
Second largest outbreak in Latin America caused by members of the elite

There are various accounts as to the origin of the outbreak. Some people say it was brought in by some Ecuadorians living in Italy, visiting Ecuador for a week's vacation, others say it was a person arriving from Spain. Fact is that, as is happening all over the world, it was initially overlooked. And Guayaquil, the Ecuadorian city with approximately 3 million inhabitants, located on the Pacific coast, has rapidly become the second major coronavirus hotbed in Latin America, after that of Sao Paulo in Brazil: almost 1,500 confirmed cases, out of a total of 2,000 in the country and most of the 58 people who have died so far. *It is feared that this might be just the beginning of a catastrophe, partly owing to the economic and social situation in Ecuador.* "It arrived via travellers, it spread during parties and receptions, especially among the rich," said **Anastasio Gallego** from Guayaquil, co-director of the Hogar de Cristo, a community centre for the poor, homeless and migrants in the city, run in conjunction with the Jesuits. In fact, most of those infected are either members of elite groups or of lower classes, i.e. the workers serving at the parties. The middle classes registered only a few cases." **A few weeks later.** Guayaquil is a ghost town. Everything is closed and the curfew begins after 2:00 pm. *While the situation is hard for everyone, it direly affects the large number of poor, unemployed, precarious workers (60% of the inhabitants in Ecuador) and Venezuelan refugees.* **Solidarity campaign in every parish.** This is where the Archdiocese of Guayaquil is playing a fundamental role.



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[“We followed two lines of action. In the first place we suspended the celebration of Holy Mass in attendance of the faithful, adopting and respecting the decisions taken by national political authorities. Religious celebrations are livestreamed on the archdiocese's media and social channels. We then launched a solidarity campaign in collaboration with 'Diakonia' and the Food Bank. The aim is to bring food, basic necessities and personal sanitation items to the homes of the most needy people. This is done parish by parish, in a comprehensive manner, with the help of dedicated staff trained to take the necessary precautions.” Mons. Cabrera noted that](#)

[“at first we were misinformed, alarms weren't taken seriously.](#)

[Now there is greater awareness of the gravity of this pandemic, and I see that people are reacting](#)

positively. My gratitude also goes to the doctors, all of them working uninterruptedly." **The tragedy of the unemployed, the homeless and Venezuelan refugees.** Admittedly, it's a very challenging context. Gallego went on to say, expressing deep appreciation for what the archdiocese is doing. "But there is great concern. The whole population is suffering a very strict curfew, that begins already at 2 pm. *There are soldiers on the streets, only one person can go out at a time and limited numbers of people are allowed to enter supermarkets. Medical facilities have no more free beds.* Luckily there are three new large hospitals built by the previous government, but the present government made large cuts in social spending." And then there are the poor, the majority of the population: "In the neighbourhood where our reception centre *Hogar de Cristo* is located, now forced to close down, 8 out of 10 people have no permanent occupation, the majority have informal and precarious jobs. That's why the archdiocese's initiative is so important." *Venezuelan migrants are the most destitute group.* For them Ecuador is usually a transit zone in their journey to Peru or Chile. But 250 000 are in the Country today, and the borders are closed: "We assisted as many as 14 thousand at the *Hogar del Cristo* alone in the last few days. Now they have no place to go, including families with children. Here we see the consequences of an individualistic mentality, of a brutal neoliberal system that has recently been imposed in many Latin American societies." **"The threat of a catastrophe."** Father **Josef Garcia**, executive secretary of Caritas Ecuador, is worried about the poor and Venezuelan migrants, besides the many sick people. SIR asked him about the situation at national level: "In this emergency, we must remember that six out of ten Ecuadorians don't have a decent job, that one out of five is living in extreme poverty. At the moment, as far as contagion is concerned, the only major outbreak is in Guayaquil, where at the beginning of the epidemic the first alarms were not taken seriously. In the capital Quito, where I live, the rules were immediately observed and there are many fewer cases (just over a hundred, *ed.'s note*). In many provinces, including the Amazon region, there are only a few infected people, with strict transport controls. We are slightly worried about the Galapagos Islands, with 4 cases. There is no proper hospital there, even just one swab must be analysed on the mainland, and it can take several days." The situation of migrants, Venezuelans and a minority of Colombians, remains worrying: "We have some reception centres. We chose to quarantine those already present, without taking in new arrivals. And we know that there are others on the streets." As for assistance to the poor, it ranges from the collection and distribution of food in Guayaquil to monetary offerings, as happens in Quito. Despite the present emergency, the Caritas secretary can't help thinking about the future. *The pandemic hits Ecuador at a time of crisis and severe social cuts, which caused massive popular uprisings in October.* "Even before the first cases of Covid-19 were reported, I attended a meeting with the President of the Republic Lenín Moreno along with other representatives of charitable organizations,- said Father Josef Garcia -. We spoke about new financial measures and the difficult economic situation caused by the drop in oil prices. The government was planning to raise some taxes. The country has no economic, social or medical resources to confront a further spread of the disease. It faces a serious risk of unpredictable catastrophe."

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