

Ecuadorians protest bodies of COVID-19 victims being left in the streets

By Andrea Lobo
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The COVID-19 pandemic's overwhelming of hospitals and morgues in Ecuador has left dozens of those stricken with the disease to die in their homes, while desperate families and neighbors have flooded social media with videos and reports of corpses rotting in their living rooms, on sidewalks and in parks for days.

In the latest count on Friday morning, the Health Ministry reported 3,368 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 145 deaths, registering 25 new deaths in 24 hours. Seventy-one percent of cases are found in the Guayas province, which includes the country's largest city of Guayaquil, with 2.7 million people. Guayaquil is also where the first confirmed case arrived in Ecuador on February 14.

The hundreds of bodies that are left lying in homes and on the streets are evidence of the vast underestimation of the real toll that the deadly virus is inflicting upon Ecuador

The government of Lenín Moreno initially sought to cover up the total collapse of the health care system and emergency services, and police were even filmed dumping bodies in working class neighborhoods.

Blanca Moncada Pesantes, a journalist at *Expreso*, created a Twitter thread on Monday to report on bodies that have not been picked up. Out of dozens of reports, some corpses have been left as many as six days indoors. In some cases, police arrived and told the family members that the body would be picked up in several days.

The outright barbarism displayed by abundant reports on social media and in the press forced President Moreno to acknowledge that the reality was worse than reported. The government then began a police-military joint operation on Monday to pick up the bodies from homes and the streets, implemented curfew exceptions to accelerate burials—with the Health Ministry now claiming that cremations are not necessary—and set up refrigerated containers as temporary morgues, and will open a public cemetery in Guayaquil with 2,000 graves next Monday.

The government had closed all entry points into the country and domestic flights in mid-March and established a nationwide curfew from 2 p.m. to 5 a.m. Schools are shut

down through April, while all on-site work has been suspended until April 12. Starting on April 13, a “semaphore” system will be implemented for the level of restrictions in each province, which will facilitate a mandatory return to work when the virus will be even more widespread.

The army, which is effectively governing the Guayas province, promised that all corpses would be buried by April 2. However, only 150 bodies were up picked between Monday and Wednesday, and reports of waiting days for pickups continued to be published on social media throughout Friday. As bodies continue piling up in homes, 3,000 soldiers remain deployed in working class neighborhoods to prevent people from going outside during 15 hours each day.

While certainly not all deaths were directly due to COVID-19, many others could have been avoided with timely care by paramedics and hospital attention. Many condemning pieces of evidence, however, do indicate a massive under-reporting in deaths due to the pandemic:

- The news outlet *Expreso* found that on March 30 and 31, the Guayas Province Civil Registry filed 722 death certificates for Zone 8, which includes the cities of Guayaquil, Durán and Samborondón. This was more than the 609 deaths registered in all of March 2019.

- The ambulance services reported on March 31 that they were being overwhelmed by calls to pick up bodies in Guayaquil, 40 that day compared to an average of 14.

- *El Universo* reported that police had a waiting list of 450 bodies for pickup in Guayaquil.

- Each new report on the Ministry's Facebook page is accompanied by a storm of dissenting comments about under-reporting. For instance, a medical student in Guayaquil writes, “Many people are not being tested due to lack of tests and there are many more dead than what appear in the outlets. In one 24-hour shift in the emergency room [of each hospital], more than 100 people die.”

The deliberate cover-up of the number of dead due to the COVID-19 crisis is meant to justify the criminal negligence

of the ruling class and of the Moreno government, which has faithfully implemented International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures, brutally slashing funds for health care.

The COVID-19 crisis is laying bare the irrationality of the continuation of capitalism globally and the urgent need for socialism. In Ecuador and other semi-colonial and backward economies, this means the subordination of economic life to the wealth and profit interests of a tiny elite and its access to foreign markets and credit.

As the uproar over the Guayaquil corpses spread worldwide, the World Bank “granted” the country a \$20 million loan to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. This is a plain insult. The data published by the World Bank itself shows that the amount the country spends on servicing its debt has tripled in the last decade to \$6.32 billion this year. At the same time, after a massive drop in oil prices, severely harming public finances, the Moreno government still decided Monday to disburse \$325 million to bondholders.

Economist Jonathan Báez of the Universidad Central de Ecuador found last year that “there are 971 people who are investing partners in [Ecuador’s] Economic Groups. In total, in 2017, they represented 0.006 percent of the Ecuadorian population and control the asset equivalent to 1.64 times the GDP with \$115.725 billion.” By comparison, the yearly health care budget for 2020 is \$3.8 billion.

Even though a quarter of these multimillionaires didn’t even report an income in 2017, their average monthly income was nearly \$80,000 or 213 times the minimum salary, found Báez.

It’s precisely these levels of inequality that the Moreno government sought to defend by using deadly military force to repress the mass upheavals and general strike against social inequality last October, which forced Moreno to temporarily move the seat of the government from Quito to Guayaquil. The betrayal carried out by the trade union bureaucracy and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONAIE) to protect their own political and economic privileges set the stage for the ongoing criminal response of the government to the pandemic.

Expreso interviewed the daughter of a deceased COVID-19 patient who had to wait six days to get the corpse from the hospital. The family then had to manage getting a burial against Health Ministry protocol. “They were charging us \$1,500 for the cremation,” she said. A young man waiting days to bury his father denounced the situation on social media, stating that “they are asking \$1,800 for a box, with funeral homes profiting off our pain.”

In Ecuador, informal and precarious labor comprises 62 percent of the population, which largely explains the fact that the average monthly income is \$324, about \$70 less than the minimum salary. Under these conditions,

aggravated by the curfew and furloughs, buying a casket is a prohibitive expenditure. Over 200,000 in Guayaquil depend on informal street sales. Even those with the means to transport the bodies in caskets and pay funeral homes have to wait hours and even days in their vehicles in long lines to reach the cemetery entrances.

Amid enormous wealth, poverty is inflicting untold suffering. A young man at the hospital in Ceibos had to plead that “my father is also a person” to demand care. Doctors and nurses lack protective equipment and are also left without care if they get sick. Dr. Esteban Ortiz told the AP that he estimates that there are only about 173 respirators available for COVID-19 patients across Guayas.

The health care crisis is compounded by the fact that vast sectors of the population are going hungry from a lack of income, price gouging and mile-long lines into supermarkets.

Street corners in at least three instances have been turned into pyres for bodies as families fall into despair and anger. “The humiliation you are making families go through, demanding that their loved ones go for three days without eating, without sleeping, because we’ve been following those arrogant soldiers that provide no solution. ... Even though my cousin gave his life working in a public company, he’s lying in some container,” commented Anita on the Health Ministry Facebook page.

Both AFP and Reuters spoke to Rosa Romero. The corpse of her husband, Bolivar Reyes, who died with symptoms consistent with COVID-19, remained at their home for more than a day and then went missing a week after supposedly being taken to a hospital. A video from a morgue reportedly in Ecuador shows piles of “unclaimed” bodybags and caskets stored without refrigeration. The harrowing and unforgettable stories and images are countless.

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