



THE AMERICAS & COVID-19

THE ISSUE:

Governments across the Americas have responded to COVID-19 in a variety of ways, ranging from calling for states of emergencies to imposing travel bans to implementing quarantines. Stakes are high: how governments in the region respond to this pandemic will determine the future of millions of people.

Deep inequality, structural discrimination, repressive policing, censorship, underfunded public health systems, and inadequate social security and labor protections long predate the outbreak of COVID-19 in the region; the pandemic exacerbates and lays bare these underlying, systemic issues.

The Americas is the most economically unequal region in the world. 60% of the region's residents rely on employment in the informal sector, including construction, vending, and domestic labor – work which typically offers less security and stability and which has been dramatically impacted by closures and stay-at-home orders. Meanwhile, one in three residents lacks access to healthcare. This problem is particularly grave in Venezuela, where 80% of hospitals lack soap and sanitizer, meaning that even the most basic precautions against COVID-19 spread cannot be taken. Because of widespread lack of access to testing, countries whose existing inequalities and inadequate healthcare structures already place their residents at greatest risk of harm – including Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Haiti – are unlikely to know the full reach of the virus on their shores.

Governments throughout the Americas risk manipulating the pandemic to concentrate power and enact measures curbing civil rights and liberties that may be difficult to reverse once the pandemic lifts. For example, in El Salvador, the president was granted emergency powers one week before the country saw a single COVID-19 case: he has used those powers to arbitrarily arrest and detain hundreds of people who allegedly violated stay-at-home orders in “containment centers” that have proven deadly for those detained within. Similarly, the President of Peru deployed military forces to enforce quarantine measures. Meanwhile, Chile and Bolivia have delayed a constitutional referendum and an election, respectively.

Relatedly, governments have cracked down on freedom of expression and, in some cases, encouraged or implemented measures promoting disinformation. Both Mexico's and Brazil's leaders cast doubt on public health experts' recommendations. In Venezuela, journalist Darvinson Rojas was thrown in jail following his efforts to educate the public about the looming threat of COVID-19; the government has neglected to report any epidemiological information since Maduro took power in 2014, and even fired a previous Health Minister for publishing an epidemiological report.

For asylum-seekers and migrants, COVID-19 is an “emergency atop an emergency.” Already, the region had been home to a mass exodus of Venezuelan nationals fleeing a historic crisis, and well as significant numbers of individuals from Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador fleeing political persecution and targeted violence. These populations are now facing severe mobility-limiting measures in addition to historic lack of access to economic and social rights. Many are also being subject to arbitrary and unlawful detention in dangerous conditions and blanket restrictions on their right to seek safety.

Meanwhile, U.S. deportations, which are continuing apace even though deported individuals are frequently held in tinderbox-like detention facilities prior to deportation, risk facilitating the spread of the virus to countries poorly equipped to respond to an outbreak. As of April 2020, 20% of all COVID-19 cases in Guatemala were the result of deportations, and individuals deported from the

United States have tested positive for COVID-19 after being returned to Haiti and Colombia. U.S. migration policy is thus potentially endangering an entire region already at the brink.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- To address these challenges, the U.S. President should:
 - ◇ Adopt an immediate, temporary moratorium on deportations from the United States in recognition of the fact that U.S. reception, processing, detention, and deportation policies increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the region.
 - ◇ Maintain targeted humanitarian assistance to address structural problems inhibiting lack of access to healthcare and economic security, ensuring that any such assistance is inclusive of asylum-seekers, migrants, and other at-risk populations (including Indigenous communities and women and girls).

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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