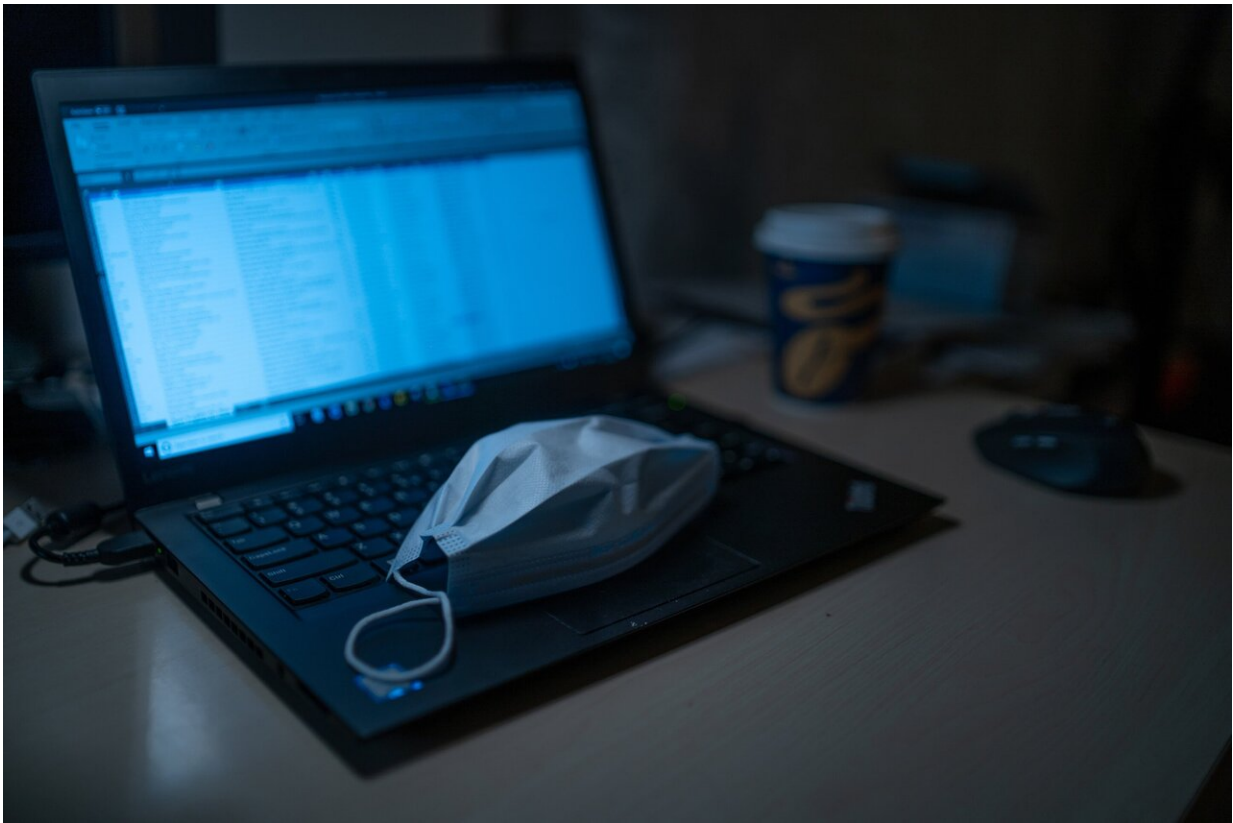


Record infections overwhelm India's hospitals

April 23 2021



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Delhi hospitals issued desperate appeals for oxygen on Friday and 13 COVID patients died in a fire, as India's healthcare system buckles under a new wave of infections.

The surge in cases, blamed on a new virus variant and the government allowing "super spreader" public events to go ahead, saw another 330,000 new infections and 2,000 deaths reported in the past 24 hours.

The latest in a string of fires at hospitals broke out on the outskirts of Mumbai early Friday morning, a local official told AFP. It has since been put out and the cause was being investigated.

"There were 17 patients inside when a fire broke out in the ICU of Vijay Vallabh Hospital, out of which 13 died and four have been shifted to other facilities," fire department official Morrison Khavari said.

India's healthcare system has long suffered from underfunding and the new COVID outbreak has seen critical shortages in oxygen, drugs and hospital beds, sparking desperate pleas for help.

Earlier this week, 22 COVID-19 patients died at another hospital in the same state of Maharashtra when the [oxygen supply](#) to their ventilators was disrupted by a leak.

'Pants down'

India has recorded more than four million infections this month, dashing hopes at the start of the year that it may have seen the worst of the pandemic.

This mistaken belief led the government to lower its guard, allowing most activity to return almost to normal, including weddings and permitting spectators at cricket matches.

The vast Kumbh Mela festival, one of the world's biggest religious gatherings, held in the city of Haridwar between January and this week, attracted an estimated 25 million Hindu pilgrims, mostly without masks

or social distancing.

Several state elections have seen big campaign rallies including one by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Kolkata that drew an estimated crowd of 800,000.

"The government has been caught with its pants down," call centre executive Navneet Singh, 38, told AFP.

Many parts of the country have now tightened restrictions, with the capital in lockdown and all non-essential services banned in Maharashtra. The northern state of Uttar Pradesh, home to 240 million people, goes into a shutdown this weekend.

The United Arab Emirates on Thursday became the latest country to impose travel restrictions on India, suspending flights on one of the world's busiest air corridors. Canada also halted flights from India as well as Pakistan, which has been badly hit too.

Crisis meetings

Modi was set on Friday to hold at least three crisis meetings on oxygen supplies and the availability of critical medicines.

Hospitals in New Delhi have been posting daily desperate appeals for oxygen to the state and national government.

"SOS—less than an hour's oxygen supplies at Max Smart Hospital & Max Hospital Saket," one of the biggest private [hospital](#) chains in India said on Twitter early Friday morning. "Over 700 patients admitted, need immediate assistance."

At least six hospitals ran out of oxygen supplies in the Indian capital late

Thursday night before deliveries arrived in the early hours.

Medical oxygen tanker trucks have been doing supply runs around the clock in a number of states and air force transport planes have started airlifting big [oxygen](#) tanks around the country.

The first "Oxygen Express" train left the southern industrial hub of Vizag on Thursday headed for Maharashtra with trucks carrying supplies on board.

India has now recorded more than 16 million cases and 187,000 deaths from the [coronavirus](#). Per capita numbers are however much lower than in many other countries.

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