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afgazad@gmail.com

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Bill Van Auken
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Amid growing anger over criminal response to COVID-19 crisis, Washington threatens war

The number of deaths in the US is set to top 5,000 today, amid a growing nationwide furor over the abject failure of the Trump administration to provide the essential medical equipment for doctors and nurses battling the COVID-19 pandemic to save their patients' lives, not to mention their own.

Wildcat strikes have broken out among Amazon, Whole Foods and Instacart workers laboring under unsafe conditions to deliver essential supplies to the American population under a totally anarchic privately run system that reduces survival to every man and woman for themselves. Other protests have been carried out by industrial and medical workers in different parts of the country as popular anger steadily escalates over the incompetence and indifference of the US government to a crisis that threatens the lives of millions.



President Donald Trump speaks during a news conference about the coronavirus in the Rose Garden of the White House, March 13, 2020, in Washington [Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci]

It is under these conditions that the US president opened his daily press briefing on the coronavirus crisis Wednesday with the announcement that he is dispatching US Navy warships to South American waters in a supposed escalation of a war on “the deadly scourge of narcotics”. He claimed—without a shred of evidence—that drug cartels are attempting to exploit the deadly pandemic.

“We’re deploying additional Navy destroyers, combat ships, aircraft and helicopters, Coast Guard cutters and Air Force surveillance aircraft, doubling our capabilities in the region,” Trump declared.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley were brought to the White House podium to make it clear that the military escalation is aimed first and foremost against Venezuela and includes the dispatch to the region of special forces units.

“Corrupt actors, like the illegitimate Maduro regime in Venezuela, rely on the profits derived from the sale of narcotics to maintain their oppressive hold on power,” Esper said. This is entirely lunatic. The amount of narcotics moving through Venezuela is infinitesimal in comparison to that reaching the US, the world’s largest market for cocaine, from US allies such as Colombia and Honduras.

The naval buildup follows last week’s US Justice Department indictment—based on no evidence—of Nicolas Maduro and other top Venezuelan officials on drug trafficking and money-laundering charges. This came replete with a Wild West-style “wanted poster” placing a \$15 million bounty on the Venezuelan president’s head.

US imperialism maintains a regime of “maximum pressure” economic sanctions against Venezuela that is tantamount to a state of war, suffocating the country’s economy by blocking its oil exports and preventing its importation of vitally needed medicine and food. This has only intensified since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which Washington views as a welcome ally in its campaign to bring the Venezuelan population to its knees and install a US puppet regime in the most oil-rich country on the planet.

Just hours before Trump began his Wednesday press conference, he used his Twitter account to make another war threat, stating, “Upon information and belief, Iran or its

proxies are planning a sneak attack on US troops and/or assets in Iraq. If this happens, Iran will pay a very heavy price, indeed!”

Just as in Venezuela, Washington has continuously ratcheted up crippling economic sanctions against Iran as it faces one of the highest death rates from COVID-19 in the world. The Trump administration has cynically claimed that medicine and medical supplies are not sanctioned, even as it prevents Tehran from purchasing anything on the world market by blacklisting its central bank.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, has deployed Patriot missile batteries to Iraq, over the objection of the Iraqi government, whose parliament has demanded the immediate and complete withdrawal of the thousands of US troops that constitute an occupation force in the country. Baghdad fears that the missiles will be used to prepare a US war against Iran in which war-ravaged Iraq, which is also confronting mounting cases of the coronavirus, will become a battlefield.

Trump has repeatedly described himself in recent weeks as a “wartime president” because of the supposed war against the coronavirus. If it were a war, and Trump a general, he would have by now been court-martialed and sentenced as a traitor. While capable of sending warships against Venezuela and missiles against Iran, he cannot marshal masks, gowns and gloves to protect front-line health care workers, not to mention ventilators to stop the deaths of those stricken with COVID-19.

There is a palpable air of desperation and hysteria surrounding the US administration’s brazen attempt to change the subject with the escalation of military threats against Venezuela and Iran. Far from some grand plan to corral the US population behind a patriotic war fever, these reckless actions are symptomatic of a ruling regime beset by extreme crisis and instability.

What would a US war against Iran or Venezuela accomplish under present conditions? It could only serve to further discredit US capitalism, which is increasingly perceived as an abject failure as the world’s population stares horrified at scenes of COVID-19 victims standing in lines outside hospitals and corpses loaded onto refrigerated trucks with forklifts. The unleashing of military violence against either country could only serve to create massive human suffering, new flows of war refugees and the further spread of the pandemic.

Even within the US military, there is undoubtedly substantial dissension over the war threats. As warships are being dispatched to South America, the USS Theodore Roosevelt,

a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the supposed ultimate symbol of American military might, has been crippled by the coronavirus, with 100 sailors infected, its crew of over 4,000 threatened with disease and its captain pleading for them to be disembarked, stating, “We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die.” The Trump administration is as indifferent to their lives as it is to those of the Venezuelans and Iranians targeted by its aggression.

The wild lashing out of the White House Wednesday followed the publication of a United Nations report stating that the COVID-19 crisis constituted humanity’s greatest challenge since the Second World War, which claimed the lives of over 70 million. It warned against “the nightmare of the disease spreading like wildfire in the global South with millions of deaths and the prospect of the disease re-emerging where it was previously suppressed.”

Among boilerplate calls for global “solidarity” and international collaboration—amid the escalation of protectionism, trade war and xenophobia by capitalist governments around the world—the report called for the ending of sanctions and for a global “ceasefire,” for “all countries to lay down their weapons in support of the bigger battle against COVID-19, the common enemy that is now threatening all of humankind.”

Wednesday’s White House press conference makes it abundantly clear that this is a pipe dream under the existing capitalist order. The “common enemy” is viewed only as another weapon in the prosecution of wars for geo-strategic interests and control of markets and resources.

The UN report states, “The COVID-19 Pandemic is a defining moment for modern society, and history will judge the efficacy of our response not by the actions of any single set of government actors taken in isolation, but by the degree to which the response is coordinated globally across all sectors to the benefit of our human family.”

Indeed, it is a defining movement, but the judgment will not be left to history. Working and oppressed people across the planet are bearing witness to the criminality of the capitalist world order in the face of the global pandemic and the resulting mass sacrifice of human life. The consciousness of hundreds of millions is undergoing a profound transformation. Capitalism stands exposed as an economically, socially and morally bankrupt system. Acts of mass resistance are spreading across the planet, from call center workers in Brazil to ambulance drivers in India.

Only the working class, through an internationally unified struggle for world socialism, can provide an alternative to the threatened destruction of humanity.

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