

# Inequality, injustice laid bare by pandemic's march

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## FULL TEXT

In "The Hunger Games," the tyrannical President Snow of Panem demands the life of one youth per district annually as a tribute, in an act of violence birthed by the politics of power and sanitized at the altar of entertainment for the unthinking.

Global reality reveals that a Hunger Games-like dystopia doesn't belong merely to a fictional future. One youth per year is nothing, and anything goes at the altar of convenience.

The rich - who have largely been able to cocoon themselves from the wrath of the global pandemic - continue to extract the services, and even lives, of the poor for their comfort.

That grotesque distance between the haves and have-nots lies naked and exposed by COVID-19 around the world. Toronto's own public health data offers irrefutable numerical evidence of a common story of affluent travellers unintentionally bringing COVID-19 in and being able to benefit - unintentionally, instantly - from a lockdown, leaving poorer bodies, racialized bodies, residing in smaller homes, in underserviced neighbourhoods, ripe for the picking by the virus.

Many of them work jobs deemed "essential." So essential that without them, society falls apart at the seams.

These are jobs that are appreciated with a minimum wage. That topsy-turvy prioritizing - touted as a trickle-down economy that rewards the rich first - is the driver of systemic oppressions.

Unintentionality is the secret of the invisibility of the system, which requires simply that people with privilege do what they've always done, to not think, not critique, not disrupt the status quo.

If the oppressed in rich countries have suffered, those in poorer nations have suffered exponentially more.

It's clear we are all connected; when immigrants lose their precarious jobs in wealthy countries it causes a domino effect downstream. Almost a third of Bangladesh is flooded. But this year, by the time the swollen river waters spilled over in June, people were already low on food; many had stopped working due to the pandemic and relatives abroad who send money home had lost jobs.

Countries around the world are witnessing overlapping disasters.

Mexico, the nation wracked by poverty despite a high gross domestic product, is overwhelmed by hurricanes and storms even while it tracks as the third-highest in the world for COVID-19 fatalities with more than 52,000 deaths.

As awareness of interconnectedness of the issues and of the people rises and sparks action, so does the backlash, bearing down on all those who dissent.

The U.S. repeatedly deployed armed troops to quell widespread and mostly peaceful anti-Black-racism protests that are now in their third month.

In Zimbabwe, where the inflation rate is more than 700 per cent and doctors and nurses from dilapidated hospitals are on strike, the president has clamped down on dissenting voices; his security forces allegedly abducting and torturing opposition party members.

The Philippines sent millions of citizens back into a partial lockdown to give overwhelmed health-care workers a break. But in April its trigger-happy president publicly said he had asked armed forces to "shoot dead" anyone who violated the restrictions. This was just as Manila residents were rallying to demand food aid after millions of workers lost their jobs.

Meanwhile in India, with 1.8 million COVID-19 cases amid the onslaught of a fierce monsoon that has already displaced millions, the country is reeling. That hasn't forced it to ease its grip on Kashmir, which is now marking a full year since India revoked its partial autonomy, stripped it of statehood, incarcerated even pro-India leaders and imposed a harsh shutdown. COVID-19 gave the government an excuse to impose further lockdowns. This week, it tightened the noose on Kashmir by imposing a two-day curfew in its capital city to clamp down on planned protests.

The Kashmiri lockdown consists of the Indian police and paramilitary forces roaming the streets with assault rifles, laying razor wire across bridges and placing steel barricades across roads.

Already-wretched neighbourhoods are being blighted everywhere. We bear witness to a failing world, misaligned with loftier principles of egalitarianism it claims to cherish, a world that is not even sustainable.

It seems obvious that we can't keep building solutions in self-interest at the expense of others. Our streets here, filled with protests, may give the impression that we - the ordinary folks - are rising, are being heard. The rest of the world shows just how easy it is to quell protest. More people need to rise, continuously so, passing the baton from group to group.

Otherwise, darker disparities loom. The politics of capital have always been about the politics of power.

We may be dystopian already but perched on the verge of worse, ceding all control to the obscenely rich. Amazon's Jeff Bezos made \$34 billion (U.S.) during the pandemic from March to May and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg made \$25 billion. The handful of other billionaires did pretty well, too, unemployment be damned. As if that is not vulgar enough, Bezos is likely to become the world's first trillionaire in a few years.

All hail the new kings.

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CAPTION: Gravediggers work at the San Miguel Xico cementery in Valle de Chalco, Mexico last month. A grotesque distance between the haves and have-nots has been exposed by COVID-19, Shree Paradkar writes, as countries around the world witness overlapping disasters. Hector Vivas GETTY IMAGES file photo

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