Surge in infections gives India third highest COVID-19 cases worldwide

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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While Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is focused on issuing bellicose statements targeting China in the wake of last month's bloody border clash, the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading across India like wildfire. Each day tens of thousands of new people are being infected by the coronavirus and hundreds are dying.

The uncontrollable surge in COVID-19 cases is a direct result of the Modi government's adoption of the ruinous "herd immunity" policy, which prioritizes the profit interests of a tiny layer of Indian capitalists over the lives of working people and their families. A recent study conducted by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology forecast that if a vaccine remains elusive, India could be recording 287,000 new COVID-19 cases per day by February 2021.

All signs indicate that India is heading toward such a disastrous situation. Its densely populated urban centres, where tens of millions of impoverished workers are crammed into small dwellings without proper sanitation, are highly conducive to the spread of the virus. And the country's public health care system is in a shambles due to decades of neglect, epitomized by the fact that India's governments have long devoted just 1.5 percent of GDP or less to health care.

On Sunday, India surpassed Russia to become the country with the third-highest number of COVID-19 cases, behind only the US and Brazil. As of Wednesday, according to Ministry of Health and Family Welfare figures, total COVID-19 cases in India rose to 742,417. There were 20,642 cases reported in the previous 24 hours, the fifth consecutive day that COVID-19 cases increased by more than 20,000.

While it took India some 109 days to record its first 100,000 cases, infections increased seven-fold over the next 49 days. Of the 700,000 plus cases, more than 264,000 are considered active. On June 8 or just one month ago, the total number of cases India had recorded since the pandemic began stood at less than 257,000.

According to official figures, 20,642 people have died from COVID-19 in India. The boasts from Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government that India's death rate is "lower" than other countries are the height of cynicism. India is notorious for undercounting deaths from malnutrition and disease even in normal times.

In recent weeks, several media reports have highlighted contradictory death figures issued by central and state governments. IndiaSpend, which talked to members of death audit committees in the four states with the most COVID-19 cases—Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh—reported on July 1, "No one agreed to share details of how many cases had come before them and how many they had certified as COVID-19 deaths." This strongly suggests that the actual number of deaths is much higher than the official figures report.

Moreover, with many hospitals overwhelmed by the flood of COVID-19 patients, especially in Delhi and Mumbai, India's two most populous cities, there are numerous reports of people with other grave health problems being unable to access treatment.

Maharashtra, home to India's financial hub Mumbai, has continuously been the worst-hit state. It now has 217,121 confirmed cases, more than two and a half times the total number of cases reported by China, where the pandemic began and the coronavirus was first identified.

The total death toll in the state was 9,250 as of Wednesday. Mumbai long ago started putting COVID-19 patients on hospital bed waiting lists due to the lack of beds and personnel.

Despite this dire situation, Maharashtra's Shiv Sena-led, Congress Party-backed state government allowed hotels and other entities that provide accommodation services and are outside "hot-spot" containment zones to resume operation at 33 percent of capacity as of yesterday.

On Tuesday, COVID-19 cases in Delhi, India's National Capital Territory (NCT), exceeded the 100,000 mark. As of Wednesday, the number of infections and deaths stood at 102,831 and 3,165 respectively. The NCT had conducted just 620,368 tests on its more than 20 million residents by last Monday.

Responding to sharp criticism and anger over its handling of the pandemic, the Delhi state government launched a blitz 10-day survey of 4 million households to identify infection hotspots. However, due to a lack of staff, which is related to the government's refusal to provide proper protective equipment for the workers conducting the survey, and confusion among officials regarding the exact protocol on how to deal with

infected COVID-19 persons, the survey has been a failure.

Many of India's Southern states have been forced by a dramatic spike in cases to re-impose lockdown restrictions. The Kerala government announced the extension of the enforcement of the state's COVID-19 "safety guidelines" by a year, till July 2021. It has mandated the wearing of masks or face coverings in public and social distancing, and imposed a 10,000-rupee fine for anyone who violates the rules. The number of infections in Kerala has risen by almost nine times since May 3, when lockdown restrictions were first eased in the state.

Authorities in Tamil Nadu were forced to return to stricter lockdown measures in Chenai in the middle of last month, but these have been now abandoned. Most factories, offices, and industrial workplaces have been given the go-ahead to operate at 100 percent capacity, with stipulations that a minority of office workers should work from home. The state has witnessed over 4,000 cases a day for the last seven days, and is the second-worst impacted state with 118,594 cases and 1,636 deaths. Five southern states—Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana—now collectively share more than 25 percent of India's COVID-19 cases, a significant increase from their 17.5 percent share at the beginning of June. The share of total cases occurring within these five states has continued to rise even as the nationwide total has exploded.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly shown, Modi's ill-prepared 10-week lockdown was a health and social disaster. The Modi government failed to use the time to implement mass testing and a comprehensive system of contact tracing, and to strengthen the chronically underfunded health care system. The government also refused to provide basic necessities for the tens of millions of people who lost their jobs and/or were deprived of all income during the lockdown. While the lockdown formally lasted until the end of May, the government began relaxing some restrictions as early as late April to allow manufacturing and other industrial corporations to once again start raking in profits.

Approximately 10 million migrant workers who were forced into overcrowded camps under unhygienic conditions during the lockdown were later returned to their villages without being tested for COVID-19. This resulted in a sharp rise in infections in rural areas, where hospitals and other health care facilities are virtually non-existent.

Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal, with a population of around 14.5 million, recorded 2,600 new cases and over 100 deaths in the last two weeks. ThePrint website reported on July 6, "The city has been struggling to contain its mortality rate (at 6 percent) even as it is running out of hospital beds amid allegations that the administration has been faltering on contact tracing."

The Modi government's premature reopening of the economy has led to large numbers of infections among workers across a range of sectors. According to *India Today* on July 7,

as many as 872 employees of the Central Railway and Western Railway, their family members and retired personnel have so far tested positive for coronavirus, and 86 of them have died. In late June, a statement issued by motorcycle manufacturer Bajaj Auto Limited reported that two Bajaj workers who had tested positive for COVID-19 at its Waluij, Maharashtra plant have died. According to a Reuters report some 250 workers at the plant have contracted the virus.

Despite the disastrous situation unfolding across India, Modi continues to gloat that India is "in a better position compared to many countries of the world." In his latest address to the nation announcing the further easing of restrictions, referred to as "Unlock-Two," Modi on June 30 said that the "timely imposition of lockdown … saved lakhs [hundreds of thousands] of lives."

Modi did not utter a word about the fact that the pandemic is now spreading so rapidly above all due to the abandonment of lockdown measures. Instead, he sought to blame the people themselves for "increasing negligence in personal and social behaviour" which is "a cause of worry."

Although Modi avoided saying as much, the Indian ruling elite is well aware that the pandemic is spreading out of control and taking a terrible toll on tens of millions of impoverished workers and toilers. Indirectly accepting the disastrous consequences of his policies, Modi said his government has been giving "free ration" to 800 million people for three months and it will continue till November. This "free ration" is nothing but famine-type relief. The *Wire* revealed on June 4 that around 144.5 million people who are eligible to be provided with grain rations (wheat or rice) under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package did not get their entitlement for the month of May. The figures were based on data released by the central government on June 3.

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