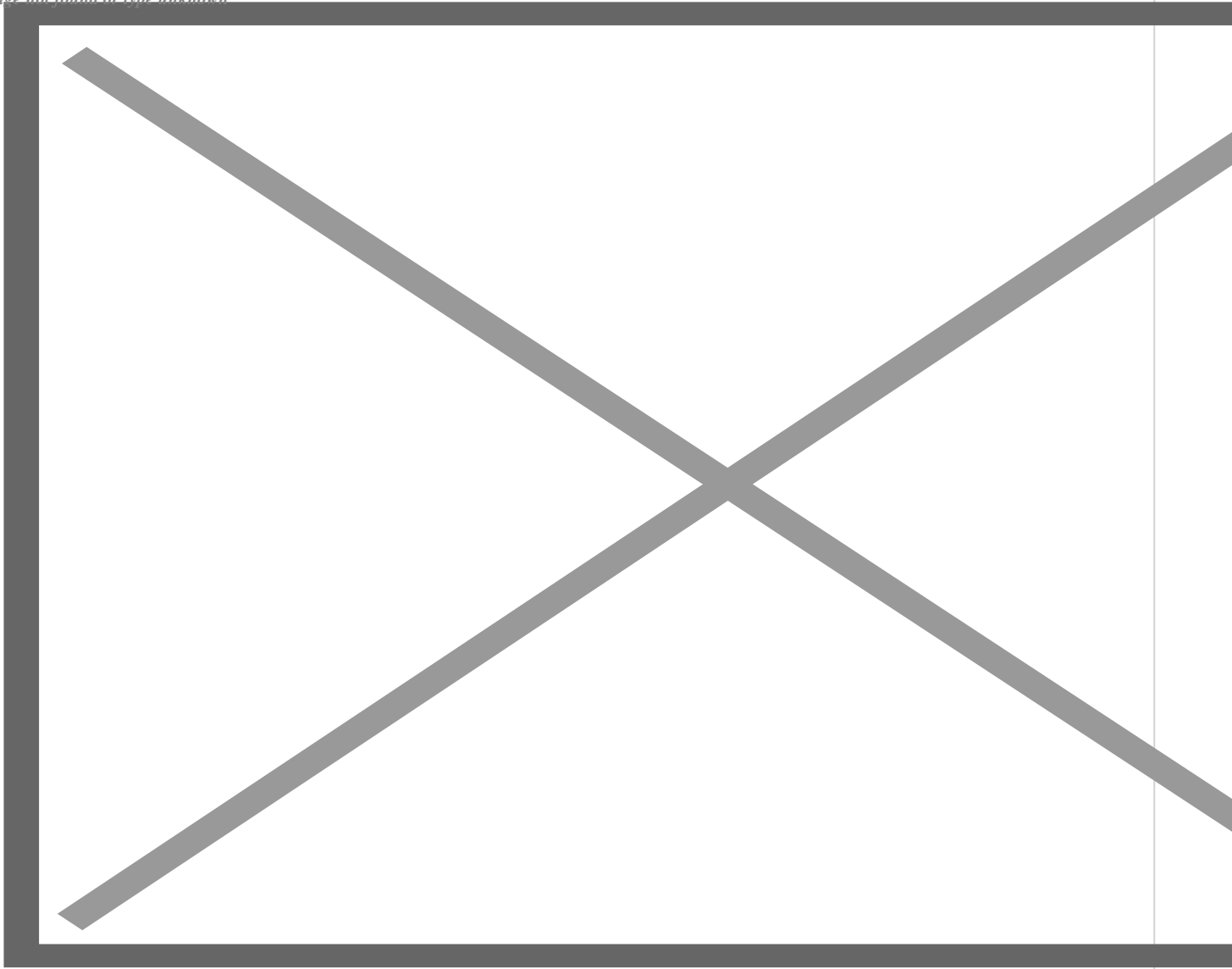


Britain's Johnson cancels India trip amid record COVID spike

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Johnson outside London's Downing Street last week amid the coronavirus pandemic [Photo: John Sibley/Reuters]

London, April 19 (RHC)-- British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has cancelled his delayed trip to India next week, his first major foreign visit since taking power in 2019, as coronavirus cases continue to surge in the South Asian nation.

Johnson's visit, which was being held as part of a post-Brexit trade drive, was originally due to be four days long, with the British leader flying out on April 25 and officially starting his visit the next day. However, a spokesperson for Johnson last week said the "main body" of the prime minister's trip programme had been cut down, with a large bulk of meetings taking place solely on April 26.

On Monday, it was confirmed the trip had been cancelled, the second time this year after a previously scheduled trip in January was postponed. "In the light of the current coronavirus situation, Prime Minister Boris Johnson will not be able to travel to India next week," said a joint statement from the British and Indian governments on Monday.

"Instead, Prime Ministers Modi and Johnson will speak later this month to agree and launch their ambitious plans for the future partnership between the UK and India. They will remain in regular contact beyond this, and look forward to meeting in person later this year."

The visit had initially been scheduled for January and heralded as an opportunity for Britain to refocus its international trade policy in the wake of Brexit as it pursues a so-called "global Britain" strategy. But spiking coronavirus cases, hospitalisations and deaths in Britain earlier this year led to its delay.

Now, surging infections in India – where officials have recorded five consecutive days of more than 200,000 cases – have led to its entire cancellation. A week-long lockdown was imposed in New Delhi from Monday night to try to contain a spike in cases that have overstretched city hospitals.

The visit was aimed at strengthening trade ties, investment and cooperation in various areas, including defence, security, health and climate change. It followed an invitation from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who took part in a climate summit hosted by London earlier this year.

Johnson has highlighted the two countries' burgeoning trade and investment relationship, worth an estimated 24 billion pounds (\$32 billion) annually.

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