

Mexico's COVID cases soar as AMLO minimizes danger

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With the onset of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, the contagion curve is skyrocketing in Mexico. In the week from January 4th to the 11th, new cases more than doubled, from 15,184 to 33,626. On January 13, 44,187 new cases were reported, along with 190 deaths, which lag two to three weeks behind infection.

The case counts this week exceed the daily maximum registered in previous COVID peaks. And this is only the beginning of the new wave, which is growing exponentially.

With the current figures, Mexico officially exceeds 4.2 million cases and 300,000 deaths from the coronavirus since the onset of the pandemic.

This number is indisputably a gross underestimation. Mexican data tracking excess deaths in 2021 from the pandemic (relative to 2015-2019) suggests that the actual death toll from the coronavirus pandemic was between 455 and 655 thousand as of December 31, 2021.

But even the official lower number places Mexico fourth in the world in deaths, trailing only the United States, India and Brazil, countries with much larger populations.

No restrictive measures have been implemented in Mexico in two years, not even travel restrictions. No negative COVID-19 test has been required to enter the country. This has allowed waves of tourists to visit the beaches of the Caribbean and Baja California Sur and infect at will. The latter state currently has the highest rate of infection.

This week, the states of Jalisco and Baja California Sur announced for the first time that as of Friday, January 15 they will “require” “proof of vaccination” or a recent COVID negative PCR test result to enter bars or restaurants. But this requirement likely will be observed more in the breach. Baja in fact stopped short

of mandating the policy, noting that showing proof of vaccination would be at the discretion of individual business owners, which was always the case.

Mexico has entrusted its entire strategy against the pandemic to immunization, a case of too little, too late. It claims to have employed Chinese, Russian and Cuban vaccines, in addition to the European and American ones, to vaccinate 80 million Mexicans to date, or about 88 percent of adults, but a significant portion of them have not been fully vaccinated. Only in recent weeks has a booster dose been started for people over 65 and for hospital staff, and only last week for educational staff in limited areas.

In November, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (popularly known as AMLO) lied in stating that Mexico had one of the highest vaccination rates in the world, when in fact it was then in 90th place.

On November 20, he commemorated three years of his rule on the 111th anniversary of the start of the Mexican Revolution with a massive congregation in the Zócalo (central plaza) of Mexico City, a space where social distancing was impossible. Nothing was said about wearing masks.

With the Omicron exploding in the current wave, AMLO and health officials are going out of their way to downplay its risk to the population. On Monday, López Obrador announced that he had contracted COVID for the second time. But, calling it “Covidcito” or little COVID, all he asked of people was to isolate themselves if they have symptoms.

Hugo López Gatell, Mexico's deputy health minister, absurdly compared the Omicron strain to the common cold, only advising people to stay at home as they would with a cold.

Health Secretary Jorge Alcocer gave false assurances that there has been a 91 percent drop in hospitalizations

relative to previous pandemic highs, and said not to worry, even as hospitals begin to fill up.

But as the magazine *Proceso* reported this week, Mexico's National Health Care System has a deficit of 300,000 health care workers. The current upsurge in the pandemic, much like the previous ones, puts increasing pressure on this system, which relies on contingent workers paid low wages and lacks necessary safety equipment. On top of that, many health workers have yet to receive vaccine booster shots and have themselves become ill from COVID-19.

This week Favian Valdez, one of the leaders of the newly formed National Union of Mexican Nursing (Unión Nacional de Enfermería Mexicana, UNEM), explained the hospital situation to *Proceso*: "Once again we are sent into battle with no weapons. Federal Hospitals and the 32 state health systems, claiming lack of resources, refuse to give us adequate protective equipment. That is how they send us to help those patients affected by omicron."

Valdez indicated that health workers are not being provided basic equipment such as KN95 or N95 masks. He pointed out that many patients enter hospitals without knowing they are infected by the coronavirus: "...and doctors and nurses have to treat them with totally inadequate equipment."

Valdez summed up the situation: "With this new variant all three levels of hospital care will be overwhelmed. Health personnel will once again have to bear that weight. This is not just for the workers that have had to carry the entire load, despite extremely low wages and that have gotten ill; many have died attending COVID patients."

As the number of COVID cases expands exponentially, the "Seven Seas," the first cruise ship to dock in the Pacific Coast port of Acapulco in two years arrived, carrying 460 passengers and 445 crew members. Acapulco tourist authorities celebrated the event with champagne, as passengers and crew members came ashore, following perfunctory questioning as to whether they had been ill, and a recommendation to wear masks.

Acapulco Tourism director Santos Ramirez indicated that 14 more giant cruise ships were expected soon, with a goal of 90 ships a year. According to Acapulco Mayor Abelina Lopez: "Today we fulfilled the promise of cruise ships; this first is one from the Regent

shipping firm. This is the step that Acapulco must take; this way we will be able to re-start the economy," declared the mayor.



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