

Failures in Ecuador a warning for Latin America's COVID-19 fight

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With hundreds of bodies left decaying in homes for days due to lack of space in the city's overwhelmed morgues and hospitals, the coronavirus has struck a blow to Ecuador's economic capital Quayaquil, now a symbol of the chaos the pandemic can unleash among Latin America's poor.

The Pacific port city has become the epicenter of South America's struggle as the pandemic gradually tightens its grip on the region.

In Guayaquil, the stench of death floats around the hospitals. Long lines of vehicles form outside the cemeteries, loaded with cardboard coffins.

For days, hundreds of bodies were left at home, or in the streets where they fell, wrapped in black plastic.

Hampered by a strict 15-hour curfew, funeral services were overwhelmed and the health sector, lacking funds and personnel, simply collapsed.

Nearly 800 corpses have been removed from homes in the city over the past couple of weeks, a [government official](#) announced late Sunday.

The grim task of removal has been handed to a special force of troops and police hastily set up last week, in response to videos posted on [social media](#) by panicked residents of bodies lying in the streets.

"The number that we have collected from homes with the special force has exceeded 700," said the head of the force Jorge Wated, who is also the government spokesman.

Wated wrote on Twitter later that the number was 771. Added to 631 bodies in hospital morgues, that makes more than 1,400 awaiting burial.

And worse is to come. Authorities in this small South American country of 17.5 million predict up to 3,500 deaths from COVID-19 in the coming months.

Guayas province, of which Guayaquil is the capital, has 73 percent of Ecuador's more than 7,500 cases and 335 deaths.

Vulnerable port

Guayaquil, the center of the country's economy and a key Pacific port, appeared vulnerable to the virus from the start.

As a key hub, travel to and from Europe and the United States is especially intense in February and March, the main school holiday period.

It was there that Ecuador's first case was detected in February, in an elderly woman returning from Spain.

Some half a million Ecuadorans reside in Spain and Italy, which are among the countries worst hit by the virus. Many emigrated to Europe during the country's [financial crisis](#) in the 1990s.

-Negligence—The problems were compounded by government negligence. Ecuador "reacted late" to the pandemic, according to Daniel Simancas, an epidemiologist at the Equinox University of Technology in

Quito.

"This led to the devastating consequences that we have seen. The authorities themselves have apologized for the lack of strategies in the management of corpses, and of forecasting of what was needed in medical materials," Simancas told AFP.

There were also delays in purchasing test kits, coupled with a weak epidemiological surveillance plan.

The "cultural broth" of the port city aggravated the crisis, he said.

Inequality

Although Guayas is the most productive province in the country, more than 11 percent of Guayaquil's population is living below the [poverty line](#), according to official figures released in December.

Unemployment and under-employment affects 20 percent of the working age population.

"The people want to go to work and this is due to informal employment," where there is no [social safety net](#), according to economist Alberto Acosta Burneo.

Guayaquil native Carlos Tutiven, a sociologist at the University of Casa Grande, points to massive inequalities in the city.

No government policy "has been powerful enough to solve the inequity" in a city where the villas of the wealthy exist cheek-by-jowl with shantytowns, he said.

Indiscipline

Authorities in Guayas province said that more than 3,000 people had violated the 15-hour daily curfew.

Despite soldiers being deployed in the streets, it is common to see street vendors plying their trade, without masks, and lines of people ignoring social distancing recommendations outside shops.

Tutiven highlights the "weakness" of government communication on recommendations to fight the spread of the [coronavirus](#).

"Not everyone can show obedience and discipline because the vast majority of people live in very precarious conditions," Tutiven told AFP.

"Locking yourself in a four-square meter apartment, in a room where there are four, five, six people, is suffocating," he said.

And the poor are not the only ones to ignore the "stay at home" regulations.

"Many families with a lot of money and power have underestimated the power of this virus and have not respected the quarantine measures," according to Simancas, the epidemiologist.

The government of President Lenin Moreno and [local authorities](#) have been forced to admit serious flaws in their approach.

"Everyone" is responsible, said Guayaquil mayor Cynthia Viteri, who herself was infected and has recovered.

"We see our dead fall in silence every day; we hear the neighbor cry for her deceased loved one... a pregnant woman with no hospital to give

birth in, and a hundred people dying because they were unable to undergo dialysis.

"It wasn't only the health system that has collapsed here, but also the funeral services and mortuaries."

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