

Nicaraguan government lets COVID-19 spread freely, covers up toll

By Andrea Lobo
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The latest report by the Nicaraguan government claim that there have been 25 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 8 deaths, one of the lowest in the Americas, which has now turned into the global epicenter of the pandemic.

Despite threats by government officials, reports have begun surfacing in recent days from medical workers and other Nicaraguans exposing a massive effort by the government to suppress effectively all data and information about the real extent of the outbreak.

The administration of president Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) has not carried out any significant measures to contain the virus or mitigate its effects. Besides ineffective health care monitoring outposts at the borders and a refusal to sanitize public areas, authorities have actually encouraged mass rallies, tourism and the continuation of nonessential work.

The Citizen's Observatory COVID-19, which claims to compile reports sent by medical workers from at least 50 of the 153 municipalities, had counted 1,033 suspected COVID-19 cases and 188 suspected deaths, as of May 9.

A study published in late March by the Imperial College of London projected that, out of a population of 6.6 million, between 5.2 and 6 million Nicaraguans would be infected and between 20,112 and 24,304 would die without a state intervention to enforce social distancing.

On Monday, Reuters interviewed several doctors, who said hospital beds intended for coronavirus patients were full at several hospitals. "Everything is about to collapse. We are seeing too many atypical pneumonias," one said, while respiratory specialist Jorge Miranda explained: "Everything that is atypical pneumonia at this time, when winter [rainy season] hasn't yet begun, is related to COVID19."

Reuters found that several doctors, nurses and their families report being infected but not counted in official totals. In one case, the mother of a radiologist, who tested

positive for COVID-19, was diagnosed with atypical pneumonia. She died and was buried without any family present. *El País* reported this week, "For over a week, dozens of burials under coronavirus protocol have occurred, according to reports by families in social media and press outlets." Several videos have appeared showing nighttime burials.

In response, Vice President Rosario Murillo, who is married to Ortega, described the whistleblowers as "people with deformed brains" who spread "pandemics of fear, hate, on the basis of fake news."

However, on Friday, pictures published by *La Prensa* and reports by medical specialists to other outlets show that the government has deployed groups of thugs in civilian clothes to patrol the outside of the hospitals and cemeteries, ordering people to leave.

A neighbor of the General Cemetery of Managua told *La Prensa* that nighttime burials have been occurring frequently since late April. "It is as if the population didn't already know that the COVID-19 is wreaking havoc. It's killing us, and instead of helping, the government is sending patrols to follow the corpses and their families so that they don't speak to anyone," she said.

Two years since a wave of mass demonstrations triggered by pension cuts unleashed a wave of repression killing over 300 protesters and turning more than 70,000 people into refugees—including many doctors and medical students—the Ortega government is employing the same authoritarian measures to let the deadly COVID-19 pandemic run rampant while silencing all opposition.

While several governments, including the White House, have denounced these measures, the denunciations have been largely muted, not to mention hypocritical. The return-to-work campaigns by virtually every government evidence that they ultimately see the response of the FSLN as the "new normality" sought in their own

countries.

The Ortega regime's response demonstrates irrefutably the bourgeois class character of the government and the inevitable outcome of Sandinismo and all petit-bourgeois nationalist movements that have historically defended capitalism. As the crisis of capitalism and its social consequences intensify, it has unconditionally subordinated the lives and living standards of the working masses to the profit interests of transnational corporations while refusing to impinge on the wealth of the local oligarchy.

This is being carried out with shocking shamelessness. During Holy Week (April 5–11), the Catholic Church canceled its processions and events, but Vice-President Rosario Murillo called for a "Holy Week to love each other, to visit one family after the other, a Holy Week to get to know each other more, to know Nicaragua more."

After disappearing from the public eye for a month and not attending any public event since February 21, Daniel Ortega reappeared on April 15 in a televised cabinet meeting to minimize the danger and oppose any shutdown: "In the middle of this pandemic, work hasn't stopped because if work stops in this country, people will die, the people will be extinguished." Such statements are not a matter of fact, but a policy being pursued in connivance with the transnational corporations and the trade unions.

According to the trade union FESITEX, affiliated to the pro-government Sandinista Workers Center and the IndustriALL Global Union, on March 24, the maquiladora employers, the government and the unions reached an agreement in which 5,500 workers were suspended without pay, 2,893 were laid off, and 78,000 were furloughed with pay, some fully and some as low as 50 percent.

On Monday, April 13, about 78,000 workers were called back to work. However, at least 12,000 workers of the Gildan company continue to be suspended without pay, according to the Nicaraguan Textile Association (Anitec).

Most of the maquiladoras produce garments and cables and are owned by transnational corporations based in the US, South Korea, Britain and Canada. They have been attracted to Nicaragua by the tax exemptions, low wages and deregulation advanced under the FSLN and the opposition parties.

According to Google's Mobility Report employing cellphone data updated to May 9, trips to recreational places, retail stores and transit stations were down 34

percent, which shows that a large section of the population is trying to stay home as much as possible. However, trips to workplaces were only down 14 percent.

An April 30 statement signed by 543 doctors denounces a total lack of data and asked for mass testing, as well as protective equipment for doctors, a cancellation of public service payments and economic aid to help workers stay home. Then, on May 12, medical students working at the Bolonia Hospital in Managua released a letter saying, "we have no data or equipment to deal with the pandemic... we have no information about the diagnosis of these patients, which makes us fearful and concerned facing this uncertainty."

A letter sent to the WHO this week by five former health ministers, including those under the Sandinista government in the 1980s, denounce the government for "denying or minimizing artificially the number of cases and deaths due to the pandemic" and reported "that [medical] personnel have been fired for informing the families with transparency."

Without providing any more information than referring to the occasion of Mother's Day, the government announced the release of 2,815 prisoners on Wednesday, more than half of the total in the country. This happened a day after the death of a 60-year-old prisoner at the Modelo prison, the largest in the country, while lawyers have denounced that dozens who remain in the prisons have shown coronavirus-related symptoms.

A teacher near the city of León explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* that she has been without an income since the private school where she worked closed in March; however, all public schools and some private schools remain open. The government has not offered any economic aid to those losing their employment.

Asked about the medical situation, she said that a cousin went to the hospital about two weeks ago with symptoms consistent with COVID-19. She said: "They have him isolated because he is sick and they won't let him communicate with anyone. They took his phone away and we have not heard from him since."

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