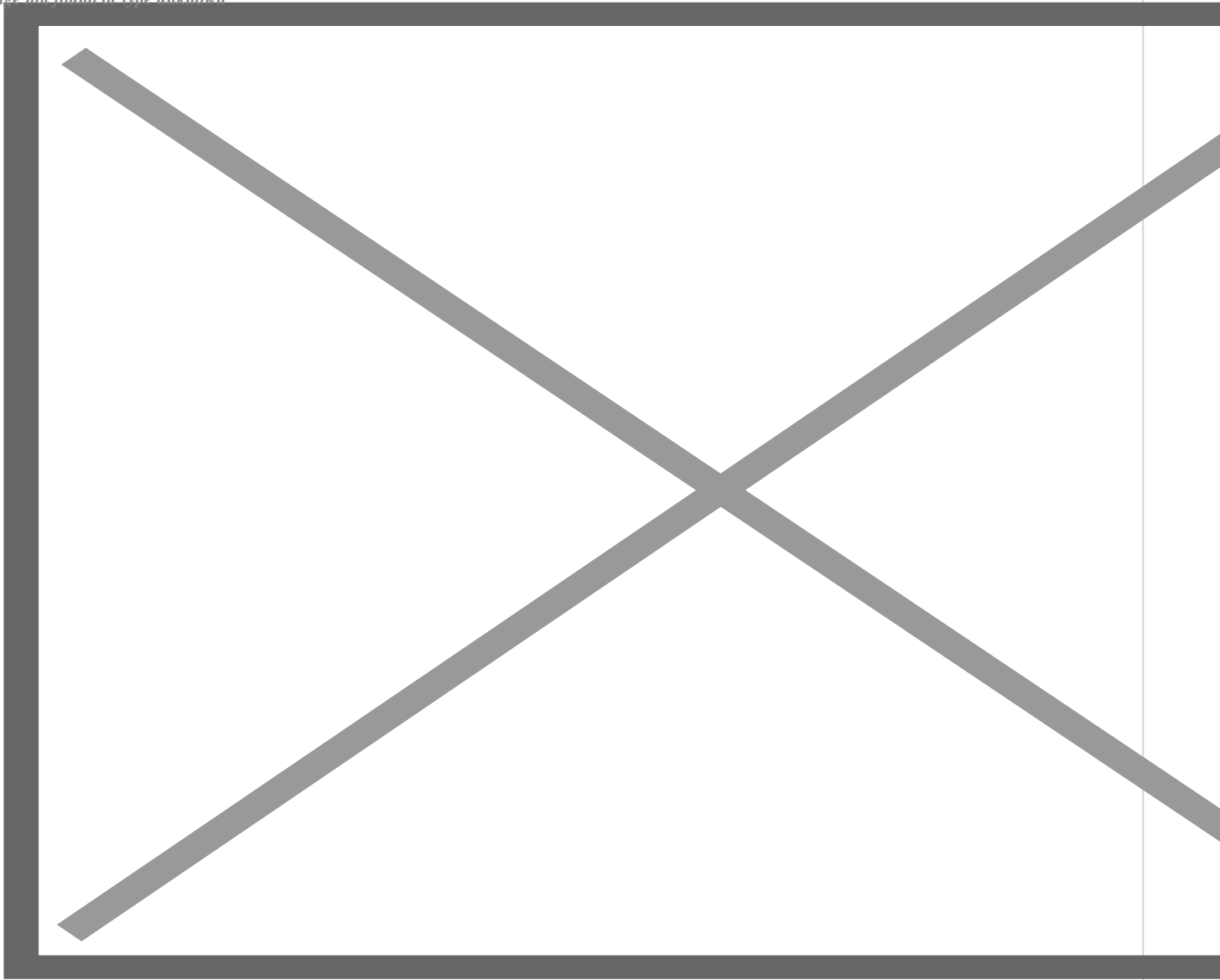


India records over 200,000 new COVID cases for the first time

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A paramedic adjusts an oxygen mask on a patient inside an ambulance waiting in a queue to enter a COVID-19 hospital in Ahmedabad. (Photo: Amit Dave/Reuters)

New Delhi, April 15 (RHC)-- India has reported a record 200,739 COVID-19 cases over the last 24 hours, according to the health ministry, as Delhi government announces weekend lockdowns in the capital and hospitals treating patients report severe shortages of beds and oxygen supplies.

Deaths stood at 1,038, taking the total to 173,123, the data showed on Thursday. The country's total caseload reached 14.1 million, just behind the United States that leads the global tally with 31.4 million cases.

Thursday's surge was the seventh record daily increase in the last eight days and comes as India battles a massive second wave of infections that has its epicentre in the economically significant state of Maharashtra, home to Mumbai. The western state accounts for about a quarter of the country's total cases.

Delhi state will go into weekend lockdowns to contain a steep increase in COVID-19 infections, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said. Shopping malls, gyms, dine-out service at restaurants and some weekly markets will be shut during the weekend and only essential services would remain operational, Kejriwal said.

Due to the surge in cases, there has been huge stress on the country's fragile health infrastructure, with many areas reporting shortages of intensive care (ICU) beds and oxygen cylinders in several states.

Hospitals and doctors in Maharashtra as well other regions including Gujarat and Delhi in the north reported chaotic scenes as healthcare facilities were overwhelmed with a surge in admissions of COVID-19 patients. "The situation is horrible. We are a 900-bed hospital, but there are about 60 patients waiting and we don't have space for them," said Avinash Gawande, an official at the Government Medical College and Hospital in Nagpur, a commercial hub in Maharashtra.

In Gujarat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, there was a long line of ambulances where patients were being treated, as there was no space in the hospital which said they were short of oxygen cylinders. "If such conditions persist, the death toll will rise," the head of a medical body in Ahmedabad wrote in a letter to the Gujarat state chief minister.

India's government said the country was producing oxygen at its full capacity everyday for the last two days and it had boosted output. "Along with the ramped up production of the oxygen manufacturing units and the surplus stocks available, the present availability of oxygen is sufficient," the health ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

According to the statistics, Delhi recorded 17,282 cases over the past 24 hours – the highest single-day figure so far – as the city was running short of ICU beds for COVID-19 patients, with only about 171 with ventilators available late on Wednesday.

"This virus is more infectious and virulent... We have 35-year olds with pneumonia in intensive care, which was not happening last year," said Dhiren Gupta, a paediatrician at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in New Delhi. "The situation is chaotic."

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