

Turkish government downplays danger as COVID-19 surge spreads

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On September 15, just four days after schools reopened in Turkey, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca announced that the Eris variant, EG.5.1, had been detected in Turkey. He claimed that it is “not a cause for concern.”

In another statement last Tuesday, he said, “The variant called ‘Eris’ has been seen in a limited number of cases in our country, after countries where life is still going on normally. There is nothing to worry about. Scientists can talk about it, but it is not worthy of being on the agenda for our people.”

Almost two weeks after the opening of schools, Prof. Dr. Tevfik Özlü, a chest diseases specialist at Karadeniz Technical University (KTÜ), said, “During this period, we see many patients with respiratory infections, because they are very easily transmitted diseases. Schools in particular are the area where such diseases increase. With the opening of schools, such diseases spread among students immediately.”

With scientists warning against variants like Eris and Pirola, the government’s reopening of crowded schools, downplaying of the pandemic and taking no public health measures is a social crime.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government has been forced to admit that the pandemic, which it has long claimed is “over,” continues. This is because the situation can no longer be denied: the pandemic has again become a topic in the bourgeois media. However, the main concern of bourgeois politicians and the media is not public health, but suppressing calls for necessary public health measures and ensuring that the capitalists’ extraction of profits from the workers is not disrupted in any way.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which the government considers “not worthy of being on the agenda,” has killed more than 26 million people globally since its

onset, according to estimates of *The Economist*. Around 400 million people are also thought to be afflicted by Long COVID. According to the magazine, globally around 11,000 excess deaths continue to occur every day that can be attributed to the ongoing pandemic.

COVID-19 has significantly shortened life expectancy worldwide. In Turkey, according to official data, it decreased from 78.6 years in 2017–2019 to 77.5 years in 2020–2022.

The Turkish Health Ministry had stopped sharing data on the pandemic in parallel with the World Health Organization’s (WHO) unscientific termination of the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE). According to the last official data released in March, the total number of deaths from COVID-19 in Turkey was over 102,000. However, according to a study by Güçlü Yaman, a member of the Turkish Medical Association (TBB) Pandemic Working Group, the number of excess deaths had reached 292,000 by June 2022.

Health Minister Koca’s statements are a mass of contradictions. In a tweet, he said that the virulence of the Eris variant was low, and that its occurrence in Turkey was a development that should not be considered a matter of concern. He then all but admitted that the virus is in fact deadly, saying, “We will protect our elders, our chronically ill patients.”

Koca also tried to downplay the deadly disease, speaking before the opening of the schools, announcing that the Eris variant had not yet been detected in Turkey. However, since it has become extremely difficult to get tested for COVID-19 in Turkey, the fact that it had not been detected did not in reality mean that it was not present.

Koca said, however, that Turkish officials would respond to the COVID-19 virus as they would to the

flu, stating, “Our citizens should rest assured and not worry. Our general protection and precautions should be the same as they are for the flu.”

He assured the ruling class that there was no question of any lockdown measures, however limited: “Don’t let these variants worry us, and there is no question of going back to the periods when we locked down. ... We are still seeing COVID. We are seeing a period of variants that are becoming less and less effective, with mutations.”

Unlike the political establishment, scientists and public health specialists are demanding that necessary public health measures be taken.

Prof. Dr. Mehmet Ceyhan, an infectious diseases specialist, stated, “The most effective way to prevent it is to stop the virus from spreading around by vaccinating and isolating people who are sick. If we do not prevent the transmission of the variant, the pandemic may continue with new variants for a long time.”

Prof. Dr. Esin Davutoğlu, an infectious diseases and clinical microbiology specialist, also said that in order to track the spread of COVID-19 in the population, “Wastewater screening is very important for COVID-19 surveillance. Assuming that it does not exist does not make it disappear.”

Despite extremely limited data, the Eris variant has already demonstrated its high virulence and dangerousness, leading a new surge around the world. WHO COVID-19 Technical Officer Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove was forced to admit in August that millions of people are being infected every week around the world. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported last month, it accounted for 71.6 percent of all sequenced cases in China.

Moreover, updated vaccines for Omicron and later variants are not available in Turkey, nor is there official information on whether they will be available.

On August 29, the Turkish Medical Association issued a statement titled “We Call on the Health Ministry to Act Responsibly! COVID-19 Pandemic Continues with New Variants!” It drew attention to the government’s criminal irresponsibility, which is causing increasing confusion within the population.

According to the statement, “The rate of those vaccinated with two doses of COVID-19 vaccine in the Turkish population is 62.4 percent. The rate of those

vaccinated with three doses is only 33.1 percent. In 2023, the total number of COVID-19 vaccines administered was approximately 110,000, but this number was only around 1,000 in August.”

It continued, “We are at a point where even a significant number of healthcare workers in the country do not trust some of the COVID-19 vaccines. The ambivalence about vaccines is one of the most important issues we urgently need to tackle for the coming outbreaks.”

The futility of calling on the capitalist ruling class and its governments to “act responsibly” has been demonstrated in countless examples since the beginning of the pandemic. In China, where a Zero-COVID policy was initially in place, the Stalinist regime abandoned it in November 2022 under pressure from the imperialist powers and the Chinese bourgeoisie. It led to the infection of almost the entire population and at least 1.4 million deaths.

This experience in China has confirmed that the pandemic cannot be fought on a national perspective, within national borders.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a social and political question on a global scale. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International have explained from the outset that resolving this crisis requires the mobilization of the international working class, in coordination with principled scientists in every country. It is necessary to deepen this struggle on a global scale as new and potentially more dangerous variants continue to infect millions.



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