

Weekend shutdown in Delhi as COVID grips India

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Total cases in India have gone past 14.5 million, second only to the United States which has reported more than 32 million infections [File: Amit Dave/Reuters]

New Delhi, April 17 (RHC)-- New Delhi went into a weekend lockdown on Saturday as India faces a ferocious new coronavirus wave, with daily cases hitting another record increase of 234,692 nationwide and families clamouring for drugs and hospital beds. The health ministry said the latest number is the eighth record high in the last nine days.

Total cases have gone past 14.5 million, second only to the United States which has reported more than 32 million infections. India's deaths from COVID-19 rose by 1,341 to reach a total of 175,649, the data showed.

Hopes that South Asian countries might have beaten the pandemic have been dashed with India seeing more than two million new cases this month alone and Bangladesh and Pakistan imposing shutdowns. India's per-capita rates remain low by international comparison, raising the prospect that infection numbers – fuelled possibly by a virulent new “double mutant” – may explode further.

After a national lockdown a year ago led to hundreds of deaths and one of the worst slumps of any major economy, the Indian government is desperate to avoid a second stoppage. Many states are, however, clamping down, including hotspot Maharashtra, industry-heavy Gujarat and IT hub Bangalore's home state Karnataka, although restrictions are less onerous than last year.

Uttar Pradesh state, home to some 240 million people, on Friday announced that all villages and cities would be under lockdown for one day on Sunday. In the capital, New Delhi, which has overtaken Mumbai as the worst-hit Indian city, restaurants, malls, gyms and spas were closed for the weekend.

Weddings though are permitted with guests limited to 50, while a maximum of 20 people can attend funerals. Movie theatres can open with one-third capacity. “Don't panic. All essential services will be available through the weekend,” the city of 25 million people's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said.

Similarly, the northern state of Uttarakhand has restricted gatherings to 200 people – but exempted the vast ongoing Hindu festival Kumbh Mela. The gathering in Haridwar has attracted as many as 25 million people since January, including some 4.6 million this week alone, with most people ignoring COVID-19 guidelines. One seer on Thursday died from the virus and 80 other holy men have tested positive, and experts fear that the millions of devotees will now take the virus back to their home towns and villages.

Election rallies are also going ahead in the eastern state of West Bengal, with Home Minister Amit Shah attending two roadshows and one public meeting on Friday alone. In 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.

Hospitals are running short of oxygen and coronavirus medicines, such as remdesivir, prompting desperate people to pay exorbitant rates on the black market.

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.

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