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Peru extends quarantine as COVID-19 deaths continue to climb

Peru's right-wing president, Martin Vizcarra, announced on Friday an extension until May 24 of a state of emergency imposed in response to the coronavirus pandemic, as the number of infections and deaths continue to rise in the South American country.



Peruvian troops on streets of Lima

The Peruvian population has been subjected to a quarantine since March 16. Nonetheless, the country has become a regional hot spot in the worldwide spread of the pandemic. As of Friday, the number of officially recorded infections had risen to roughly 62,000, and the number of recorded COVID-19 deaths to over 1,700. As everywhere, there is a major gap between the official numbers and the virus's real toll.

The real impact of the pandemic has been graphically exposed in a grisly videotape emerging from Iquitos, the capital of the department of Loreto in the Amazon basin, showing dozens of bodies wrapped in black garbage bags and piled on top of each other in the city's morgue.

“The two hospitals in Iquitos are overflowing,” Luis Leonardo Runciman, dean of the Iquitos Regional Medical College of Peru told the BBC. “We have nowhere to treat any more patients and this means that people are going to die in their homes.”

Vizcarra's announcement of the quarantine's extension came just days after the convening of the *Acuerdo Nacional* (National Accord), a body bringing together the country's major political parties—including the pseudo-left Frente Amplio—along with the employers' and agricultural associations and government officials.

Vizcarra acknowledged at the meeting that, despite the weeks of quarantine, “the results have not been exactly what we expected.” He added that it “is not just a health crisis, a sanitary crisis; what we are living through is a social and economic crisis without precedent in Peru and the world.”

Among the body's stated objectives is maintaining Peru's “competitiveness” and fostering a “social market economy.” One of the main sessions was devoted to a report from Minister of the Economy María Antonieta Alva presenting the government's proposal for reopening the Peruvian economy. As everywhere, the Peruvian bourgeoisie and the transnational corporations that exploit the country's mineral wealth are determined to resume production and the extraction of profit, no matter what the cost in workers' lives.



Bodies wrapped in garbage bags piled up in Iquitos morgue

Meanwhile, in a historic reversal, immigrants from the interior of Peru are making desperate efforts to return to their places of origin. For decades, people have come to the capital in search of work, turning it from a city of 1 million inhabitants in 1950 to more than 10 million in 2020, more than 30 percent of the national population.

There have been huge queues at bus stations and on the roads, with families with small children and babies waiting for days to find a way back to their villages. Others have set out on foot, forming long lines along the main roads with destinations thousands of kilometers away from Lima. Many people have already used up their savings and are living in makeshift tents because they cannot pay their rent.

By mid-April, an estimated 167,000 people in Lima from rural areas had registered with their regional governments asking for help with their return. However, the bureaucratic obstacles are enormous. As of April, of those 167,000, only 3,579 had been able to return by land or air.

With the return of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people to their home regions from Lima, where the majority of cases are concentrated, the coronavirus pandemic can only spread among even more vulnerable populations.

Driving this mass flight is not fear of contracting the virus in Lima, but rather the lack of employment, loss of housing and hunger resulting from the economic lockdown.

It is estimated that as much as one third of the population has become unemployed since the outbreak of the pandemic. The true figure may be much higher in a country where 70 percent of jobs are informal.

According to the Peruvian Institute of Economics (IPE), “more than 10 million Peruvians live on their daily income.” It adds that “89 percent of urban Peruvians live in vulnerable conditions and work in the informal sector. But that figure hides the reality of enormous social inequality. While in the wealthiest economic sectors, A and B, unemployment reaches 17 percent, at the other extreme, D and E—working class, poor youth and small business owners—the sum total reaches an alarming 59 percent; that is, six out of every 10 have lost their jobs.”

Moreover, most of those unemployed are receiving little, if nothing at all, out of the miserable bonuses the government is distributing as the “family basket.” Even a full bonus is insufficient for most families, providing less than half the minimum wage.

The pandemic has also spread among the country's prison population, taking the lives of at least 15 inmates, with 500 confirmed infections in prisons in four Peruvian cities. The prisons are appallingly overcrowded—housing on the order of five times their capacity—and serve as a tinderbox for the virus's spread. Moreover, those infected lack proper health care.

On April 28 at the Miguel Castro prison in Lima, which houses 5,500 inmates despite a capacity of only 1,140, dozens of inmates recently burned mattresses and put up signs demanding protection from the contagion. The riot left nine inmates dead, and 67 injured.

At Lurigancho prison in Lima province—the country's largest, presently housing 10,000, four times its capacity—inmates protested demanding medical care before returning to their cells.

Recently in the Huancayo prison, located in the Andes 200 kilometers from Lima, inmates carried out a revolt, demanding that they be tested for coronavirus following virus deaths. The prison likewise packs in inmates, housing 2,100 inmates despite a capacity of just 680.

On April 18, two prisoners died in a riot triggered by the fear of coronavirus infection in a prison in the northern city of Chiclayo. A similar riot without deaths also occurred in the northern city of Piura.

The head of the National Penitentiary Institute (INPE), Gerson Villar, confirmed that two inmates died from COVID-19 in Lima's prisons on Sunday. He said that inmates are demanding the pardons that have been talked about by the government, and that adequate care be given those who are infected.

The pandemic has laid bare the stark inequality and economic oppression that dominates Peruvian society, while creating the conditions for an eruption of class conflict.

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