

Turkish government rejects public health measures as Omicron rages

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30 December 2021

As the Omicron variant spreads rapidly throughout Turkey amid record numbers of infections worldwide, President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government is refusing to take any public health measures against the pandemic.

The Health Ministry announced over 36,000 new daily cases on Wednesday. It was an 80 percent increase in three days. While the test positivity rate has risen to 10 percent, many more infected people have undoubtedly gone undetected due to the limited number of tests—around 360,000 per day in a country with 85 million people.

Under these conditions, the government is keeping all workplaces and schools open, implementing a “vaccine-only” policy against COVID-19. The only change it made in policy after the Omicron variant emerged was to reduce the time to receive a booster dose from six months to three months. In Turkey, only 20 percent of the population is triple-vaccinated, and there is no vaccination permit for children under age 12.

No public health measures other than vaccines exist. There are no restrictions on international and domestic travel or life indoors. There is no widespread testing, and there is no contact tracing.

On Saturday, President Erdo?an claimed: “We successfully managed the pandemic with a flexible and unique model, using the opportunities provided by our strong health infrastructure in the most effective way.”

Moreover, Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati recently laid out the government’s approach to mass infections and death, declaring: “Is the pandemic over? Yes. Is the economy vigorous? Yes. We are going to double-digit growth figures. Exports exploded.”

Calling to “maintain social life as it should be,” Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said Tuesday: “Reducing the number of cases to 20,000 was a serious

success. Due to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, it now appears to be in an uptrend. We are in a period that requires being careful and taking booster doses as soon as possible. Have no doubt. WE WILL HAVE SUCCESS AGAIN.”

What the government presents as “success” is that millions have been infected or lost loved ones to a preventable disease. The number of recorded infections with COVID-19 in Turkey has exceeded 9.4 million. While the total official deaths surpassed 82,000, the calculations of Güçlü Yaman, a member of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) Pandemic Working Group, show that the real death toll from the pandemic is more than 235,000.

Despite the government’s attempt to normalize mass death, with overt or tacit support of the opposition parties, pseudo-left organizations and unions, scientists are warning of a public health catastrophe.

“We can see another storm coming. Within weeks, Omicron will dominate in more countries of the [European] region, pushing already stretched health systems further to the brink,” warned Dr. Hans Kluge, the director of WHO-Europe, on December 21.

Not long after this warning, the number of daily cases in Europe rapidly approached about 1 million. Records are being broken in the number of daily cases in France, Britain, Spain, Italy and many other countries.

Prof. Dr. Tu?rul Erbaydar, a public health expert from Ankara University, warned of the growing dangers and against the absence of any measures. He said: “We also know that the protective efficiency [of vaccines] decreases with Omicron. The pandemic has been long and there is a fatigue. Due to our officials stop taking precautions, a dangerous situation arises. As the risk rises for the coming days, there are no precautions against them.”

Erbaydar emphasized that the beds in hospitals will be full and patients other than COVID will not be able to receive health services.

In an interview with the daily *Hürriyet*, Prof. Dr. Derya Unutmaz, an immune system expert, warned about the contagiousness of Omicron. He stated: “It would not be wrong to call this variant one of the most contagious viruses in human history. ... It is spreading at an incredible speed.” He added: “Currently, 90 percent of cases in many countries, and even close to 100 percent in some, are caused by Omicron. We can say that Omicron took over the world by excluding Delta.”

Stressing the danger facing children, he said, “There are growing data that Omicron infects children more ... We can definitely say that Omicron is more dangerous than Delta for children.”

Speaking to the daily *Hürriyet*, Prof. Dr. Bülent Ertuğrul, an infectious diseases and clinical microbiology specialist, warned: “If we do not take adequate precautions, our health system may be overwhelmed as it was last year.”

Despite these serious warnings, the government insists on not taking any public health measures, while workers and youth on social media demand immediate action in the face of the rising danger.

Reflecting the situation at most hospitals, one health care worker wrote on Twitter: “Our 7 nurses in our service have been diagnosed with Covid (+). All of them showed symptoms in 24-48 hours. The Omicron variant is spreading rapidly, especially among health care workers. If this is not taken seriously enough and awareness is not raised, our health system may be at great risk.”

The situation in schools is rapidly getting worse. Neither Education Ministry nor the education unions bother to announce the outbreaks in schools anymore. One teacher wrote on Twitter: “I am a teacher working in Istanbul. I don’t know how many classes were closed [due to outbreaks], but there has been intense absenteeism among children in the last few weeks. They don’t test children, and I think most of them would be positive if they did!”

Another teacher states: “The high school where I worked was empty today. The reason is that 19 classes are in quarantine. Another class was quarantined in the afternoon. There are 4 or 5 classes left in this massive school that continue in-person education.”

However, Education Minister Mahmut Özer openly rejected demands for distance learning raised on social media. Yesterday, he said: “Taking a break from in-person education is not on our agenda. I find it improper that when new variants appear, the first thing that comes to mind is to discuss schools taking a break from in-person education.”

The main thing that the ruling class and all its representatives find “improper” is, in fact, the demand to prioritize public health and saving lives over capitalist profits.

The trade unions also ignore the demands for remote education in the face of the growing danger with Omicron.

While the E?itim-?? union called a one-day nationwide teacher strike last Wednesday to demand a 100 percent raise for educators amid surging inflation and cost of living, it did not advance any demands to protect the health of teachers and children against COVID-19.

Moreover, not only the pro-government unions, but also those controlled by bourgeois opposition parties did not even participate in this strike for wages, let alone demand distance learning.

While the political establishment and trade unions impose a policy of mass infection and death in the interests of the ruling class, the only social force that can stop the pandemic and save lives is the international working class, based on a scientific Zero COVID strategy.

Workers must demand and fight for nonessential workplaces and schools to be closed until zero cases are reached. There must be full income support for all workers affected by this, and other critical public health measures. Together with mass vaccination, widespread testing, contact tracing and isolation of infected persons, this can lay the basis for ending the pandemic and saving millions of lives internationally.



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