New COVID cases in India jump nearly four times since start of year

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A healthcare worker collects COVID-19 test swab sample from a woman at a railway station in New Delhi [Adnan Abidi/Reuters]

New Delhi, January 7 (RHC)-- India's new COVID-19 cases have soared by 90,928 in the past 24 hours, up nearly four-fold since the start of the year, mostly from cities where health officials say the Omicron variant has overtaken Delta.

Cities such as the capital New Delhi, Mumbai in the west and Kolkata in the east are experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases, although without a corresponding rise in hospitalisations. But fears are growing about a spread to rural areas in coming days in the country now facing a third wave of the pandemic.

Local media reports on Thursday said nearly 500 Omicron infections were found in the past 24 hours, raising the total number of new variant cases in the country to 2,630. On Wednesday, the federal health ministry confirmed the country's first death linked to the variant, in an elderly man in Rajasthan state who was suffering from diabetes. Meanwhile, daily deaths on Thursday rose by 325, taking the total to 482,876, as total infections hit 35.11 million.

Government officials privately say daily cases in the third wave could surpass the record of more than 414,000 reached last May. They also warn that many people are taking the Omicron variant lightly and are not wearing masks as most cases have been mild.

Top health official Vinod Kumar Paul declined to estimate a new peak but said even mild cases could put pressure on the country's health systems.

"There is no room for complacency," he told a weekly media briefing, adding Omicron was driving surges in the cities. "Don't take it for granted. We don't know, the system can get overwhelmed, your household can get overwhelmed."

Nevertheless, the government reduced the number of home quarantine days for mild and asymptomatic patients to a week, from 10 or 14 days previously.

Another official at the briefing said the elderly man from Rajasthan, whom he did not identify by name, died of a heart attack a few days ago. Genetic tests later showed he had been infected by the Omicron variant.

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