

# Venezuela produce market at center of COVID-19 outbreak

The open-air bazaar, where people pay little heed to social distancing though most wear masks, upsets President Nicolas Maduro's government's efforts to stop an accelerating number of coronavirus cases from overloading Venezuela's dilapidated health system

Reuters | Caracas

Venezuela capital Caracas' largest produce market is at the center of a worsening COVID-19 outbreak, but cash-strapped merchants refuse to stop hawking food there for the city's 5 million residents, many of whom are starving.

Three days a week - down from six before the pandemic - some 10,000 people, including retailers and consumers, pack into the state-run Coche Wholesale Market. The produce is trucked out to the city's supermarkets, providing a lifeline amid Venezuela's six-year economic crisis.

"Caracas depends on this market," its administrator Walter Rivera said in an interview, adding that about 17,000 tonnes of goods are sold there each month.

But the open-air bazaar, where people pay little heed to social distancing though most wear masks, upsets President Nicolas Maduro's government's efforts to stop an accelerating number of coronavirus cases

from overloading Venezuela's dilapidated health system. So far authorities have confirmed 20,206 cases and 174 deaths, though the opposition and medical NGOs warn that testing is insufficient.

On July 29, authorities limited the opening hours of wholesale markets across the capital to between dawn and 2 p.m.

Coche is a "potential site of high contagion" due to its lack of social distancing, Jose Manuel Olivares, a health advisor to opposition leader Juan Guaido, said in an interview.



Sellers wait for customers under the rain at the Coche wholesale market amid coronavirus (COVID-19) disease outbreak in Caracas



Customers walk at the Coche wholesale market amid coronavirus (COVID-19) disease outbreak in Caracas



A child pulls a cart at the Coche wholesale market amid coronavirus (COVID-19) disease outbreak in Caracas

Maduro ordered harsh lockdown measures in March which slowed the virus' spread, but basic goods shortages forced many merchants to return to wholesale markets to make a living.

"If you don't go out every day you don't eat," said Moises Rojas, 23, who sells carrots, potatoes and onions in Coche.

Rojas, one of the market's 3,500 workers, said on pre-pandemic days he could sell three 45-kilogram sacks of carrots. Now, he may sell only 5 kilos.

Some traders lugging sacks

and pushing carts around the market said they feared getting infected, but they were more afraid the government would stop them working.

"It would get ugly for us," said Angel Serrano, who has spent 32 of his 44 years selling there. "This supports all of us here."

Coche administrator Rivera said in the last few weeks they carried out 4,500 rapid antibody tests there, with only one positive result. "We're working so that they don't shut the market," he said.

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## Trump says coronavirus outbreak under control 'It is what it is'



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DONALD TRUMP

Reuters | Washington

President Donald Trump said the coronavirus outbreak is under control as it can get in the United States, where at least 155,000 people have died amid a patchy response to the public health crisis that has failed to stem a rise in cases.

The Republican president continued to press for US schools to reopen in an overnight Twitter post, and defended his administration's response to the virus in an interview with the Axios news website released late on Monday.

"They are dying, that's true," he said. "It is what it is. But that doesn't mean we aren't doing everything we can. It's under control as much as you can control it. This is a horrible plague."

Coronavirus cases continue to surge in the country and dozens of US states have had to pause or roll back their reopening plans. The White House coronavirus task force coordinator, Dr Deborah Birx, said on Sunday the virus was "extraordinarily widespread" in rural areas as well as cities.

With US deaths reaching a record 1,000 a day, Trump pressed the view of deaths in proportion to the number of cases instead of as a proportion of the population, in which the United States fares worse than other Western nations.

In the Axios interview, Trump again insisted that increased diagnostic testing in the United States accounted for the increase in cases, an assertion disputed by health experts who say expanded testing accounts for some, but not all, of the growth in cases.

Health experts also call it a key tool in fighting the spread of the disease, which had been detected in at least 4.6 million people across the United States as of Saturday.

## Thai PM asks student protesters 'not to create chaos'

Reuters | Bangkok

Thailand's prime minister yesterday asked increasingly bold student-led protesters "not to create chaos" after some broke longstanding taboos by openly calling for reform of the constitutional monarchy.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former army chief who staged a coup six years ago and has led military-backed governments ever since, also promised that parliament would consider protesters' demands to amend the constitution.

"I beg people not to create chaos at this time. We are solving these problems together," Prayuth told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

He said he was "worried" about the young protesters who have been gathering in small groups in different parts of the country calling for the dissolution of parliament and new elections.



Harry Potter-themed pro-democracy protest in Bangkok

Prayuth said a committee has been formed in parliament to discuss possible changes to a 2017 constitution drafted under military auspices and a mechanism to gauge the views of

young people would be set up this month.

Opposition activists say that under the constitution, Prayuth was virtually assured of staying on a prime minister after a dis-

puted 2019 general election by the creation of a junta-appointed Senate.

"I support changes that are needed and I am not in conflict," he said.

He did not say what changes would be considered in parliament, where his ruling coalition holds a comfortable majority after a main opposition party was dissolved in February.

A court ban of the opposition Future Forward Party sparked campus demonstrations and student protesters took to the streets last month with some 2,500 rallying at Bangkok's Democracy Monument. Since then, protests have spread.

Prayuth has previously warned protesters not to insult the monarchy, which is illegal in Thailand, though he said King Maha Vajiralongkorn had asked that people no longer be prosecuted under that law.

On Monday night, student protesters issued a statement calling for changes in laws "that expand the power of the monarch and that could impinge on democracy where the king is the head of state".

Officials at the Royal Palace on Tuesday said they had no comment when asked about the protest demands.

The constitution says the king is to be "revered" and insulting the monarchy is a crime punishable by up to 15 years in prison under "lese majeste" laws.

After the king took the throne in 2016, the palace required revisions to the new constitution that gave him greater emergency powers. He has since taken personal control over some army units and palace assets worth tens of billions of dollars.

Asked about the protesters openly discussing the king, Prayuth said it was a matter of law enforcement.

"I won't stop it from happening. This issue is for authorities to follow the law," he said.

"Protests are a right under the law, but they have to respect the law and rules. I am not threatening, but I am worried."