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Modi indicates no lockdown even as COVID-19 tsunami rips through India

massive surge of COVID-19 is ripping through the Indian population, threatening a devastating humanitarian crisis, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made clear there will be no nationwide lockdown to check the coronavirus pandemic.

On January 9, the second day that India witnessed over 100,000 daily cases since last June, Modi chaired a "high-level" meeting to "assess the COVID-19 pandemic situation in the country," the Prime Minister's official website reported. The purpose of the meeting was to ensure the financial oligarchy that there will not be a lockdown, which would affect their profits. Modi's remarks at the meeting did not aim to devise a strategy to curb the pandemic, but to lull the population to sleep even as hundreds of thousands are infected each day.



People gather to listen to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he lays the foundation stone of Major Dhyan Chand Sports University in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh state on January 2, 2022. (AP Photo/Rajesh Kumar Singh)

Modi attended the meeting along with Home Minister Amid Shah, Dr. Mansukh Mandaviya, Minister of Health and Family Welfare and Dr. V.K. Paul of the NITI Aayog think-tank. Modi “stressed the need to ensure adequate health infrastructure at the district level”; “usage of masks and physical distancing measures”; “implementation of home isolation for mild/asymptomatic cases and to disseminate factual information to the community at large”; “intensive containment and active surveillance should continue in clusters reporting higher cases,” and so on.

All these officials are well aware, however, that such measures cannot currently be effectively implemented against a highly contagious airborne virus like the Omicron variant of COVID-19. If non-essential businesses and industries continue to function—forcing workers to travel to workplaces, send children to school, and use overcrowded public transport facilities—the virus will spread massively. However, they refuse to order a lockdown, the suspension of non-essential production, and investment to allow for distance learning for youth.

The Modi government’s policies in relation the pandemic are nakedly based on prioritizing the profit interests of big business over human lives.

A few weeks ago, on December 23, Modi and the same officials held another “high-level meeting,” supposedly to “review the status of COVID-19 and Omicron” and discuss public health measures. That day, daily COVID-19 cases stood at 7495 and seven-day average was 6768. When Modi held the second meeting on January 9, daily cases stood 159,632 (over 21 times higher) and seven-day average of cases were 91,268. Such was the effectiveness of Modi's “high-level” meetings on the pandemic!

By allowing COVID-19 to rip through an unprotected population, a politically criminal Indian ruling elite as a whole have already sacrificed masses of lives. Statisticians estimate that the death toll is between 3-5 million lives in India, though the official toll shows only 483,000. This was the tragic outcome of Modi government's murderous herd immunity policy. While costing millions of lives and causing untold suffering due to Long Covid, this policy also threw hundreds of millions into poverty, hunger, unemployment, and social misery.

Allowing corporate elites to intensify the super-exploitation of millions of Indian workers in unprotected factories and offices, the Indian government has increasingly abandoned even the limited restrictions adopted after the pandemic wave of May 2021. At that time, India witnessed a shocking toll, recording 400,000 COVID-19 cases and over 4,000 deaths each day.

Like other capitalist governments in the world, it now promotes the “vaccine only” mantra to justify its vicious herd immunity policy, though vaccines are clearly failing to halt a catastrophic rise in infections and deaths. The Modi government has also jumped on the bandwagon of claims by the US, UK and European governments that the Omicron variant is “milder,” a claim rejected by the World Health Organization. This false narrative was shattered this month, when India reported its first two Omicron-related deaths, one of whom was doubly-vaccinated.

Despite unmistakable warnings issued by a number of medical experts and epidemiologists, Modi and BJP ministers held massive election rallies for assembly elections in five states including Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous state with over 200 million people.

Modi and the Election Commission of India (ECI) criminally ignored a ruling of the Allahabad High Court in UP on December 23, postponing the UP assembly elections (now scheduled to be held from February 10) and citing the threat of the Omicron wave. The court also requested the ECI to ban super-spreader election rallies involving masses of people. But the ECI wasted almost two weeks until January 8, when it finally banned physical election rallies till January 15.

As a result of these reckless policies, India on January 10 reported 179,339 new infections. The total number of confirmed active patients in India is now over 700,000. Indian media showed the steep rise in the past week was primarily due to the case surge in urban centers: Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Chennai. In January 4-8, these five cities recorded between 150 and 450 percent increases in infections over the previous week. India's test positivity rate now crossed the 10 percent mark, suggesting that large numbers of cases are not being detected.

Predictably, the surge in cases is leading to increased hospitalizations. On January 10, the Health Ministry admitted that India is seeing a hospitalization rate of 5-10 percent of cases, adding that the situation is “dynamic and evolving and need of hospitalisation may change rapidly.” It also warned that for every 100 Delta cases, there could be 400-500 Omicron cases, finally admitting that this surge is “being driven by Variant of Concern (VOC) ‘Omicron.’” It also recognized “the continued presence of another VOC 'Delta' in large geographies across the country.”

In Kerala, “ICU occupancy of COVID patients in both public and private hospitals showed a nominal increase and stands at 435 cases, while the number of patients requiring ventilator support showed a slight increase to 157 on Sunday,” The Hindu reported on January 10.

In Bengaluru, COVID-19 hospitalizations account for an average of 80 percent of all new admissions, the Deccan Herald reported. It cited medical professionals who said “panic admissions” are taking place leading to rising occupancy of ICU and ICU-ventilator beds. “Of 168 hospital admissions to government hospitals in the last seven days, for example, 22 were for ICU and 9 were for ICU-Ventilator beds,” the newspaper wrote.

In poll-bound Punjab, as of January 8, 226 patients were put on oxygen support—up from just 62 on the previous day, a 264 percent jump in 24 hours. The state’s test positivity rate reached 14.64 percent on Saturday, up from just 2.02 percent a week ago.

The explosion of COVID-19 is placing immense pressure on medical workers and doctors, forced to work to save lives under extremely dangerous conditions, without adequate protective equipment, for two years. In Tamil Nadu, 200 doctors and staff members tested positive for the infection at Vellore CMC Hospital on January 9.

In Maharashtra on the same day, over 300 resident doctors tested positive for COVID-19, leading to fears of a shortage of medical staff that will prevent hospitals from properly treating cardiac patients and other urgent cases, who are increasingly left to their fate.

Though the surge in cases has forced a number of states to impose limited restriction measures like closing schools and declaring night curfews, not a single state is ready to impose a strict lockdown to curb the pandemic. Not only that, some states’ heads, like Modi, have openly declared their opposition to such strict mitigation measures against the pandemic.

On January 9, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, also the head of Delhi state’s ruling Aam Aadmi party leader, said, “We don’t want to impose lockdown, we won't if you wear masks. No intent for lockdown as of now.”

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