

India imposes new curbs as COvVID-19 cases hit record

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state Gujarat became the latest to tighten coronavirus curbs on Wednesday as India's infections surged to a record of almost 116,000 new cases in 24 hours.

Experts blame the country's fresh wave on people ignoring guidelines and attending huge religious and political events, as well as weddings and

cricket matches in recent months.

India has now recorded 12.8 million cases, the third-highest behind the United States and Brazil, although those nations have much smaller populations. More than 166,000 Indians have died.

Maharashtra, the worst-hit state and home to megacity Mumbai, has imposed a night curfew and weekend lockdowns are due to begin on Friday evening.

New Delhi imposed night curfews from Tuesday, and on Wednesday, Gujarat in western India extended after-dark restrictions to 20 cities and banned large social and political gatherings.

"We have also extended the timing of night curfew from 8 pm to 6 am... This will be in force until April 30," Gujarat chief minister Vijay Rupani said in a video message.

The northern state of Punjab on Wednesday ordered a ban on political gatherings and extended a night curfew to the whole state while capping numbers at indoor funerals and weddings to 50 guests and 100 for outdoors.

Chief minister Amarinder Singh said it was also a "matter of concern that over 85 percent of cases in Punjab are of the UK strain, which is more contagious and virulent."

Press reports say that hospitals are starting to suffer, particularly in Maharashtra. One Pune clinic is reportedly giving oxygen support to patients in a makeshift waiting area.

The All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), one of Delhi's biggest government hospitals, will from Thursday end walk-in

consultations to minimise infections, reports said.

The government has so far shied away from reimposing a nationwide lockdown after a shutdown in March 2020—one of the world's toughest—caused widespread human and economic misery.

Many Indians lowered their guard after infections slowed sharply in late 2020, with huge crowds thronging religious festivals such as the Kumbh Mela which on one day last month saw three million attendees.

Spectators were also allowed at cricket matches between India and England in Gujarat, while political rallies for state elections have drawn huge crowds, including an estimated 800,000 at one event hosted by Modi.

The government late Wednesday expanded the sites where vaccinations could take place—currently concentrated at hospitals and healthcare centres—to include workplaces that have 100 staff willing to receive a jab, amid growing calls for more flexibility to speed up the pace of the rollout.

India launched its mass vaccination drive in mid-January and opened up jabs to the over-45s at the start of April. The country has so far administered almost 90 million shots.

But experts say that the government's target of inoculating 300 million people by August risks being missed with many scared to get the injections or complacent about the virus.

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