

Top scientist warns third COVID wave in India ‘inevitable’

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A woman cries during the cremation of her husband, who died from COVID-19, at a crematorium in New Delhi [Adnan Abidi/Reuters]

New Delhi, May 6 (RHC)-- A top scientific adviser to the Indian government has warned the country would inevitably face further waves of the coronavirus pandemic, as almost 4,000 people die in the space of a day.

India's principal scientific adviser K Vijay Raghavan on Wednesday warned that even after infection rates subside, the country should be ready for a third wave. "Phase 3 is inevitable, given the high levels of

circulating virus,” he told a news briefing. “But it is not clear on what timescale this Phase 3 will occur... We should prepare for new waves.”

India on Thursday reported a record 412,262 new COVID-19 cases and 3,980 deaths, with infections in the world’s second-most populous nation surging past 21 million and a total death toll of 230,168, according to the health ministry’s data.

But medical experts say the actual figures could be five to 10 times the official tallies. The country has added 10 million cases in just over four months, after taking more than 10 months to reach its first 10 million.

The surge in infections has coincided with a dramatic drop in vaccinations because of supply and delivery problems, despite India being a major vaccine producer. At least three states, including Maharashtra, home to the commercial capital of Mumbai, have reported a scarcity of vaccines, shutting down some inoculation centres.

Lengthy queues formed outside two centres in the western city that still have vaccine supplies, and some of those waiting pleaded for police to open their gates earlier.

The government said production capacity for the antiviral drug Remdesivir, used to treat COVID-19 patients, has trebled to 10.3 million vials per month, up from 3.8 million vials a month ago. But daily testing has fallen sharply to 1.5 million, state-run Indian Council of Medical Research said, off a peak of 1.95 million on Saturday.

Meanwhile, the outbreak continues to spread. With hospitals scrambling for beds and oxygen in response to a deadly second surge in infections, the World Health Organization (WHO) said in a weekly report that India accounted for nearly half the coronavirus cases reported worldwide last week and a quarter of the deaths.

Many people have died in ambulances and car parks waiting for a bed or oxygen, while morgues and crematoriums struggle to deal with a seemingly unstoppable flow of bodies. Overnight, 11 people died in a hospital near the southern city of Chennai after pressure dropped in oxygen lines, the Times of India reported on Thursday, the latest in a string of similar incidents.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government has been widely criticised for not acting sooner to suppress the second wave, after religious festivals and political rallies drew tens of thousands of people in recent weeks and became “super spreader” events.

The opposition has urged a nationwide lockdown, but the government is reluctant to impose one for fear of the economic fallout, although several states have adopted social curbs. In the latest move the eastern state of West Bengal, where voters dealt Modi’s party a defeat in an election last week, suspended local train services and limited working hours for banks and jewellery shops among its steps to limit infections.

In the remote state of Mizoram bordering Myanmar, beds in its biggest coronavirus hospital are in such short supply that all victims of other diseases have been asked to leave, said government official Dr Z R Thiamsanga. Just three of a total 14 ventilators were still available.

“In my opinion, a complete lockdown is required to control the situation,” he told Reuters news agency from the state capital, Aizawl. The central bank asked banks on Wednesday to allow more time for some borrowers to repay loans, as the crisis threatens a nascent economic revival.

With the government facing criticism as patients die outside hospitals, consignments of oxygen and equipment have been arriving from the United States, France, Britain, Russia and other countries in recent days. Two “oxygen express” trains carrying liquid oxygen arrived in the capital, New Delhi, on

Wednesday, railways minister Piyush Goyal said on Twitter. More than 25 trains have distributed oxygen supplies nationwide.

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