bill for the sham compensation scheme, they are similarly culpable for the waves of mass infection and death that have swept across the Indian population.



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