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Covid-19 pandemic

# Coronavirus: a month of pandemic in the Indian subcontinent

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Although the governments of the region have had different postures and policies in relation to the epidemic, they have the same relationship with the press. Beyond the viral images of social media, information is lacking. It is particularly complicated to apprehend the scale of hunger riots that have already been witnessed in major Pakistani cities.

In India, migrant workers are still trying to return home and are gathering in stations to demand the right to do so. This is an illustration of the precariousness that they have been experiencing for almost a month and that they anticipate will continue in the coming weeks. The queues by the side of the roads or at the entrance to the buses echo the miles of queues in front of the food distribution points. Last week, a 35-year-old woman died in a queue for a ration of rice in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh. Conversely, Hindu pilgrims left Benares by luxury bus and Alvi, the Pakistani president, authorized gatherings in mosques for Ramadan.

More than a hundred deaths have been identified as being due to the virus in Pakistan, five times more than that in India. This remains little compared to the ravages of diarrhoea or malaria. But given the number of tests carried out, these figures have no validity. The Indian government pretends that only 270 districts out of 700 are affected by the virus, with the aim of reopening many sectors, such as the building industry, from April 20. Factories that have closed should follow. The pandemic is not about to be stopped.

## **"In exceptional circumstances, exceptional measures"**

Twenty million jobs have already been cut in Pakistan. In addition to the social crisis in the subcontinent, there has been a decrease in the funds sent by expatriate workers. The unions also report numerous complaints relating to unpaid wages and sacking of workers. In the Indian mines that have remained open, wages have been drastically reduced. Textile workers in Bangladesh have demonstrated to demand their unpaid wages - and the cancellation of orders from big firms has already resulted in the sacking of a million of them.

The Indian government has announced that it wants to modify the 1948 legislation, already amended in 2016 and long since in the sights of the bosses. This law limits the activity of an adult to 48 hours of weekly work, a period to which overtime is added. They want to make workers move to 12 hours a day and 72 hours a week. The proclaimed goal is to meet the food and medicine needs of the population; it is above all a question of compensating for the labour problems of capitalists of various sectors and of aggravating exploitation.

## **"The genocidal scenario is approaching"**

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The far-right government in India wants to put responsibility for the epidemic on the country's Muslims, exploiting various incidents, in particular a religious gathering that took place prior to the confinement. In the suburbs of Delhi, a private hospital which treats patient for cancer has announced that it will only accept Muslim patients if they and their close relatives have tested negative for the coronavirus. In Bharatpur, 20 kilometres from the Taj Mahal, a Muslim woman who was on the point of giving birth was not admitted to hospital because of her religion. Her baby died.

At the same time, the authorities are preparing to test massively the prophylactic properties of hydroxychloroquine on several tens of thousands of inhabitants ("volunteers") of the slums of Bombay, from where the inhabitants cannot leave and where the virus is wreaking havoc. The weight of the Indian pharmaceutical industry is added to the political sympathies of the leaders of the main powers, in the first place Trump and Bolsonaro, for Modi. So, his abject policies are not denounced.