

Medical authorities warn of disaster as Omicron variant found in India

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India's first confirmed case of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 has been detected in Bangalore, the capital of the South Indian state of Karnataka. "Omicron variant was confirmed by genome sequencing," reported Lav Agarwal, the Joint Secretary of the Union Home Ministry.

Since then, the Omicron variant has been confirmed in Delhi and other cities. Twelve patients infected with the Omicron variant are hospitalised in the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan (LNJP) hospital in Delhi. A senior government official told the *Indian Express*: "A total of six sensitive flights landed in Delhi from Wednesday 10 pm to Thursday 6 am. The passengers came from Paris, Frankfurt, London and Moscow. Four of them tested positive for Covid-19 and have been sent for treatment. They will be tested for Omicron."

The Karnataka government reported that at least 10 airline passengers gave false mobile numbers and then fled after arriving in Bangalore from South Africa, a centre of the Omicron outbreak.

The emergence of the new variant, under conditions where governments internationally are not taking action to eliminate the spread of the virus, threatens a devastating new wave of cases. Already, official health ministry data showed that the total number of COVID-19 cases across India has risen to 34.65 million, while the death toll is nearly 474,000. These totals are massive underestimates, however, and epidemiological analyses suggest that well over 4 million people have died of COVID-19 in India. Unless urgent action is taken, these numbers will again rise massively.

In India, medical faculties are protesting against the shortage of medical staff to handle a new looming onrush of cases and seriously ill patients. The Federation of Resident Doctors' Association of India, representing dozens of government hospitals, sent a letter to the health minister, stating: "Health care institutions across the nation are running short of adequate workforce of resident doctors, with no admission in the current year yet."

The letter warned: "With the possibility of a future COVID-19 pandemic wave looming large, the situation will

be disastrous for the health care sector."

India's central and state governments are indicating, however, that their response is "business as usual." They are rejecting all aggressive policies of social distancing, stopping of nonessential industries and in-person schooling, and identification and tracing of cases that alone can eliminate transmission of the virus.

On December 3, the *Economic Times* published an Indian Health Ministry statement on the Omicron variant. To a question "what precautions should we take?" it answered: "The same Covid-appropriate behaviour as before, which includes face masks, vaccinations, social distancing, and maintaining good ventilation." In fact, even these basic mandatory measures have not been implemented with the seriousness they deserve.

In short, the Modi government and state governments of various political colorations are determined to maintain policies that have already led to the deaths of millions. While telling the people to maintain social distance, they have encouraged mass gatherings, the running of nonessential industries, the reopening of schools and colleges, the operation of cinema and mass transit with 100 percent full seating, of crowded markets and of restaurants. Sports events like cricket matches with large crowds are allowed. The monsoon season will worsen this situation.

A chilling sign of the catastrophic impact of the BJP's handling of the pandemic was the discovery last month of rotting corpses in a Bangalore hospital, 15 months after their deaths. According to the *Deccan Chronicle*, "The two patients were admitted in the hospital in Rajajinagar with coronavirus in June 2020 and died a few days later in the following month." The dead bodies were noticed when workers went inside the old mortuary on November 26 to clean it. They noticed a foul smell coming from the freezers and found the bodies.

The emergence of the more vaccine-resistant Omicron variant exposes the fraudulent arguments of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian state governments of various political colorations that

vaccinations would make the pandemic disappear. The WSWS noted “three bad reasons” for which capitalist governments have advocated a “vaccine-only approach” to the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, it conforms entirely with the economic interests of the corporate and financial elite by supposedly making unnecessary aggressive public health measures that would impinge on corporate profits.

Second, it is essentially a national solution, which could ultimately be used as a tool to strengthen the position of the American ruling class in relation to its main geo-strategic rivals.

Third, it is a pragmatically simplistic and individualistic approach that does not require a broad-based and coordinated social response to the pandemic.

The Modi government allowed millions of people to die in early 2021 but reassured the public that the development of vaccines would end the suffering. It promoted the Covaxin and covidSHIELD vaccines, boasting of having administered 1.25 billion vaccine doses around the world.

This vaccination strategy by itself fell massively short, however. According to medical experts, India still needs more than 12 million doses a day to fully vaccinate all eligible adults by the end of 2021. Health economist Dr. Rijo M. John told the BBC that there are also about 70 million more “vulnerable” adults above the age of 45 that are yet to receive even a single dose. Only 32 percent of India’s 1.4 billion people have received two shots, according to Bloomberg’s vaccine tracker.

The emergence of the Omicron variant, threatening to evade all the existing vaccines, has definitively exposed the bankruptcy of Modi’s strategy. It confirmed repeated warnings by scientists that mass circulation of the virus combined with a slow uptake of the vaccines would breed dangerous, vaccine-resistant variants.

Dr. Shahid Jameel, a leading virologist and Fellow at OCIS and Green Templeton College, University of Oxford, said: “Regions of the world that are poorly vaccinated are likely breeding grounds for newer variants. Countries without the required resources should be supported. The world needs better vaccine access and equity. It should be a wake-up call for the world, especially the developed nations.”

Dr. Satyajit Rath, an immunologist at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune, said: “While

mutations in the virus will keep arising and being selected under appropriate circumstances, the unconscionable vaccine inequity has indeed contributed to the persistence of a large size of the virus pool.”

Rath also sharply criticized the imperialist powers for their role in creating a global shortfall in vaccine supplies and blocking ex-colonial countries’ access to vaccines. Vaccine inequity, he said, is “driven by a global manufacturing shortfall and by vaccine nationalism, leading to inequitable global vaccine supply. The first is driven, in part, by for-profit considerations, while the second is driven by xenophobic ideologies.”

The contempt for the lives of millions revealed by the Indian bourgeoisie’s “profit before lives” policy is driving mounting opposition from workers, scientists and medical experts.

In April, leading Indian scientists signed an open letter to Modi, blaming India’s disastrous record during the pandemic on “epidemiological data not being systematically collected and released.” Furthermore, they argued, even though the Indian Council of Medical Research has collected data from COVID-19 diagnostic tests since early in the pandemic, it refuses to make this data accessible except to a few government officials.

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers from India’s National Rural Health Mission are threatening a countrywide strike this month. ASHA workers have gone door to door in remote parts of the country throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, urging people to get vaccinated. The vast majority of these impoverished workers, paid about US\$40 per month, are deprived of critical Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including gloves, masks and sanitizers.

The critical task is the building of a movement in the working class across India and internationally fighting for a scientifically-guided policy eliminating the spread of all variants of COVID-19.



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