

# Turkey ends remaining pandemic measures as over 200 die every day

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On Wednesday, as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government lifted remaining measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) and public health experts denounced this decision.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca announced the decision at a press conference after the government's so-called "Science Board" meeting. "I would like to say that corona affects Turkey less at the moment," he claimed, before adding, "For a while, we have announced to you that the corona was off the agenda. We removed some restrictions when we realized that the epidemic was going to be over."

Koca's statement and the recent decisions are based not on science or protecting public health but on the profit interests of the capitalist ruling class and aim to divert public attention from continuing mass infections and deaths.

While the Erdoğan government declared that "coronavirus is off the agenda," echoing similar statements from governments worldwide, the daily official number of new cases is over 60,000, and the daily death toll has not fallen below 200 for more than a month.

The total number of deaths that could have been prevented by taking necessary public health measures during the pandemic now exceeds 95,000, and excess deaths have reached 269,000, according to a calculation of Güçlü Yaman, a member of the TTB Pandemic Working Group. While political responsibility for this policy of mass infection and death lies firstly with the government, Turkey's bourgeois opposition parties and trade unions support this policy and are also politically implicated.

The government's declaration of the "end of the pandemic" comes as Russia has invaded Ukraine, and

NATO is moving towards war against Russia. Turkey risks being quickly drawn into the war: A NATO member state, it neighbors both countries and controls the straits between the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

Alongside the war crisis, the Erdoğan government faces growing working class opposition to surging living costs and social inequality at home. As of February, official annual inflation reached 54 percent, while the independent Inflation Research Group (ENAGroup) announced that the real rate is 123 percent. As dozens of wildcat strikes erupted in 2022 involving about 25,000 workers, doctors and other health care workers repeatedly struck for higher wages and benefits. Health care workers are to mount a three-day nationwide strike starting March 14.

According to the new regulations, while the outdoor mask mandate is removed, "if the ventilation is sufficient and there is [social] distancing, it is no longer necessary to wear a mask indoors." According to Health Minister Koca, the obligation to mask in closed areas will be limited to airplanes, buses, theaters, health institutions and schools. As there is no official monitoring of ventilation, this step paves the way for *de facto* abolition of the masking requirement in all indoor places.

Koca also announced that the official contact tracing application (HES) has been removed and that people who do not show signs of illness will not be tested. Accordingly, the HES code control will no longer be possible anywhere, and infected or exposed people will be able to travel everywhere.

Removing the remaining measures in schools puts children at greater risk. According to the health minister, "In cases where two infections are detected, there is no need to close a classroom. Students testing positive will be isolated, and education will continue."

Keeping schools open amid a deadly pandemic is seen as critical so that parents continue to go to factories and workplaces to create profits for the corporate and financial elite, whatever the cost in lives.

Denying all objective scientific fact and the World Health Organization's (WHO) insistence that the pandemic is continuing, Koca said: "When a person says the pandemic is not over or the pandemic is over, the concrete reality does not change. The pandemic has lost its effect, this is a visible truth. We must stop the pandemic from being the main criterion of daily life."

He declared: "We must move from the period of combating the pandemic through restrictions as a society to the stage of individual protection from the disease," effectively announcing that his government had stopped pretending to be fighting the pandemic.

The Turkish Medical Association (TTB) sharply condemned the government's new regulations in a press conference on Thursday. "The announced decisions are a harbinger of more infection and death," it said, adding: "This step is the continuation of the state policies that have ignored public health since the beginning of the pandemic, but prioritized economic concerns."

It noted that an average of 251 people lost their lives from COVID-19 in February, according to the official data, which is a gross underestimate. Fully 40 percent of all deaths in Turkey in the two-year pandemic occurred in the last six months.

The TTB stated that despite Minister Koca's claim to "fight with vaccination" against COVID-19, daily vaccination rates fell to record lows (less than 100,000 per day). It added, "It should be answered how many preventable deaths of our citizens are considered acceptable in our country, where there is no adequate vaccine protection."

While only 32 percent of the population in Turkey has had a booster dose, vaccination permission has not yet been issued for children under the age of 12.

Emphasizing that "the Health Ministry violates the right to life with these decisions," the TTB urged the public to complete their vaccinations, take necessary measures, such as masking, social distance and ventilation, and "raise the demands for taking steps [against the pandemic] based on science."

After Koca's announcement, Prof. Dr. Mehmet Ceyhan, chair of the Infectious Diseases Association,

wrote on Twitter, "We are trying a new way in the fight against the pandemic: the period without measures. Our rate of third dose vaccination is 32 percent, the number of active cases (number of people with a potential for transmission) is 616,964." Ceyhan claimed the daily number of cases was 60,000, but only 10 percent of the cases could be detected because there was no mass testing.

Yesterday Ceyhan also pointed out that the abolition of the measures in New Zealand has led to a public health disaster. He wrote: "New Zealand, an island country. While they were one of the countries that had the best control of COVID with very strict measures, they relaxed the measures. The result: They break new case records every day."

In New Zealand, with a population of 5 million, more than 23,000 cases were detected on March 3, and at least 146,000 people are currently infected. Until October 2021, when the New Zealand government began to lift public health measures, the total number of cases did not exceed 4,300, and only 27 people had died in total. As of March 3, the total number of cases exceeded 166,000, and the death toll reached 63.

This vindicates the principled stance of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which opposes the end of the elimination strategy in New Zealand and advocates the implementation of a worldwide Zero COVID strategy.

As the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) stated in its statement in October, "The fight for elimination now depends directly on the building of a movement of the working class, which is the only force in society with no interest in the defence of capitalist profits at the cost of unending deaths. ... Workers must build new organisations that they control, to organise a global fightback against the homicidal policies of the ruling elite."



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