

# Protests and looting break out in Colombia over failure to distribute aid amid COVID-19 quarantine

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Protests and looting broke out last week in Colombia's major cities over the abject failure of the right-wing government of President Iván Duque to provide promised aid to working people left without income or food amid a nearly month-long coronavirus quarantine.

Riot police attacked protesters banging pots in the street with tear gas in southern Bogotá's impoverished district of Ciudad Bolívar, while looting was reported in several parts of Medellín, the country's second largest city, as well as in Vichada province's capital of Puerto Carreño and in Sincelejo, the capital of the northern province of Sucre.

There were also reports of the hijacking and looting of trucks carrying goods, forcing the closure of a road between Cordoba and Antioquia provinces.

When Duque first imposed the nationwide quarantine on March 25, he promised to provide emergency financial aid and food deliveries to Colombia's poorer areas, where much of the population is employed in the so-called informal sector, making their money through casual labor and street vending, with little means of support.

Since then, food has failed to arrive, and the main emergency aid program, the so-called "Solidarity Income," which was supposed to provide the poor with a meager 160,000 pesos (\$41), has been suspended amid charges of systematic embezzlement and a failure to make payouts to those who need them.

Popular anger over the government's malign indifference to mass suffering, defense of the interests of the rich and rampant corruption boiled over as Duque has continued to clash with Colombian governors and mayors over his demand for the

reopening of the economy.

As of Sunday, the official number of coronavirus cases in Colombia stood at 3,792 and the death toll at 179. As in every country, these figures are a gross underestimation of the real toll of the deadly virus. Health Minister Fernando Ruiz himself admitted last week that 12,000 people have been infected, roughly four times the official estimate. No doubt the number of deaths is a similar or greater multiple, with many people never reaching a hospital.

As elsewhere in the country, in Cali, Colombia's third most populous city, residents of impoverished districts have hung red rags from their windows to indicate that they are without food and need aid.

Mábel Avendaño, environmental coordinator of Cali's Tercer Milenio neighborhood told the Spanish news agency EFE that people had taken to the streets in protest because "they locked us up for a month and a half and told us that they were going to bring us food."

"People are hungry, they're leaving their homes, risking their lives, and they haven't brought them food. We were told that we had been sent two trucks but they have sent us nothing; we've received nothing ... We need help," said Avendaño, one of the leaders of a protest that saw over a hundred people take to the streets banging pots and pans, while many more joined in from inside their homes.

The mayor of Bogotá, Claudia López, claimed that aid from the city had benefited 262,561 families, out of over a half a million who had applied for assistance, and in a city of 7.5 million people, most of whom are out of work. The boast only underscores the complete lack of preparation to meet the crisis unleashed by the pandemic and the callous indifference of Colombia's

bourgeoisie to the plight of the working class and poor.

This lack of preparation is also expressed in the catastrophic state of Colombia's health care system. At least four Colombian health care professionals are known to have died from COVID-19. In the north of the country, near the Panamanian border, doctors at the Clinica Apartadó walked out for the second time in a week Monday, protesting both the lack of personal protective equipment and the failure to receive a paycheck for the last three months. One carried a sign referring to the cheering for medical workers saying, "What good is the applause if our families are going hungry and our colleagues are dying."

The economic impact of the pandemic upon Colombia is already devastating. According to the daily *El Tiempo*, the IMF is warning that "the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic are expected to generate the first recession in Colombia since 1999," with a negative 4 percent growth rate, which would make it the worst crisis in Colombia's history.

Under these conditions, the government of President Duque has been thoroughly discredited. The main government aid program, which was supposed to prevent Colombians from going hungry, has been suspended while authorities investigate how massive amounts of money allocated for it were diverted into ghost accounts set up for dead and non-existent people. This has stopped the distribution of \$75.5 million out of the wholly inadequate \$126 million allocated to prevent starvation.

Colombia's weekly *Semana* reported that the country's National Registrar has already discovered 35,000 ghost accounts to which money has been sent.

The legislation establishing the program included in its first paragraph a clause granting immunity to all public officials from criminal investigations or charges, in apparent anticipation of massive embezzlement.

Duque, responding to the demands of Colombian and foreign capital—and in direct consultation with Washington—has called for an immediate reopening of the country's economy saying that he favors a plan to "recover productive life without social life." Thus far, however, mayors and governors have opposed this plan, maintaining in place orders restricting social mobility. Colombia's medical professionals have warned of the collapse of the country's health care system. According to most estimates, the pandemic in

Colombia will not peak before the second half of May at the earliest.

The nationwide quarantine, and the growing hunger among the population, is only intensifying the extreme tensions that erupted into a series of mass protests and strikes in November and December of last year. This movement of the Colombian working class was directed against rising social inequality and unemployment as well as the series of reactionary fiscal policies imposed at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

These policies shifted social resources to private capitalist interests at the expense of the working class and were paid for through continuous cuts in social programs, with education and health the most affected. The coronavirus has exposed the criminality of these policies, which are now leading to the unnecessary deaths of working people and health care professionals.

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