3rd death in India

Covid-19 cases in the country rise to 126; West Bengal reports first case

AGENCIES

A 64-year-old patient became the third victim of novel coronavirus at Mumbai's Kasturba hospital in India yesterday. Meanwhile, the number of novel coronavirus cases in the country rose to 126 after fresh cases were reported from several states.

The confirmed cases include 22 foreign nationals and two persons who died in Delhi and Karnataka. According to the ministry's data, 13 people have been discharged so far, including the three Kerala patients.

Yesterday, West Bengal reported its first Covid-19 case, an 18-year-old youth who returned to Kolkata from England recently.

A state health ministry official confirmed this last night, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

In a bid to discourage gathering of large crowds in view of the coronavirus, some zonal railways have hiked the platform ticket charges from Rs 10 to Rs 50, officials said yesterday.

This has been done by six divisions of the Western railway zone -- Mumbai, Vadodra, Ahmedabad, Ratlam, Rajkot, Bhavnagar -- that covers around 250 railway stations, reports TNN.

In Southern railway zone, price of platform ticket only in Chennai has been raised, officials said, adding in Central zone, comprising of five divisions -- Mumbai (CST), Bhusawal, Nagpur, Solapur, Pune -- prices have been raised across all stations.

In an unprecedented move, the state government in Maharashtra - where maximum coronavirus cases have been reported in India - on Monday said it would "stamp" all those who have been sent to home quarantine amid scare over the pandemic, reports NDTV.
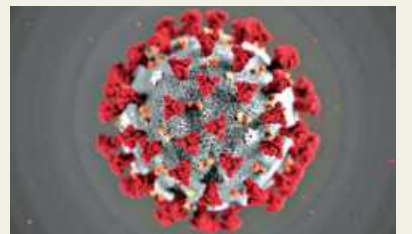
Left hand of those under home quarantine will be stamped to identify them easily, said Health Minister Rajesh Tope.

People stand in a queue to enter a Cora supermarket before a lockdown imposed to slow the rate of the coronavirus disease at midday in Cambrai, France yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Iran reports 135 new deaths, raising total to 988

Iran yesterday announced another 135 deaths from the novel coronavirus, bringing the overall toll to 988 in one of the world's worst-hit countries. "Reports by more than 56 laboratories indicated that we have had 1,178 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection in the past 24 hours," health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said in a televised news conference. "This brings the total number of confirmed cases to 16,169 as of today noon," he added. Jahanpour also said 5,389 people who were infected had been discharged from hospitals "with general good health". Tehran province recorded the highest number of new infections with 273 fresh cases.

Two Covid-19 cases at World Health HQ

Two cases of COVID-19 have been registered at the World Health Organization headquarters, a spokesman said yesterday. The WHO, based in the Swiss city of Geneva, is coordinating the international response to the new coronavirus pandemic, which has infected more than 180,000 people and killed more than 7,000 across 145 countries. "We do have two staff confirmed with symptoms of COVID-19," spokesman Christian Lindmeier told reporters at a virtual press conference. "This was last week, Friday and Thursday. They both have gone home. They have self-isolated. They showed symptoms. "Colleagues in the office have been checked and we're waiting for further information on those. Everything so far seems OK with them. He said all but essential staff were working remotely.

Lanka bans all incoming flights for two weeks

Sri Lanka said yesterday said it will ban all incoming flights for two weeks from 1830 GMT today to combat the spread of the coronavirus. Flights already in the air will be allowed to land and passengers to disembark, said Mohan Samaranayake, a spokesman for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Sri Lanka reported a near-doubling of cases to 18 from 10. Most of the government offices, private offices and business in the country will remain closed till Thursday due to increase in cases. Over two hundred people have been kept under observation, most of them are Sri Lankans retuning from Italy and other foreign countries. Government ordered each people returning from Europe, Iran or South Korea during this month to register at the nearest police station for the benefit of themselves and the community.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

UK begins tougher action

Govt calls for an end to 'non-essential' social contact, foreign travel

AFP, London

Britain yesterday ramped up its response to the escalating coronavirus outbreak after the government imposed unprecedented peacetime measures prompted by scientific advice that infections and deaths would spiral without drastic action.

More firms sent staff to work from home and public transport emptied after the government called for an end to "non-essential" social contact and foreign travel as confirmed COVID-19 cases climbed to more than 1,500 and deaths rose to 55.

More stringent restrictions are expected in the coming days, including forcing people with serious health conditions to stay at home for three months to ease pressure on health services.

The government was set to set to detail emergency laws in parliament late yesterday, where members of the public have now been banned from attending debates, meeting lawmakers or visiting.

PM Johnson says: avoid clubs, pubs, theatres

More firms sent staff to work from home

Scientists warn hundreds of thousands of people could die in Britain, US

Prime Minister Boris Johnson had faced criticism for his approach to the pandemic, which involved holding off on imposing the strict measures seen in other countries to combat the spread of COVID-19.

But he stepped up the response after scientists warned hundreds of thousands of people could die in Britain and the United States if there was only a focus on delaying and slowing infections.

People should avoid pubs, clubs, restaurants, cinemas and theatres, Johnson said.

The paper, compiled by 30 members of Imperial College London's COVID-19 response team, concluded suppression was "the preferred policy option".

Johnson urged all to stay away from pubs, clubs, restaurants and theatres.

Johnson's announcement sparked concern about the impact on business, especially in the hospitality industry, amid fears of an extensive economic fall-out from the outbreak.

China reports just one new domestic case

More regions impose quarantine as 20 more cases imported from abroad

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday reported just one new domestic coronavirus infection but found 20 more cases imported from abroad, with more regions imposing quarantines on foreign arrivals in a bid to stem the disease being brought in from overseas.

The single case in Wuhan will boost China's view that it has "basically curbed" the spread of a disease that is believed to have emerged in a live animal market in the central city in December.

Wuhan and its 11 million people were placed under strict quarantine on January 23, with the rest of Hubei province going under lockdown in the following days.

Authorities tightened restrictions in the city even further on February 11, confining people to their homes as health workers faced a daily deluge of well over 1,000 cases -- a move officials say was critical in containing the virus.

Other cities across the country enacted further measures to compel most people to stay indoors, and no new domestic infections have been detected outside Hubei for many days in a row.

But the country is now concerned about an influx of cases from abroad, with an average of 20,000 people flying into China every day.

People who live alone, minors, the elderly, pregnant women and people with underlying conditions are allowed to confine themselves at home.

India closes Taj Mahal

India closed the iconic Taj Mahal to visitors from yesterday as part of measures to try and combat the coronavirus pandemic, the tourism ministry said on Monday. "All ticketed monuments and all other museums have been directed to be closed until March 31,"Tourism Minister Prahlad Patel tweeted late Monday. India has also suspended all incoming tourists, and will bar passengers of flights from the European Union, the European Free Trade Association, Turkey and the United Kingdom. The closure of the Taj came as the central bank, after an emergency meeting, said Monday it would boost cash injections into financial markets by one trillion rupees ($13.5 billion) to address the economic impact of the pandemic.

CAA legal: Indian govt to Supreme Court

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is "perfectly legal and constitutional", the government yesterday told the Supreme Court, asserting that the citizenship law was a matter concerning the sovereign power of parliament and "could not be questioned" before the court. "Only parliament has got sovereign powers to legislate on citizenship," said the government in a preliminary affidavit to the Supreme Court. "Under Article 246 of the Constitution, the parliament has got the exclusive power to make laws with respect to any matters listed in the list One in 7th schedule, in that, item 17 is to do with citizenship and naturalisation of aliens," the Centre's affidavit argued, defending the controversial law at the heart of nationwide protests.

Biden-Sanders vote proceeds in 3 states despite virus fears

Millions of anxious Americans troop to polling stations in three states yesterday, but not Ohio, as the coronavirus pandemic roils the nation's Democratic primaries featuring frontrunner Joe Biden and his rival Bernie Sanders. Campaigning has shifted from rallies to online events, candidate debates are audience-free, and multiple states have postponed their primaries as the virus, which has killed more than 80 people nationwide, prompts unprecedented alterations to the political landscape in an election year. Ohio became the latest and largest state to upend the voting schedule when officials ordered polling stations closed.

SOURCE: AFP, NDTV

People gather to collect free facemasks distributed by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) workers amid concerns over the spread of COVID-19 novel coronavirus, outside a temple in New Delhi yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Australian researchers map immune response to virus

REUTERS, Sydney

Australian researchers said yesterday they have mapped the immune responses from one of country's first coronavirus patients, finding the health minister said were an important step in developing a vaccine and treatment.

The coronavirus has infected more than 168,000 people worldwide and killed at least 6,610, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

While the bulk of those infected experience only mild symptoms, it is severe or critical in 20% of patients. The virus mortality rate is about 3.4%, the WHO has estimated.

As scientists scramble to develop a vaccine, researchers at Australia's Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity said they had taken an important step in understanding the virus.

By examining the blood results from an unidentified woman in her 40s, they discovered that people's immune systems respond to coronavirus in the same way it typically fights flu.

The findings help scientists understand why some patients recover while others develop more serious respiratory problems, the researchers said.

Findings help scientists understand why some recover while others develop more problems

"People can use our methods to understand the immune responses in larger COVID-19 cohorts, and also understand what's lacking in those who have fatal outcomes," said Katherine Kedzierska, professor of microbiology and immunology at the University of Melbourne, which took part in the research. COVID-19 is the disease caused by the coronavirus.

As researchers monitored the Australian patient's immune response, they were able to accurately predict when she would recover.

Researchers did not name the patient, but said she was an Australian citizen who was evacuated out of Wuhan, the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in China.

Health Minister Greg Hunt described the development as "world leading" and a major development in research on the disease.

E Africa starts closures

Tanzania, Somalia, Liberia, Benin confirm their first cases

AFP, Dar Es Salaam

Tanzania and Somalia on Monday became the latest East Africa countries to confirm their first cases of coronavirus, as neighbouring countries shuttered borders and schools as fears of contagion rose.

As the global pandemic takes root in Africa, Chinese billionaire Jack Ma announced he was donating 20,000 testing kits, 100,000 masks and 1,000 protective suits to each of the continent's 54 countries.

"We take precautions and get prepared ahead of time, as Africa can benefit from the experience and lessons of other countries that were earlier hit hard by the virus," he said in a statement on Twitter.

In a little over a week, 21 new African countries have reported cases, bringing the total affected to 30.

In West Africa, Liberia and Benin also recorded their first cases Monday.

A 46-year-old Tanzanian woman tested positive for the illness after returning from Belgium on March 15, where she had been staying with a relative sick with coronavirus.

Health Minister Ummy Mwalimu said the woman, who was recovering in hospital in Arusha, was not detected by temperature scanners but reported herself for testing.

"All in all, this is an imported case, and the woman is improving and continues with treatment," she said.

Somalia, meanwhile, also confirmed its first case of coronavirus and announced a ban on international flights in and out of the country, starting from today.

The government had quarantined four Somalis as a precaution after they arrived from country's with coronavirus outbreaks, and one had subsequently tested positive.

"None of the quarantined individuals had shown symptoms so far, and look healthy, but the virus is present in the body of this individual," health minister Fowzia Abikar Nur said in a televised address.

Swiss hospitals could collapse if virus spreads

Warns top health official as 2,330 tested positive

REUTERS, Zurich

Swiss hospitals could collapse if the new coronavirus keeps spreading rapidly, a top health official warned yesterday, urging his compatriots to respect the government's emergency measures to curb the epidemic.

"The virus is among us, now we have do our utmost that it does not spread further. Too many are infected and if this goes on hospitals will collapse," Daniel Koch, head of infectious diseases at the federal health agency, told SRF radio.

Switzerland mobilised up to 8,000 members of the military on Monday and banned all public and private events after declaring the coronavirus outbreak an "exceptional" emergency that demanded more radical measures.

More than 2,330 people have tested positive for coronavirus so far in Switzerland, and at least 14 people have died.

Koch defended the government's policy to focus testing on people most at risk from the new virus and those who might need hospitalisation.

Bottlenecks in processing test results were an issue, he said. Authorities were already running more than 2,000 tests a day.

"We will do more testing in Switzerland as soon as we can but the virus doesn't wait for it to be tested. Hospitals are seeing a leap in sick people and that is an alarm signal."

Makers of ventilators needed to help people in respiratory distress breathe have said that even Switzerland may not have sufficient equipment, should hospitals become overloaded with a deluge of patients.

The government tried to reassure the public that food and medicine supplies would not run out.

"Provision of the entire population with foodstuffs, medicinal products and essential everyday items is assured; there are sufficient stocks," the government said in a statement.