

Honduran doctor warns of “collapsed health care system” as coronavirus toll grows

By our reporter
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A doctor at a primary clinic on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula in northern Honduras offered an interview to the World Socialist Web Site to speak out about the disastrous state of the country’s health care system amid the coronavirus pandemic. As the interview ended, news broke that the eleventh fatal victim of the virus in the country was fellow Dr. Denisse Roxana Murillo Martínez in San Pedro Sula. The city and its surroundings are quickly becoming the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in Honduras, where 172 cases have been confirmed.

If you are a medical worker and want to speak out about your own experience with the COVID-19 crisis, please contact us today.

WSWS: Can you describe the situation that doctors and other hospital workers face in Honduras during the coronavirus outbreak?

Dr.: The situation we are living is a real crisis. And, as health care personnel, we recognize that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

We face the tough reality that the disease keeps spreading; the number of gravely ill patients is increasing, and we don’t have the means to attend to them. And in these tough times, the government is indifferent to our needs, not providing adequate personal protective equipment for all health care workers. We are beginning to see the consequences with four doctors infected with COVID-19 and a couple of nurses.

For years, we’ve demanded that the [President] Juan Orlando Hernández administration, characterized by innumerable acts of corruption, invest our tax money in health care and education. Instead, he has built up the Armed Forces and created his own Military Police. We made our demands in an orderly way for a long time, beginning with marches with torches. The Honduran

people were outraged to see how he re-installed himself illegally, which he achieved with US backing.

Meanwhile, we have observed a collapsed health care system, with cancer patients forced to wait six months for an appointment, eliminating their hope for survival. Moreover, the state National Anti-corruption Council declared in 2018 that 49 percent of the health care budget had been re-routed due to corruption.

As health care workers, we have fought against this incessantly through attempts at dialogue, marches, strikes, formal lawsuits, all in vain. Now, we face this COVID-19 pandemic which demonstrates, tragically, that the armored tanks of the police and warships of the Navy are incapable of saving lives, and that our fight was always well directed.

WSWS: There were protests in early March by hospital workers due to the shortages, and authorities claim to have provided enough protective equipment and respirators. What do you think about this?

Dr.: The protective equipment that is effective for COVID-19 was reserved for hospitals where patients with this disease are being treated. They use the equipment recommended by the WHO [World Health Organization]. But, before arriving at these hospitals, patients pass through our clinics, where the clinical diagnosis is carried out and they are referred to these hospitals for tests.

We are not provided with the necessary equipment. We barely have conventional masks—not the N95’s that would be more adequate—or non-sterile gloves. Disposable gowns, eyewear or additional gloves are not in our stock. We often have to try to buy our own gloves for our biosecurity since those provided by the government are not enough.

We have two doctors, one professional nurse and five assistant nurses in our clinic. If there was a positive

case, we would honestly be very exposed, and it's public knowledge that many carriers are asymptomatic.

On a national level, we barely have 88 respirators in the public sector and 70 in private hospitals. The rest of the ventilators that the government said it just bought are not adequate for these patients and don't meet quality requirements for hospital use. These numbers become insignificant when one sees the disease's impact in other countries. We are simply left to wait with our arms crossed to see what happens here, as spectators in [the Gabriel García Márquez novel] *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*.

WSWS: How do the budget cuts and privatization drive, particularly after the 2009 US-backed coup, affect the response to the pandemic?

Dr.: As I said before, the health care crisis is not new. The medical workers have fought for years to defend the right to public health care for the Honduran people—the opposite of the government's privatization efforts. To achieve this privatization, it has deliberately reduced the budget and diverted the focus away from public health care. This has come at the expense of the lives of thousands of Hondurans who struggle enormously to reach some hospital, only to be welcomed with a notice that “there are no medicines,” and having to return home sick and with less money.

I want to deeply thank all doctors, nurses, pharmacists, lab technicians and other health care personnel for, despite the difficulties, not hesitating to go to work each morning out of love for others and for our profession. I hope to God that this pandemic gets resolved soon.

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