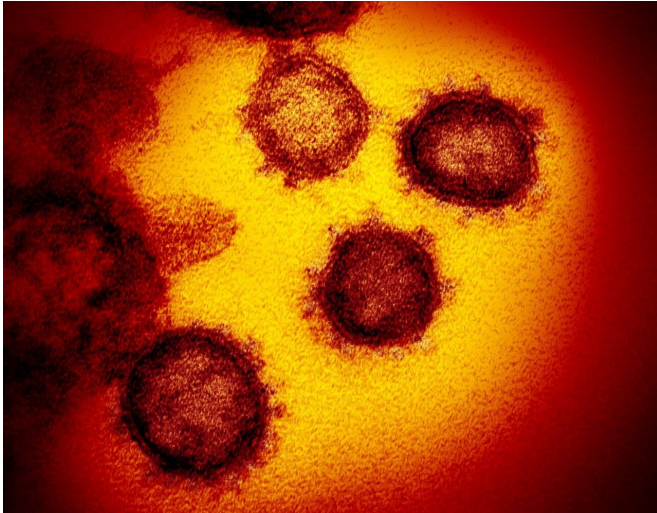


COVID lockdown empties Delhi streets amid deadly surge

17 April 2021



Transmission electron microscope image of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, emerging from human cells. Credit: NIAID

New Delhi led major cities across India into a weekend lockdown Saturday as the country confronts a fierce new coronavirus wave, with more than 230,000 fresh daily cases and families clamouring for drugs and hospital beds.

Hopes that South Asia might have beaten the pandemic have been dashed with India seeing over two million new cases this month alone and Bangladesh and Pakistan also imposing shutdowns.

India added another record 234,000 cases Saturday to pass 14.5 million overall and 1,341 deaths took its pandemic total to 175,649 deaths.

The per-capita rates remain low by international comparison, but the speed at which cases are rising led the international Red Cross to call the South Asian surge "truly frightening".

India now has three times the daily cases of the United States, the world's worst-hit country.

After a national lockdown a year ago led to an economic slump, the Indian government is desperate to avoid a second stoppage. But Delhi joined Mumbai in ordering all but essential services to close.

Landmarks such as the historic Red Fort where tens of thousands of people would normally gather were deserted. "Not one person has turned up," said security guard Anil Dayan. Police checked many of the cars that strayed onto the streets.

The city of more than 20 million people now has the most daily cases in India and restaurants, malls and gyms were all closed. Weddings can go ahead with guests limited to 50 people, while only 20 can attend funerals.

"Don't panic. All essential services will be available through the weekend," Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said.

Maharashtra, which includes Mumbai, Gujarat and IT hub Bangalore's home state Karnataka have also imposed restrictions on movement.

Uttar Pradesh state, home to some 240 million people, has ordered a one-day lockdown on Sunday.

Festival fears

Similarly, the northern state of Uttarakhand has restricted gatherings to 200 people—but exempted the huge Hindu Kumbh Mela festival.

The gathering in Haridwar has attracted up to 25 million people since January, including some 4.6 million this week alone, with most people ignoring COVID-19 guidelines.

More than 1,600 people tested positive for [coronavirus](#) in Haridwar in barely three days this week and experts fear that many devotees will take the virus back to their home towns and villages. © 2021 AFP

The latest round of voting also went ahead in the West Bengal state election with long queues forming outside polling stations. Rival parties have been holding huge rallies in recent weeks again fuelling super-spreader fears.

In the state capital Kolkata, railway employee Samaresh Tapna fell sick after attending one such gathering and was hospitalised.

"I felt angry with myself... I cursed my fate," the 42-year-old told AFP.

Medicines run short

Hospitals are running short of oxygen and widely prescribed medicines such as Remdesivir and Fabiflu, prompting desperate people to pay exorbitant black market rates.

Social media is full of horror stories of desperate calls to help a loved one needing hospital treatment for COVID-19 or other complaints.

"I lost a cousin on Saturday. He was not admitted after a stroke. Tried 4 hospitals," read one message on a Delhi neighbourhood WhatsApp group this week.

India's drive to vaccinate its 1.3 billion people has also hit obstacles, with just 117 million shots administered so far and stocks running low, according to some local authorities.

"This is a wake-up call to the world. Vaccines must be available to everyone, everywhere, rich and poor to overcome this terrible pandemic," said Udaya Regmi from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), describing conditions in South Asia as "truly frightening".

"We must redouble our efforts to contain this disease as too many lives are at stake," Regmi added.

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