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Global quarantine III

Brazil's president doesn't take the coronavirus all too seriously, while Palestine and Benin must prevent the spread now

Read our first part of 'Global Quarantine' with perspectives from Russia, Vietnam and Argentina; and the second part with perspectives from Singapore, Bulgaria and Colombia; and the fourth part with perspectives from France, Ecuador and South Africa.

Read this article in German.

Brazil

With official figures showing 5,812 people infected, 202 dead and a sharply rising number of cases, Brazil is the country in the region that has been most affected by the coronavirus. The estimated number of unreported cases is undoubtedly significantly higher. Public life is being disrupted more and more in big cities such as São Paolo or Rio de Janeiro. At the same time, President Jair Bolsonaro describes the effects of the virus as merely being a mild flu (*gripezinha*), says that the 'hysteria' is unjustified, the measures taken exaggerated and that the media are spreading false information. It is a stance that will have consequences for the country and possibly also for Bolsonaro's presidency.

Initially, the Brazilian government was hesitant in its reaction to the danger of the virus. Whilst quarantine measures or travel restrictions were already being imposed in neighbouring countries, the government held back. Bolsonaro was still shaking hands at a demonstration when colleagues working close to him had already infected each other. Only later were the land borders to neighbouring states closed or travel by plane from virus-hit regions limited, including China, Iran and the EU but excluding the US.

It was above all the federal states that acted with gradually more restrictive measures. Schools and universities in São Paolo were therefore shut down, as well as cultural establishments, shops, restaurants, cafes and

so on. Even the beaches of Rio have become empty. Essential institutions in areas of general care, security or health have been excluded. Holidays for health sector public employees were cut.

A big part of the population advocated a more decisive approach from the government. More than 70 per cent of Brazilians are in favour of at least a temporary imposition of a curfew. For the moment there is, above all, the recommendation from individual governors to stay at home. But Bolsonaro's statements leave one in doubt that messages about containing the spread of the virus will actually come from the government.

By contrast, Bolsonaro sharply criticises the measures imposed by governors. According to the president, that will only ruin the economy. According to him, the virus is anyway only dangerous for old people, so why should the schools be closed? But Bolsonaro is under pressure as ongoing protests, former allies openly tuning away from him and current polls results leave him appearing to be tarnished. 33 per cent of the population judge his actions in the Coronavirus crisis to be bad or very bad. By contrast, governors, the health minister and the press, which is despised by Bolsonaro, are faring well in polls.

Instead of political power games, a decisive and restrictive approach is needed to counter the spread of the virus. According to the health minister, there is a threat of the health system collapsing already in April, there is a lack of capacities especially in the poorer north east of the country, the economy is facing a recession and the numerous *Comunidades*, the poor districts in the big cities, are practically unprotected.

But instead of containment taking precedence, the economy has priority for the government. In fact, the virus could have a devastating effect on Brazil's economy. The Central Bank has adjusted the growth forecast for GDP from 2.2 per cent to 0 per cent for this year. A package worth billions to support the economy has been wheeled out. And yet the sections of the population who were disadvantaged anyway were hardly taken into consideration at first. The country has nearly 40 per cent of black market workers, who do not have any social security. €109 per month has been promised to them. A compulsory quarantine would hit the disadvantaged section of the population disproportionately harder than other sections. Every third *favela* dweller calculates that they will only be able to buy just a few groceries after one week without work. After social standards had already been cut in previous years, the socially explosive nature of the crisis is now huge.

In this phase, Bolsonaro is more concerned with a power struggle – and he is increasingly isolated in that. The country has tough weeks and months ahead of it. Alongside its immediate effects, the coronavirus may end up having far-reaching social, economic and finally also political consequences.

Christoph Heuser, FES Brazil

Palestinian territory

The radio rang out with: 'The Palestinian Health Ministry has decided…' Upon hearing that, one coronavirus said to another: 'Palestine has a Health Ministry?' Jokes like that circulated in WhatsApp groups when the coronavirus pandemic first became an issue. Then political comments that gave people some satisfaction took the upper hand: Now the world can see how limited freedom of movement and quarantine feels. And then all of a sudden it was not funny at all any more.

Right after the first seven confirmed cases in a hotel in Bethlehem on 5 March were announced, the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas imposed a state of emergency for a month. Schools, universities and kindergartens were closed. Bethlehem was totally sealed off in coordination with Israel. The closure of restaurants and the cancellation of events soon followed and a curfew has been in place for a week now in the areas in the West Bank controlled by the Palestinian Authority. The World Health Organisation praised the Palestinian government for its quick and decisive action. And many Palestinians, who have developed considerable mistrust in the Palestinian Authority over the years, were also surprised by its professional approach. Public life has been considerably restricted in the Gaza Strip too, which is under an Israeli blockade and governed by the Islamic group Hamas. Here is where the biggest disaster is looming.

This strip of land, where two million people live, is very densely populated and already has inadequate medical infrastructure. Only around 70 hospital beds are available for intensive medical care in Gaza. That's a real concern if there should be an outbreak of coronavirus. It will be extremely hard to introduce a social distancing policy and to stick to the corresponding hygiene levels especially in the narrow alleyways and houses in the refugee camps.

At first there was a lot of hope that the fact that the Gaza Strip was sealed, as it has been for 13 years, would be an advantage in the coronavirus crisis. In the meantime, two people returning from Pakistan in the past weeks have tested positive for the coronavirus on the border

with Egypt. They are in a quarantine station in the border town of Rafah. Seven security staff members from the quarantine station have tested positive in the meantime and it is not unlikely that people who had contact with them have brought the virus into the Gaza Strip. The disaster that is looming, should there be an outbreak of the virus in Gaza, may well far exceed the scenes that we are currently seeing in Italy. Israel ought to loosen the blockade of the Gaza Strip immediately and make the corresponding equipment available in order to avert the threat of a disaster in terms of shortfalls of supply.

But Israel's government in office is itself in the middle of getting the crisis under control. Even Israel, with 1.7 hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants (Germany has twelve) and only around 2,000 beds for intensive care, is not prepared for an uncontrolled outbreak of coronavirus. Up until now, the figures in Israel amount to 2,666 cases and eight deaths and, in the Palestinian territories, to 82 cases and one dead. The drastic measures, which are meant to control the numbers of cases now, are hitting the socially weakest in particular – those Palestinians who hire themselves out as daily workers and have no savings.

Last week the Israeli government gave the around 70,000 Palestinian workers, who work legally in Israel, a choice before it refused any access for Palestinians to Israel. They could decide on a one-off basis to leave their home and families for a two month period in order to work in Israel. They are too important for the Israeli construction industry and farming. Thus the Israeli construction association found accommodation for around 40,000 Palestinian workers mainly in flats or hotels near the construction. However, the Israeli government then decided on a far-reaching curfew. Without work, many of the workers are returning home. At least in one case a worker brought the virus back and infected another 18 people.

There are currently many reports that talk about the good cooperation between the Palestinian and Israeli authorities in relation to the coronavirus. But it is also true that the conflict is in no way on hold. That is shown by the fact that, despite the Coronavirus crisis, Israel has begun to press on with preparations for a highly controversial construction project for a settlement in the E1 zone in East Jerusalem. Up until recently the Israeli government also seemed firmly resolved to still use Donald Trump's time in office to annex broad swathes of West Jordan. As far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is concerned, there should be no expectation that the post-coronavirus world will be a different one.

Hannes Alpen, FES Palestinian territory

Benin

Since the beginning of last week a cordon sanitaire has been laid around the south of Benin. For two weeks, no one is allowed in or out. Although deliveries of goods are not affected, the additional barriers are likely to slow down or reduce supplies to the most populous region of this small country in West Africa.

To date, only nine cases have been officially confirmed in Benin. Nonetheless, the government has increasingly used the entire arsenal of prevention: Whereas initially arriving air passengers were only examined for symptoms of Covid-19 and ordered to self-isolate, today the few passengers are immediately transferred to a 14-day forced quarantine under military guard.

The external borders have been sealed for more than a week. Schools, universities and other public institutions are closed. Meetings with fewer than ten people are allowed, but only if a minimum distance of one metre is maintained. Markets, shops and restaurants are required to provide sufficient hand washing stations. Buses are no longer allowed to drive; taxis can only carry three passengers; the drivers of the most frequently used public transport, motorbike taxis, must have masks prepared for themselves and their passengers.

Benin has no other chance than to prevent the spread of the virus wherever possible. The health system is not prepared for a mass outbreak of the disease. However quick and correct the draconian decisions may appear in the current situation, it will not be easy to implement them. After all, how are those who work in the informal sector as market women, wheelbarrow drivers, domestic workers supposed to get to work? How can hygiene regulations be followed in the districts and villages where water is still scarce? How can one keep distance in the narrow street markets, where almost every square metre is used for displaying goods? The conditions for effective prevention in everyday life are therefore limited, and we can only hope that sealing off of the country has been effective after the first case occurred.

The social effects of the corona crisis are already being felt, especially among lower income groups. Thousands of employees in bars, pubs and restaurants have been laid off. The closure of mostly informally run kindergartens is forcing working women to stay at home and give up their meagre income. A good third of school children in primary schools receive one meal a day free of charge; with the school closures, this support for the narrow budgets of poorer households is no longer available. Many drivers of motorcycle taxis have returned to their families

in the villages.

We can assume that the economic situation of groups in poverty in particular will worsen considerably in the medium term: Benin's large neighbour Nigeria, with 200 million inhabitants the largest market in West Africa, will have considerably less demand for agricultural goods as a result of the collapse of the oil market. The world market prices for cotton, the country's main export product, have fallen to their lowest level in five years; the harvest is just about to begin and storage facilities are limited. Transfer payments from migrants, which amount to more than €250 million annually, half of which come from Nigeria, are likely to fall sharply, placing a burden on dependent families.

It is likely that the collateral damage of the pandemic is worse for Benin than the virus itself. Not an good prospect for a country that is among the poorest in the world.

Hans-Joachim Preuß, FES Benin



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Hannes Alpen

Jerusalem

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Hans-Joachim Preuss

Cotonou

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