India daily virus cases double to 200,000 in 10 days

April 15 2021

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India's daily coronavirus caseload has doubled in 10 days, with a record 200,000 new infections logged Thursday as authorities grapple with shortages of vaccines, treatments and hospital beds.

Having let its guard down with mass religious festivals, political rallies and crowds at cricket matches, India is experiencing a vicious second wave, recording almost two million fresh infections this month alone.

This week, it overtook Brazil to become the country with the second-highest number of cases worldwide, after the United States.

In the past day it also recorded over 1,000 deaths, health ministry data showed, taking its total to 175,000, although on a per-capita basis India is far behind many other countries.

After a nationwide lockdown a year ago caused widespread misery and one of the sharpest downturns of any major economy, the government is desperate to avoid repeating the hugely unpopular shutdown.

But many states are tightening the screws, in particular Maharashtra and its capital Mumbai, which this week introduced tougher restrictions for its 125 million people.

This has prompted many migrant workers to flee Mumbai and other cities in the state, in scenes reminiscent of the exodus last year when the government halted all activity almost overnight.

The capital New Delhi on Thursday became the latest to impose a weekend curfew and ordering shopping malls, gyms and spas to stay shut from Friday evening.

The megacity of around 25 million inhabitants recorded over 17,000 fresh cases on Wednesday, its highest single-day tally since the pandemic began.

Late Thursday, the ministry of culture said that all major monuments, including India's top tourist attraction the Taj Mahal, would be shut until

April 15 amid the surge.

The marble mausoleum south of New Delhi was reopened in September after it was shut to visitors in March last year.

Meanwhile Uttar Pradesh, a northern Indian state with a population of more than 240 million, also imposed curfews in major cities as it scrambled to control a recent surge in cases—with chief minister Yogi Adityanath admitted to hospital with the virus on Thursday.

Disturbing trend

Indian hospitals are now struggling to cope, running short of beds, oxygen and coronavirus medicines like Remdesivir.

In a new disturbing trend, doctors across the most-affected cities told AFP they had seen an increase in the number of COVID-19 patients aged below 45 and suffering from more severe symptoms compared to last year.

"We are also seeing children under the ages of 12 and 15 being admitted with symptoms in the second wave. Last year there were practically no children presenting symptoms," said Khusrav Bajan, a consultant at Mumbai's P.D. Hinduja National Hospital.

The country's drive to vaccinate its 1.3 billion people has also hit obstacles, with just 114 million shots administered so far and stocks running low, according to local authorities.

New Delhi has put the brakes on exports from the Serum Institute—which has supplied dozens of nations with COVID vaccines—to prioritise domestic needs.

Even as infections soar, several religious festivals are ongoing, including the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar in northern India, which has seen almost five million mostly maskless Hindu pilgrims massing on the banks of the holy Ganges River this week.

The virus was detected in almost 2,000 people in just 48 hours in Haridwar, officials said Wednesday.

"Our faith is the biggest thing for us. It is because of that strong belief that so many people have come here to take a dip in Ganga," Siddharth Chakrapani, a member of one of the Kumbh Mela organising committees, told AFP.

"They believe that Maa (mother) Ganga will save them from this pandemic."

Many crematoriums are also struggling, according to press reports.

"Since 9 am we have been waiting outside. Now it is 1 pm and still we need another 2-3 hours for our turn," said one relative outside a Bangalore crematorium.

"There are hundreds of people like us are waiting here."

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