

As at the end of March, there were three confirmed cases of coronavirus in Nicaragua. One person out of the three has died due to complications from COVID-19 and another 14 people were under observation but had so far tested negative for the virus.

Nicaragua's public health system offers free, universal health services based on community-focused preventative care and the Nicaraguan government has prioritised prevention and education during this first phase of the pandemic.

The national network of hospitals, health centres and health posts is supported by a network of tens of thousands of volunteer health promoters called *brigadistas*. Over recent weeks, health personnel, including many trade union members, and *brigadistas* have visited over 1.2 million households in an education and monitoring campaign to address the pandemic. They have given out leaflets with information on prevention (hygiene) and what to do if you have symptoms. In addition to home visits, trucks with loudspeakers are going round barrios as part of a public education campaign. If people have symptoms, they are encouraged to go immediately to local clinics where they are assessed, and if necessary given tests, with results available within hours.

For the moment, Nicaragua has been successful in preventing the virus from spreading. The authorities have prepared 19 hospitals should the pandemic begin to spread in the general population. 37,206 health workers in both public and private health institutions have been trained in preventive measures, how to identify suspected cases, how to protect fellow health workers, how to provide medical care and how to transfer patients safely between local health units, health centres and hospitals. Similarly, the health ministry has trained 250,000 community health promoters in preventive measures, early identification of patients with symptoms and how to ensure referral of suspected cases to the different health posts, health centres and hospitals. The government has also established a new free direct line with information on symptoms, prevention and how to get further help for any members of the public with doubts about the pandemic.

Whilst there are at present controls at airports and border posts checking everyone's temperature, there is no quarantine and no restrictions on movement. However, social distancing remains a problem in Nicaragua, where the popular economy of medium, small and micro businesses of all kinds, small farming households and cooperatives across many different industries generate 70% of all employment. The remainder is provided by the public sector along with the private business sector including free trade zone businesses. This economic structure means that a majority of the economically active population depend on daily or weekly income to be able to buy food and other basic necessities. For Nicaragua, this makes shutting down the economy practically impossible, and the situation may get more difficult during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) which takes place this year from 5-11 April. In most of Latin America, the traditions of Holy Week are normally honoured with processions, celebrations, music and food.

Nicaragua produces 80% of its supplies of basic food: as during the attempted coup in 2018, guaranteeing these supplies will be critical during this crisis. Small and medium farmers will play a vital role in ensuring the production of these supplies.

The Nicaraguan government faces the dilemma of weighing up taking all possible measures to prevent the spread of such a virulent and lethal virus while recognising the potentially catastrophic consequences of drastic measures for those who are most vulnerable.

Efforts are continuing at a regional level to control the virus. On 12th March, Central American leaders agreed to formulate a regional contingency plan to deal with the pandemic. The agreement, adopted after a teleconference meeting of members of the Central American Integration System (SICA), was signed by Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic.

The region has so far registered cases of the novel coronavirus in Costa Rica (23), Honduras (2) and Panama (27). Under a declaration titled “Central America united against the coronavirus,” the leaders called on the area’s health ministers to prepare “a regional contingency plan aimed at complementing national efforts for the prevention, containment, and treatment of COVID-19.” They also instructed finance ministers to take actions before international financial organizations to guarantee the availability of resources to finance the contingency plan. The declaration also guided health authorities to adopt actions to guarantee the supply of medicines, medical equipment and other necessities.

Nicaragua is working with SICA to ensure production, delivery and access to foodstuffs and the Secretary General of SICA, Vinicio Cerezo, has thanked the Nicaraguan government for their contributions to the regional contingency plan and for the efforts being made in Nicaragua to contain the virus. He has also spoken of the many challenges faced as a result of the crisis, but also the opportunity to build a new region, with more solidarity, social justice and harmony with the environment. The Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) has also reiterated its support for Nicaragua and technical cooperation to combat Covid-19.

For their part, Nicaragua’s right-wing opposition continues the same relentless disinformation campaigns that they used during their violent, failed coup attempt in 2018, spreading false rumours and scaremongering via their news outlets and social media. They claim, for example, that Nicaragua is concealing hundreds of cases of the virus and that the government is not doing enough to address the pandemic, a claim which is unfortunately repeated uncritically by international media.

While all this is going on, the US has stepped up its onslaught against Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua by imposing yet more sanctions and restrictions aimed to bring about regime change in these countries. During the coming weeks, we will continue our efforts to support sister trade unions and communities in Nicaragua who are bearing the impact of the crisis. We will also remain vigilant regarding the actions of the United States and take whatever steps we can to defend Nicaragua’s sovereignty and the right of the Nicaraguan people to self-determination and to live in peace.