

South Asian countries ease COVID-19 lockdowns despite sharp rise in infections

By our correspondents
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Ignoring the rapidly increasing number of coronavirus cases and deaths across South Asia, the region's governments have begun easing lockdown restrictions in a bid to "reopen" the economy. Collectively, the total number of government-confirmed COVID-19 cases in the region to date stands at 229,000—more than 3.5 times the number on May 1. Official fatalities, as of yesterday, stood at 5,290.

Alarming as are these figures, they are a vast underestimate of the true extent of the pandemic. The absence of health care infrastructure across the region means that huge numbers of cases are going undetected, and many are dying due to a lack of basic medical care. One indication of the desperate state of health care infrastructure is the disastrously low levels of testing for COVID-19. India has carried out just 2,135 tests per 1 million residents, compared to 2,149 in Pakistan, 1,481 in Bangladesh, 44,200 in the United States, and 59,300 in Russia.

All of the region's governments have failed miserably in providing assistance to the hundreds of millions of impoverished workers and toilers who have lost their jobs and incomes as the result of government anti-COVID-19 lockdowns. Their harrowing plight has been illustrated most graphically in India, where millions of migrant workers who had been left to fend for themselves walked home or attempted to walk home, until they were herded into cramped, makeshift internal refugee camps.

Now, the same governments that callously abandoned them are cynically exploiting the masses' financial destitution and social distress to justify forcing them to return to work under unsafe conditions that will accelerate the spread of the virus in the weeks and months ahead.

The social misery confronting the vast majority of the population underscores the incapacity of all factions of South Asia's reactionary and corrupt bourgeoisie to overcome the legacy of colonialism and imperialist oppression.

With 1.93 billion inhabitants, almost one-fourth of the world's population, South Asia is the most densely populated region in the world. This, along with widespread poverty and ramshackle public health systems, makes the region especially vulnerable to pandemics like COVID-19. Ominously, the coronavirus appears to have become entrenched in the slums of some of the region's biggest cities, including Delhi and Mumbai in India, Karachi in Pakistan and Dhaka in Bangladesh.

India

With over 125,100 COVID-19 cases and more than 3,700 deaths, India accounts for more than half of the official cases and deaths in the region. The Narendra Modi-led, Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government facilitated the spread of the disease with its calamitous lockdown introduced with just a few hours' notice on March 25. The measures were enforced with no financial assistance for the hundreds of millions employed in the so-called informal sector.

As millions of migrant workers sought to return from large urban centres to their home villages, they carried the coronavirus with them.

Then, on May 3, Modi responded to the demands of big business by relaxing some of the restrictions in "green zones," areas of the country where infections remained low. This has helped fuel the further spread of the virus, with the daily increase in cases currently ranging between 5 and 7 percent.

Maharashtra—where India's second-largest city, Mumbai, is home to almost 20 million people—has emerged as an epicentre of the pandemic with 47,000 cases and 1,577 deaths as of May 23. The surge of cases has already overwhelmed the state's health care system, forcing authorities in Mumbai to ask COVID-19 patients to go on "a waiting list" to get a hospital bed.

In an order issued Saturday, the Gujarat High Court described conditions at the Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad, the largest city in the state of Gujarat, as "pathetic" and "as good as a dungeon, maybe even worse." The facility, referred to as Asia's largest hospital, had recorded 377 coronavirus deaths by Friday.

The opening of large factories is accelerating the spread of the virus. At Maruti Suzuki's Manesar assembly plant in Haryana on the outskirts of Delhi, one worker tested positive after the first week of operations, and a second potential case was being investigated Saturday. At Hyundai's assembly plant in Chennai, which reopened May 8, three workers have tested positive.

The Modi government has accompanied the reopening of the economy with the unveiling of a new series of pro-investor "reforms," including an accelerated privatization drive and changes to labour and land laws long demanded by domestic and international capital. The reforms are aimed at intensifying the exploitation of the working class, so India can grab a larger share of global investment, including by attracting US-based companies, under pressure from Washington to develop alternate production chain hubs to China.

Last week, the Modi government also amended its "guidelines" on the COVID-19 lockdown measures by allowing "domestic air travel in a calibrated manner" from today.

Pakistan

Despite a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan last week lifted the half-hearted lockdown measures his government had implemented. The lifting of the lockdown was all the more irresponsible given that it came on the eve of the Islamic festive period at the end of Ramadan, when families and groups usually gather to celebrate.

COVID-19 deaths passed 1,100 on Saturday with over 52,000 confirmed cases.

The Khan government ignored the warnings of medical experts and allowed religious gatherings at mosques to continue during Ramadan. According to Waseem Khawaja, a senior doctor in a main Islamabad hospital treating coronavirus patients who spoke to the *Washington Post*, there was a sharp increase of cases since Ramadan. At the same time,

millions of workers and toilers are scrambling to find work and put bread on the table, after being pushed to economic desperation during the lockdown.

Workers protesting these appalling conditions face ruthless state violence. The National Trade Union Federation of Pakistan reported that one worker was injured after police officers and factory guards in Karachi opened fire on workers demanding unpaid wages from the Denim Clothing Mills, which supplies international clothing brands. The protest was also called to oppose the sacking of colleagues by management.

The main concern of Pakistan's ruling class is that the economic fallout caused by the pandemic may affect their investments and wealth. Khan recommitted his government to savage economic reforms dictated by the International Monetary Fund at the beginning of the pandemic, when Islamabad sought and received a \$1.4 billion emergency loan to supplement its \$6 billion IMF bailout finalized in 2019.

A judgment issued last week by the country's Supreme Court underlined that the ruling elite is concerned more with staying in the good graces of the IMF and global investors than protecting the health and well-being of its citizens. It warned the government not to interfere with "business activities of private entrepreneurs," who would move their investments to other countries if they "lost faith in the system." The ruling also questioned why "so much money is being spent" on combating COVID-19 when Pakistan is "not... seriously affected."

Bangladesh

The lifting of lockdown measures on May 10 has accelerated the spread of the virus in Bangladesh. Shopping malls and markets were allowed to open and private transport was allowed to operate. Factories opened even earlier, from April 26.

By Saturday morning, total infections passed 32,000, with 450 deaths. In a country with a population of 160 million, the authorities are barely managing to conduct 10,000 tests per day. Patients are also reportedly being turned away from medical facilities due to a lack of equipment.

The virus is taking a heavy toll on the working class, especially in the garment sector which has been in the forefront of the government's back-to-work drive. At least ten garment workers and one manager have died after showing coronavirus symptoms. The ruling elite's criminal disregard for workers lives is due to the fact that the garment industry accounts for some 84 percent of Bangladesh's \$40 billion in annual exports. The industry is in ruthless competition with other low-wage locations, including China, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Last Wednesday, baton-wielding police clashed with workers protesting over unpaid wages at 50 factories in Ashulia, Savar, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Chattogram.

The social and health crisis triggered by the coronavirus was aggravated still further by super cyclone Amphan hitting coastal areas of the country on Wednesday night, killing 16. The authorities had to evacuate 2.4 million people to more than 15,000 storm shelters before the cyclone hit without any precautions against the spread of the virus. One of the world's largest refugee camps, which hosts 1 million Rohingya refugees, has registered three COVID-19 infections.

Afghanistan

The war-torn country, which has suffered under two decades of direct US imperialist occupation and neocolonial rule, has virtually no health and social infrastructure for its 32 million inhabitants. As of Sunday, there were 9,998 officially recorded infections and 216 deaths.

One third of the cases in the country have been reported in the capital, Kabul, which has been under a lockdown of varying intensity since March 8. Like all other countries in the region, the COVID-19 restriction measures have exacerbated unemployment and poverty levels. "Despite lockdown, many people have returned to the streets—this time to beg,"

reported Al Jazeera on May 8.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan authorities have downplayed the threat of the pandemic and infection figures so as to reopen business activities during May. With total confirmed cases standing at 1089, Sri Lanka will lift its curfew on Tuesday except for six hours during the night.

Despite the false claims by the government that it has handled the pandemic exceptionally well, Sri Lanka has averaged less than 600 coronavirus tests per day since February 18. Health workers are not receiving adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse is using the pandemic to take definite steps towards autocratic rule. The military has been mobilized in Colombo under the pretext of enforcing social distancing. The government has also seized on the pandemic to move towards far-reaching, regressive labor reforms with the support of the pro-capitalist trade unions.

The public health system is crumbling following a decade-long austerity drive and nearly thirty years of civil war. Epidemiologists warn that the crisis could be complicated still further by possible outbreaks of dengue fever and leptospirosis with the start of southeastern monsoon.

Nepal

Although official figures indicate that there are only 548 confirmed cases in Nepal with three deaths by Saturday evening, this is a gross underestimation. Nepal's extremely limited health care system is in no condition to deal with the pandemic.

Workers in the informal sector and the poor in the rural areas are facing a calamity at present because of a government-imposed lockdown. There are thousands of migrant workers stranded at the India-Nepal border in appalling conditions desperately trying to enter the country. In addition, hundreds of thousands of highly-exploited Nepalese migrant workers are confined in terrible conditions in the Middle East.

To divert the mass anger over poverty and unemployment and their aggravation by the lockdown into reactionary channels, the Kathmandu government is whipping up Nepalese nationalism, reviving a border dispute with India. Seizing on New Delhi's recent opening of a road in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, through land claimed by Nepal, to the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, Prime Minister Sharma Oli vowed before Parliament last week that his government will get the disputed areas "back."

Maldives

There are 1,274 confirmed cases and four deaths in the Indian Ocean archipelago, which has a population of around 450,000. The collapse of tourism, which is the main source of its foreign exchange earnings, has plunged the country's economy into deep crisis.

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