

Over 1,000 sailors on French carrier Charles de Gaulle sick with COVID-19

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France's nuclear aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle arrived at its home port in Toulon a week ago with 50 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on board. After more testing, the Defense Ministry announced that 1,081 sailors were infected with the coronavirus out of 2,010 sailors tested on the carrier and its escorting fleet. Currently, 24 sailors are hospitalized with one in critical condition, and 545 sailors are presenting symptoms.

Since January 21, the Charles de Gaulle had been operating in the Mediterranean as part of Operation Chammal targeting Syria and Iraq, and then the North Atlantic for a mission slated to end on April 23. In the North Atlantic, according to the Navy, it was tasked with "deepening knowledge of the areas traversed and contributing to stabilizing the Euro-Mediterranean and Euro-Atlantic regions." Its escorts included German, Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese frigates.

There is growing anger among the carrier's crew, whose commander was refused permission to end the mission as the ship arrived at the Atlantic port of Brest on March 13 with confirmed coronavirus cases aboard. A month before arriving at Brest, the carrier had put in at a port in Cyprus. Initial reports suggested the first cases could have emerged after a five-to-eight-day incubation period and spread very rapidly.

One sailor anonymously told the press, "The armed forces played with our health and our lives. ... It is impossible to respect social distancing measures aboard an aircraft carrier."

The infected sailors are victims of the imperialist war drive in the Middle East threatening Iran, Russia and China. Like Washington, Paris is sabre rattling against Russia in the Mediterranean, where Moscow backs the Syrian regime against NATO, and in the Euro-Atlantic area. Putting its imperialist geostrategic interests first,

including above all intensifying war threats against Russia and China, President Emmanuel Macron's government acted with contempt for the sailors' health with its refusal to allow the sailors to disembark to safety.

The disaster on the Charles de Gaulle follows the outbreak aboard the US aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, whose captain was sacked after asking for authorization to evacuate the vessel as COVID-19 tore through the crew.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper refused to grant authorization to the crew to leave the ship, as the Trump administration insisted that the carrier be ready for war in the Pacific despite the many of the crew falling ill. Since then, several hundred American sailors have tested positive due to Washington's insistence on continuing its threats against China in the Pacific. The US sailors are currently being treated at the US military base on Guam.

Similarly, the mass infection of three-fifths of the Charles de Gaulle's crew took place after the French Navy refused an urgent appeal from its commander for an emergency evacuation.

L'Express reported, "as early as March 13, the 'pasha'—this is how the ship's captain is called—reportedly sent a message to his superiors asking to halt the ship's mission. As it was preparing to enter in Brest harbor for a three-day stop, cases of COVID-19, or at least suspected as such, had emerged aboard. Ship captain Guillaume Pinget was concerned and therefore asked to scrap the aircraft carrier battle group's moves northwards to instead return to Toulon, its home base, to confine the entire crew to try to avert the worst."

Now, the French armed forces are undertaking a disembarkation operation to place 1,900 sailors in

quarantine. The spokeswoman for the maritime prefecture of Toulon, Christine Ribbe, said: “Our objective is to protect all our sailors but also their families and the French people by deploying an unprecedented operation to greet them that will be as humane, as coordinated, as concerted but also as effective as possible.”

The disembarkation of the crew required a heavy logistical operation. Sailors were evacuated by ship as well as by buses, trucks and other vehicles to avoid all contact with the exterior and thus limit the risks of further infections. An operation to decontaminate the carrier as well as its complement of warplanes began last Tuesday so that they can “recover as soon as possible their full operational capacity,” the Defense Ministry stated.

The sailors who tested positive and those presenting symptoms, it added, are being “transferred to dedicated locations ... in accord with the armed forces’ health services and the Saint-Anne military hospital” in Toulon. It is only after the health quarantine and further testing that the carrier’s crew will be allowed to return to their families.

Ribbe stressed that “Everyone will be tested.” The sailors, including the roughly 1,700 serving aboard the Charles de Gaulle and over 200 aboard an escorting frigate, are to be confined for a two-week period without contact with their families, “on military installations of the Var region and surrounding areas.”

Celyne Flandrin, the wife of an infected sailor, spoke to the press about the dismay of the sailors’ families. “They maintained hygienic measures and tried to enforce social distancing,” she said, including “the same restrictions that we know on land due to the shelter-at-home order,” with the ship’s bar and other non-essential services being closed. However, she noted, as in all aircraft carriers, “the size of common areas and installations is quite narrow, everyone is packed in.”

On Friday, French Navy spokesman Captain Eric Lavault insisted that all precautionary measures applicable in France had been respected aboard the vessel. Lavault also denied the reports in *L’Express* that Pinget had requested to halt the ship’s mission and disembark, instead telling RTL: “Very officially, I deny this report. It is erroneous.”

Lavault immediately admitted, however, that many

are asking questions about the decisions taken at the time of the Brest port call and demanded incoherently that the public refrain from asking about the causes of the disaster: “I think we must avoid formulating hypotheses, as I see now that some people are doing. Indeed, we are all thinking about the port call at Brest, but there probably will be some other hypotheses and an epidemiological investigation will give answers.”

Last Wednesday, journalist Justine Brabant reported for the Médiapart news site on further errors in the handling of the epidemic aboard. Fourteen days after the March 13-16 port call in Brest, the armed services reportedly relaxed social distancing orders among the crew.

As the sailors themselves are saying, this event has exposed that the Navy brass and the Macron government treat them as cannon fodder—just like workers, whom Macron is ordering back to work in the middle of the pandemic, endangering countless thousands of lives.



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