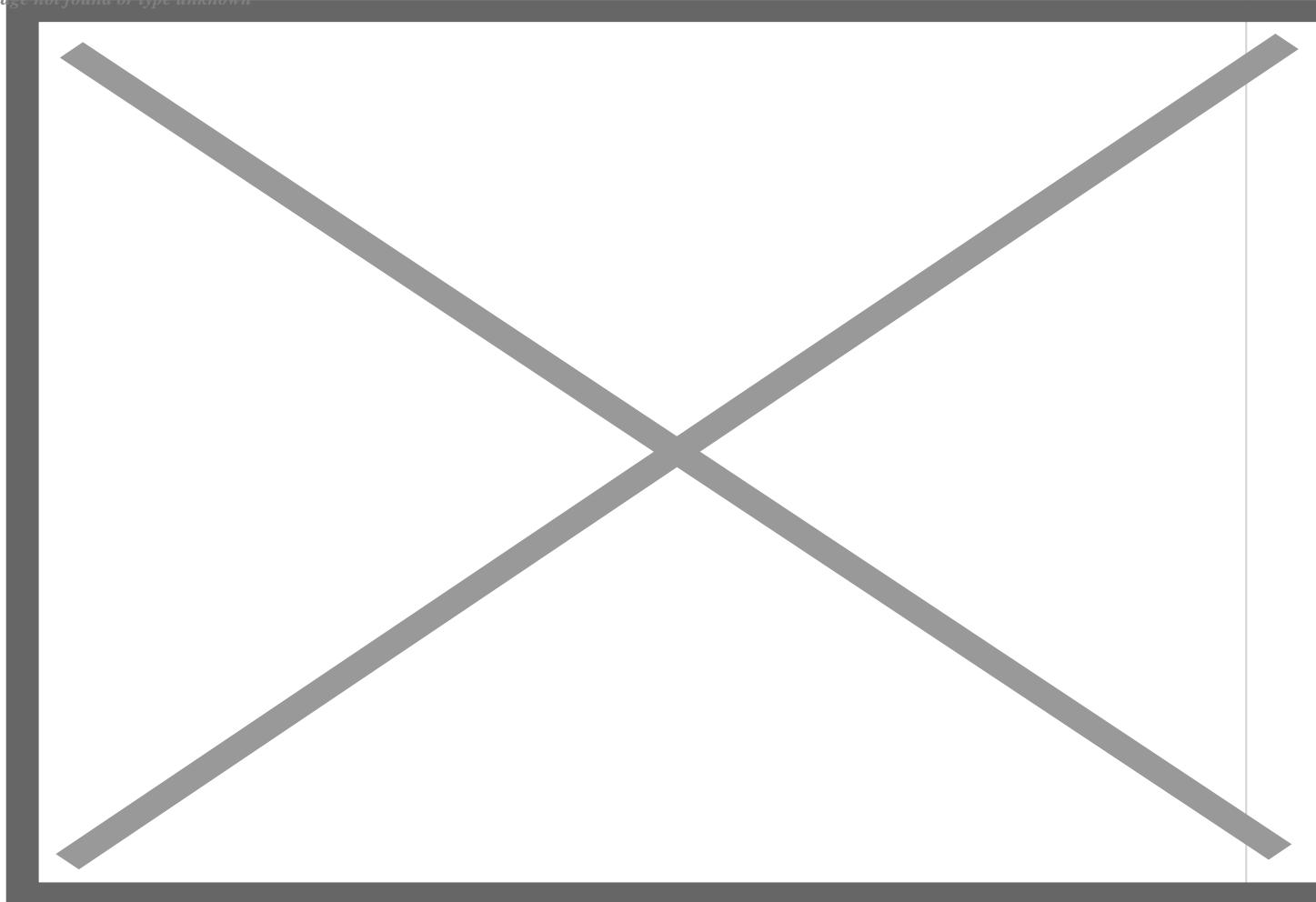


WHO says 'perfect storm' of conditions led to India COVID surge

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A relative of a patient who died of COVID-19, mourns outside a government COVID-19 hospital in Ahmedabad [Ajit Solanki/AP Photo]

Geneva, April 28 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization (WHO) has said the wave of COVID-19 infections in India is the result of a "perfect storm" of mass gatherings, more contagious variants and low

vaccination rates.

India's new coronavirus cases remained above 300,000 for a sixth consecutive day on Tuesday, while its armed forces have pledged urgent medical aid to help battle the staggering spike in infections overwhelming its hospitals and crematoriums.

The WHO is providing critical equipment and supplies to India, including 4,000 oxygen concentrators, which only require an energy source, WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic said. India's death toll is now pushing towards 200,000, and hospitals that do not have enough oxygen supplies and beds are turning away coronavirus patients.

"Currently, part of the problem is that many people rush to the hospital (also because they do not have access to information/advice), even though home-based care monitoring at home can be managed very safely," Jasarevic said.

Fewer than 15 percent of people infected with COVID-19 need hospital care and even fewer will need oxygen, he added. Community-level centres should screen and triage patients and provide advice on safe home care, while information is also made available via hotlines or dashboards, he said.

"As is true in any country, WHO has said the combination of relaxing of personal protective measures, mass gatherings and more contagious variants while vaccine coverage is still low can create a perfect storm," he said.

The crisis has led several countries to ban flights from India including Canada, Belgium and the United Arab Emirates. Australia on Tuesday also suspended all direct passenger flights from India until May 15, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced.

A doctor in the Indian capital, New Delhi, said the situation in Indian hospitals is "totally devastating," with ventilators and ICU beds fully occupied. "There are no beds in the wards, our emergency room is full of patients, they have nowhere to go," Sumit Ray told Al Jazeera via Skype.

"Our young resident doctors, nurses, are totally traumatised. They're working really hard but they are devastated emotionally," he added.

The Indian government has called on its armed forces to help tackle the situation, described by many as the worst healthcare crisis in modern Indian history. Chief of Defense Staff General Bipin Rawat said late on Monday that oxygen would be released from armed forces reserves and retired medical personnel would join health facilities that are struggling under the sheer number of cases.

Briefing Prime Minister Narendra Modi about the army's preparations to deal with the crisis, Rawat said any oxygen cylinders the military had would be diverted to hospitals in need of the life-saving gas.

Many patients have been forced to turn to the black market where the prices of life-saving medicines and oxygen cylinders have skyrocketed.

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