

Governments downplay pandemic risk as MV Hondius hantavirus cases mount in US, Europe

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The hantavirus outbreak aboard the MV Hondius is rapidly unfolding into an unmitigated disaster, exposing capitalist governments' continued war on public health. In the 36 hours since passengers and crew began disembarking in Tenerife, Spain on Sunday, the number of confirmed and probable cases of the highly lethal Andes virus has jumped from eight to 11, with new infections detected in returning passengers in the United States, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Spain. Three passengers—a Dutch couple and a German woman—are dead, two of them confirmed by laboratory testing to have been caused by the virus and a third pending confirmation.

The numbers will almost certainly grow. The incubation period for Andes hantavirus may extend to 42 days, meaning every one of the 147 passengers and crew evacuated from the vessel—and every contact they encountered on the cascade of government-chartered flights now dispersing them across Europe, North America, Asia and the Pacific—must be regarded as potentially infected. They have arrived in communities that received little to no prior warning and in many cases have no contact tracing mechanisms in place. This amounts to the deliberate international seeding of a lethal pathogen that has demonstrated human-to-human transmission, with a fatality rate of roughly 40 percent among severely ill patients.

The Andes strain is the only hantavirus known to spread between humans, transmitted through close, prolonged contact with an infected person's saliva, respiratory secretions or other body fluids. There is no vaccine and no specific treatment; survival depends on prompt hospitalization and supportive care—hydration, artificial respiration, dialysis.

Conditions aboard the Hondius made suppression all but impossible once the outbreak took hold. The Dutch-flagged vessel, owned by Oceanwide Expeditions, departed Ushuaia, Argentina on April 1 on a 33-day voyage to Antarctica and remote South Atlantic islands, carrying around 150 passengers and crew of 23 nationalities in 95 cabins. For weeks, the virus circulated in the closed, high-contact environment in which it spreads most readily.

“We are facing an unprecedented, worrying event with many unknowns,” said Professor Antoine Flahault of Université Paris

Cité and the University of Geneva, who is monitoring developments at Bichat Hospital in Paris, where Hondius passengers returning to France are being treated. He added: “We don't know whether patients are contagious during their incubation period, whether asymptomatic forms exist, or whether this RNA virus has mutated.”

Returning passengers of the Hondius are falling ill in the United States and across Europe. Early Monday morning, 17 US citizens and one British national living in the United States landed at Eppley Airfield in Omaha, Nebraska, on a government medical flight and were immediately transported to the National Quarantine Unit. Upon arrival, one American passenger tested positive for the hantavirus, and another began showing symptoms, with both traveling in the aircraft's biocontainment units.

This came alongside an alarming development in France. A French woman who was among five French people evacuated from the Hondius and repatriated to Paris on Sunday also tested positive for the virus. French Health Minister Stéphanie Rist confirmed Monday that her condition is deteriorating.

Cases are spreading across Europe. A passenger of the Hondius who returned home to Switzerland via flights through South Africa and Qatar has now tested positive. The ship's doctor, who tested positive for the virus, was evacuated to the Netherlands, where 12 staff of the Radboud Hospital in Nijmegen have been placed in quarantine after procedural errors in handling him. In Spain, a Spanish passenger has been placed in isolation at Gómez Ulla military hospital in Madrid after testing positive.

Yet government officials in the United States and internationally are recklessly downplaying the threat posed by the virus, insisting that there is no danger of a pandemic, or denying that basic public health measures like contact tracing are necessary.

The false reassurances begin at the top. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, speaking to journalists in Tenerife on Sunday as disembarkation began, insisted “this is not another COVID” and that the public “shouldn't be scared and they shouldn't panic.” Maria Van Kerkhove, the

WHO's chief of epidemic and pandemic preparedness, repeated the same line to the Associated Press: "Most people will never be exposed to this."

A flagrant contradiction underlies these statements on the outbreak. While publicly insisting the virus poses a very low risk, officials themselves invoke comparisons to the COVID-19 pandemic, even as MV Hondius passengers are escorted to top-tier biosecurity facilities.

On Monday, US President Donald Trump claimed the virus is "not easy to spread" and that the United States is in "very good shape." He said, "I hope it's fine. All I can do is everything that a president can do, which is actually somewhat limited."

While the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) classified its hantavirus response as Level 3, the lowest of three CDC emergency activation levels, the protocols it activated tell a different story. Hondius passengers were flown on a government medical flight to Omaha, Nebraska, to be assessed for early-stage hantavirus symptoms, including fever, muscle aches and diarrhea at the National Quarantine Unit at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Anyone who falls ill could be transferred to the nearby Nebraska Biocontainment Unit.

The National Quarantine Unit is described by Nebraska Medicine as the only federally funded quarantine unit in the United States designed to safely house and monitor people who may have been exposed to high-consequence infectious diseases. Its 20 single-person rooms are fitted with negative air pressure systems to contain airborne pathogens. It previously treated patients during the 2014 Ebola outbreak and among the first COVID-19 patients evacuated from the Diamond Princess cruise ship in 2020.

Acting CDC Director Jay Bhattacharya, co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration and a prominent opponent of public health measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, went on CNN to insist that contact tracing should not be done—even for people who came into contact with passengers of the Hondius on the international flights taking them home.

"The passengers on the ship that flew home were not symptomatic when they flew home," he said. "Because the virus doesn't spread unless somebody has active symptoms, those passengers on the planes are considered contacts of contacts." On the basis of this completely unsubstantiated argument, he concluded: "There's not a reason to do that kind of sort of recursive contact tracing."

Bhattacharya's central premise—that the virus does not spread before symptoms appear—has no foundation in the established science. As Professor Flahault and other researchers have warned, the transmission dynamics of this strain remain unknown, including precisely the question of whether passengers are contagious during the incubation period.

Bhattacharya said passengers deemed low risk would be offered the choice to remain in Nebraska or return home if it was possible "to safely drive them home without exposing

other people on the way." People who required biocontainment units on a federal medical aircraft will thus be driven home to expose their families and communities.

The French government held an emergency meeting Monday afternoon, after identifying 22 French people exposed to the virus on flights taking Hondius passengers home. These individuals are to be held in a 42-day quarantine, while the cabinet insists the risk is low.

The Spanish Health Ministry insisted "all measures" had been taken "with the objective of breaking potential chains of transmission"—a statement aimed at defusing public anger after protests broke out in Tenerife against the arrival of the vessel. Photos have since emerged of a Hondius passenger on the bus to his repatriation flight with his FFP2 mask pushed down below his nose and mouth, provoking outrage on social media.

The Hondius outbreak is unfolding amid the ongoing dismantling of public health infrastructure in every major capitalist country. The same forces that allowed more than 27 million people worldwide to die in the COVID-19 pandemic are now actively dispersing carriers of a virus many times more lethal than SARS-CoV-2, while telling the public to remain calm. The crisis exposes the incompatibility of public health with the profit interests of the ruling class.

The defense of public health requires the independent intervention of the working class internationally. This means demanding the immediate implementation of rigorous contact tracing across all flights and communities exposed to Hondius passengers, the full mobilization of scientific and medical resources to identify and isolate cases, and complete transparency about what governments and health agencies know about the outbreak.

Above all, it requires the building of a movement that fights for a socialist reorganization of society, in which the resources necessary to protect human life are taken out of the hands of the corporate-financial oligarchy and placed under the democratic control of the working class.



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