

Sharp spike of coronavirus deaths in India

By Saman Gunadasa
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India recorded its deadliest single day Tuesday since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 2,006 new deaths. This staggering increase, which represented a 20 percent increase in total deaths within just 24 hours, took India's total fatalities to more than 12,000.

The following day, new infections rose by a record 13,103. Underscoring that the pandemic is spreading exponentially, Thursday brought yet another record of new infections, with 13,827 cases.

India is now the country with the fourth highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world. With over 381,000 officially recorded infections, cases have doubled since June 1, when approximately 190,000 were reported. Given that India has one of the lowest test rates in the world, with 4,400 tests performed for every million inhabitants, infection rates are certainly much higher. Many impoverished residents of the country's large slums and rural areas, where health care is virtually nonexistent, find it almost impossible to get tested.

India's two largest cities, Delhi and Mumbai, have been hit hardest by the pandemic. On Tuesday alone, they accounted for 437 and 862 new deaths respectively.

Despite these horrific death tolls, Narendra Modi, India's ultra-right prime minister, has categorically ruled out imposing another lockdown to curb the spread of the disease. In a video conference with 14 chief ministers Wednesday, Modi declared, "We need to fight against rumours of lockdown since the country is now in the phase of unlocking. We need to think about Phase II of Unlock and how to minimise harm to our people." Phase I of Unlock began June 7, but even before then most production facilities and many businesses had already been allowed to reopen.

Modi's callous remarks confirm that his government is committed to a policy of "herd immunity" that will claim hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of deaths. One of the government's top epidemiological advisers has openly admitted that the "herd immunity" strategy could lead to 2 million deaths.

In Delhi alone, cases are expected to explode to 550,000

by the end of July, which would represent a more than ten-fold increase from current levels.

The situation in Delhi's hospitals is already catastrophic. A case brought by the United Nurses Association before the Supreme Court Wednesday reported that there are no adequate isolation facilities for COVID-19 patients, no personal protective equipment for staff, and a lack of appropriate accommodations for nurses, which is causing the virus to run rampant among medical workers. The family of a 68-year-old man reported earlier this month that he died after being refused treatment by five hospitals.

The congestion of hospitals in Mumbai is so bad that the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai has requested laboratories not to release COVID-19 positive reports to patients to prevent them from immediately looking for a hospital bed. Instead, laboratories have been ordered to provide the positive reports to the Corporation, violating the patients' privacy, so patients can be notified to quarantine at home.

Gurugram (Gurgaon), which is about 30 kilometres southwest of Delhi and home to hundreds of factories and local offices of more than 250 Fortune 500 companies, has seen a surge of coronavirus cases over recent days. The industrial area, which is one of the most polluted in the world, reopened many factories in mid-May and has seen cases jump to 3,682 as a result. Forty-two people have lost their lives thus far.

Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority head V.S. Kundu said that teams are surveying convention centers and banquet halls in the city to determine how many patients they can hold. The authorities expect to have 150,000 cases in the city by the end of July. It is clear that most of these infections will be impoverished workers forced to labour in large factories and industrial facilities with virtually no protection. Under these conditions, the convention centres and banquet halls will not become health care facilities, but rather death camps.

Modi's speech to the chief ministers sought to cover up the disastrous conditions produced by the uncontrolled

spread of the virus while reassuring them that nothing would be done to hamper the operations of big business.

Brushing aside India's rapid rise to fourth place in coronavirus cases worldwide, Modi began by claiming that the coronavirus had not been able to cause as much damage in India as it had in other parts of the world.

Even as India's death toll reached three times that of China's, Modi asserted that India is among the "nations with least deaths due to COVID," that deaths were contained to a "minimum" and that, with adequate precautions, India could emerge from the battle against the disease with "minimal damage."

Covering up his belated, haphazard and brutal lockdown of the country on March 25 with less than four hours' warning, and without providing any means of support to hundreds of millions of workers who lost their incomes, he said, "India started preparing when COVID wasn't even being discussed in many nations."

Modi then moved on to paint a bright picture of the economy. Ignoring the unprecedented numbers of deaths and new infections being recorded as he spoke, Modi declared, "The more we limit COVID, the more the economy can function." He enthused, "almost all offices are open now. Private sector staff also are going to the office now."

The strategy of allowing the virus to rip through the population unchecked was reinforced by the contribution of Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, a member of the opposition Congress Party, who stated, "the authorities were not sealing the entire street or an area if cases were found in a house; they were sealing only a few houses." These were named as micro-containment zones and Modi said other states also could replicate this model, whose aim is to minimize the disruption to the operations of businesses.

The chief ministers who were allowed to speak all supported the line of the government.

The autocratic nature of the meeting held by Modi with the chief ministers was revealed when it was reported that Mamata Banerjee, Trinamool Congress leader and the chief minister of West Bengal, was barred from speaking at the meeting. She has recently mildly criticized the central government for "playing politics" with the issue of COVID-19 by trying to shift the blame onto the states. Her attempt to place all of the blame on the central government is no less disingenuous, since the West Bengal state government has also allowed the pandemic to run rampant.

Modi began his meeting on June 17 with two minutes'

silence for the soldiers who perished in the Galwan Valley in a border clash with Chinese troops Monday night. By contrast, there was no tribute to the hundreds of thousands of medical workers risking their lives amid the pandemic. According to official statistics released in early May, when only a fraction of the current infections had been reported, coronavirus has infected around 548 doctors, nurses and paramedics in India.

In his remarks, Modi was forced to acknowledge that medical workers faced a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) earlier in the pandemic. "Just 3 months back, there was a shortage of PPE kits and diagnostic kits across the world. In India too, we had a very limited stock because we were completely dependent on imports," he said.

But he went on to boast, "India has fought back from facing a supply shortage of medical kits to become self-sufficient."

This is a flat-out lie, as underscored by the continued rationing of COVID-19 tests. On the same day Modi spoke, the Supreme Court condemned the Delhi state government for "shooting messengers" after it suspended an employee for making a video of the horrific conditions at a government-run hospital and filed police reports against medical staff who have protested working conditions, including the lack of PPE. In an earlier hearing, the Court described the way patients are treated in Delhi as "worse than animals."

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