

36 HOURS, 80 KM

Long walk home for Indian labourers amid coronavirus lockdown

The afternoon sun is blazing in Uttar Pradesh's capital Lucknow. The city police have enforced a strict lockdown and only essential services are allowed. The police made announcements all night after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi last evening ordered citizens to stay at home for 21 days, in a special televised address to the nation.

But extremely compelling and worrying circumstances have forced 20-year-old Awadhesh Kumar to abandon caution, risk police anger and be on the streets.

Awadhesh started walking from his factory in Unnao to his village in Barabanki, 80 km away, on Tuesday evening. He will reach only by early Thursday, only if he is not stopped by cops as he cuts through sealed state borders.

This nearly 36-hour journey will be almost non-stop, with few breaks. Keeping Awadhesh company are at least 20 other men, young and old, all workers at the same factory.

"I don't want to do this but I have no option," says Awadhesh, asked about Modi's appeal to migrant labourers to stay put instead of heading home, with the assurance that states will take care of their needs.

"But how could I have stayed? I work at a steel fabrication company in Unnao. I stay wherever they put us up. Last night the management asked me to vacate. They said we could not stay here. So what option do I have but head home. There is no transport. So some of us from the same village decided to walk it," Awadhesh tells NDTV.

The unprecedented shutdown to check the spread of coronavirus has left lakhs in the unorganized sector without any shelter, transport or means to earn. The government has promised that no one will go hungry, but these migrant workers have been left without



Stranded Labourers
Walk For 80 kms

even a place to stay, overnight.

Rajmal, in his 50s, is also in the group. "There is some food back at our village but my earnings are what keep my family going. I have heard of the UP government's Rs 1,000 monthly payout plan for people like me but I am not registered anywhere. No one has come to me. It looks bleak for people like us," says Rajmal.

The group trudges on, carrying a bag with clothes, water and some biscuits. Towels are wrapped around their heads as protection from the sun. There is no protection from the virus that has infected over 560 in India and left nine dead. Worldwide, coronavirus or COVID-19 has caused over 17,000 deaths.

The next three weeks could only get worse as these labourers continue on their long walk home.

India is likely to agree an economic stimulus package of more than 1.5 trillion rupees (\$19.6 billion) to fight a downturn in the country, two sources familiar with the matter told Reuters. The plan has not yet been finalised. The package, which could be announced by the end of the week, will be used to put money directly into the accounts of more than 100 million poor and to support businesses hit the hardest by the lockdown, the sources said.

SOURCE: NDTV ONLINE



A migrant worker holding her baby cries after she missed to receive free food outside Howrah railway station after India ordered a 21-day nationwide lockdown to limit the spreading of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Kolkata, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Whole of humanity at risk

Warns UN as pandemic puts one third of world's population in lockdown

AGENCIES

The coronavirus pandemic is threatening the entire human race, the United Nations warned yesterday as it launched a humanitarian response plan featuring a \$2 billion appeal for the world's poorest people.

"COVID-19 is threatening the whole of humanity -- and the whole of humanity must fight back. Global action and solidarity are crucial. Individual country responses are not going to be enough," Secretary General Antonio Guterres said in announcing the initiative.

The UN plan is designed to last from April to December -- suggesting the UN does not see the crisis ending any time soon.

The appeal came as more than 1.3 billion Indians went into lockdown yesterday, leaving a third of the planet now under orders to stay at home, as the United States vowed to spend \$2 trillion to counter the economic harm of the coronavirus.

Europe remains at the heart of the epidemic, with first Italy and now Spain's death toll overtaking that of China, while Britain's Prince Charles became the latest prominent figure to test positive for the COVID-19 disease.

Coronavirus cases are also spreading in the Middle East, where Iran's death toll topped 2,000 yesterday, and in Africa, where Mali joined

all seven of its neighbours in declaring its first cases -- two nationals who arrived home recently from France.

Government policies and the capacity for virus testing vary widely around the world, so the true extent of the pandemic is difficult to estimate, but more than 427,940 cases have been declared in 181 countries and territories since the epidemic first emerged in China in December.

What is in less doubt is the number of deaths, with at least 19,246 deaths attributed to the new

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Indians race for supplies as lockdown bites

Prince Charles tests positive

China reports no new domestic cases

US agrees on \$2 trillion rescue plan

Spain overtakes China virus toll with 3,434 deaths

coronavirus strain since the outbreak began.

The economic damage of the virus -- and associated lockdowns -- could also be devastating, with fears of a worldwide recession worse than the financial meltdown that occurred over a decade ago.

But financial markets soared as the US Senate and the White House agreed a stimulus package worth roughly 10 percent of the entire American economy, an injection Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said represented a "wartime level of investment".

India yesterday woke up to a sweeping lockdown of its 1.3 billion people, one of the world's most ambitious efforts to fight the coronavirus. India has identified 562 confirmed cases of the disease, which has so far killed nine people in the South Asian nation.

Yesterday, Indians crowded grocery stores and chemists in a struggle for essential. People in the key cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru rushed to stock up after Modi decreed the shutdown in a speech televised nationwide, barely four hours before it took effect.

In China, where the new virus emerged last year, authorities loosened tough rules on the 50 million people in Hubei province yesterday after a months-long lockdown as the country reported no new domestic cases. The provincial capital Wuhan -- the ground zero of the outbreak -- will allow residents to leave from April 8.

The medical situation is still critical in Europe, where Spain joined hardest-hit Italy in surpassing even China's toll after 738 people died over the past 24 hours, bringing deaths in the country to 3,434.



Doctors are 'incarnations of God': Indian PM Modi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday described doctors and other health staff at the frontlines of the fight against coronavirus as "incarnations of God" and said those harassing them would face police action. "In this hour of crisis, those in white coats are the incarnation of God. Today they are saving lives, putting their own lives in danger," the Prime Minister said, interacting via video link with the people of his constituency Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh on the coronavirus crisis. To a question on the harassment of doctors, nurses and other staff handling coronavirus patients, the PM said he ordered all state police chiefs to take the most strict action against those harassing them.

Alarm as US, UK teen die of coronavirus

Two healthy teens in US and UK died of coronavirus raising doubts on the narrative that the virus is not deadly for youths. A British 21-year-old woman with no pre-existing conditions has died from coronavirus, The Sun newspaper reported yesterday. In California, officials on Tuesday pleaded for young people to heed safety warnings over the virus after a teen tested positive and died. Multiple studies have found the virus disproportionately affects older patients and those with underlying conditions. A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found juveniles "appear to have milder" illness, with no intensive care admissions or deaths in the US as of March 16. Only two known cases of minors dying from the disease in China, where the virus emerged late last year, have been recorded.

Quarantine dodgers may get 7-year-jail in Russia

Russian lawmakers have proposed imposing severe punishments -- including up to seven years in prison -- for people breaking coronavirus quarantine rules. Legislation due to be discussed yesterday foresees fines of between 500,000 rubles (\$6,400) and two million rubles (\$25,700) for violating a quarantine. If a quarantine dodger were found guilty of causing a person's death or intentionally infecting many people, they would face up to five years in prison, and up to seven years if two or more people died. The Duma will consider the proposed legislation next Tuesday. Russia, which has a population of 144 million people, reported 658 cases of the coronavirus as of Wednesday. Yesterday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the public vote on his constitutional reforms must be postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic and declared next week a public holiday.

SOURCE: AFP



Turkey charges 20 Saudis over Khashoggi murder

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey has charged 20 suspects including two former aides to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over the 2018 murder of Riyadh critic Jamal Khashoggi, prosecutors said yesterday.

Prosecutors accuse Saudi Arabia's deputy intelligence chief Ahmed al-Assiri and the royal court's media czar Saud al-Qahtani of leading the operation and giving orders to a Saudi hit team.

Khashoggi, 59, a commentator who wrote for The Washington Post, was killed after he entered the Saudi consulate on October 2, 2018, to obtain paperwork for his wedding to Turkish fiancée Hatice Cengiz.

Turkey carried out its own investigation into the murder after being unhappy with Saudi explanations.

The Istanbul prosecutor's office said in a statement that Assiri and Qahtani, along with 18 others, were charged with "instigating the deliberate and monstrous killing, causing torment".

They face life in jail if convicted.

The Turkish prosecutor said a trial in absentia would be opened against the 20 suspects but did not give a date.

The CIA, UN special envoy Agnes Callamard and Turkey have directly linked Crown Prince Mohammed to the killing, a charge the kingdom vehemently denies.

IS ATTACK IN AFGHANISTAN

Gunmen in kill 25 at Sikh complex

REUTERS, Kabul

Gunmen and suicide bombers raided a Sikh religious complex in the Afghan capital of Kabul yesterday, killing 25 people before security forces killed all of the attackers, the government said.

The Islamic State militant group claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement. Sikhs have been the target of attack by Islamist militants before in South Asia. Their community in Afghanistan numbers fewer than 300 families.

Several hours after the early morning attack was launched, Interior Ministry spokesman Tariq Arian said an operation by the security forces was over and all of the attackers had been killed. He did not say how many.

The ministry said 25 people who had been in the religious compound had been killed, eight wounded and 80 rescued.

Narender Singh Khalsa, a member of parliament who represents the tiny Sikh community, said he had had reports that up to 200 people had been trapped in the temple during the attack.

Human rights activists and countries including the United States, India and Pakistan condemned the attack.



A homeless man feeds pigeons at the border between Italy and The Vatican (Rear) in Rome yesterday during a lockdown imposed to halt spread of new coronavirus pandemic.

PHOTO: AFP

WHY MALARIA PILLS BEING USED?

Older malaria drugs are being studied, and in some cases used, to treat or try to prevent infection with the new coronavirus, even though there is no firm evidence to show they are effective. Studies are underway in a number of countries, including China, France, India and the United States, to see whether the pills - chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine - may have a role to play in the rapidly spreading pandemic.

US President Donald Trump has touted the malaria drugs as "a game changer." But the Food and Drug Administration and other health experts said trials must first ensure the medicines are effective and safe for use in this patient population.

WHY ARE MALARIA DRUGS UNDER CONSIDERATION?

Because of lack of proven treatment, the Covid-19 patients are largely receiving only supportive care such as breathing assistance. On its website, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says some US clinicians have reported anecdotal use of hydroxychloroquine at different doses. Chloroquine is a synthetic form of quinine, which is found on the bark of the cinchona plant.

Both drugs, which have serious side effects if used incorrectly, are used to combat malaria, which is caused by a parasite spread through mosquito bites, because they interrupt its ability to digest a host's blood cells. Scientists have detailed biochemical properties of chloroquine that indicate it could be used against some viral infections. These include direct antiviral effects, such as blocking steps needed by certain viruses to replicate, and its ability to suppress production and release of proteins involved in inflammatory complications of several viral diseases. In addition to malaria, hydroxychloroquine is also used to treat lupus and rheumatoid arthritis.

WHAT DOES THE DATA SAY?

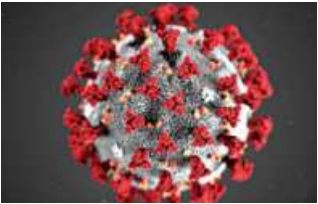
Data has begun to emerge from some coronavirus trials, but most

information so far is preliminary. A French team last week said initial results from a 24-patient trial of hydroxychloroquine showed that 25% of patients given the drug still carried the coronavirus after six days, compared with 90% of patients given a placebo. But the trial is small and results on patient outcomes are still awaited. Chinese researchers last month reported trial results showing that chloroquine treatment of COVID-19 patients had clinical and virologic benefit versus a comparison group. It has been added as a recommended treatment for the illness in China, where the virus first emerged in December. This week, the Journal of Zhejiang University reported disappointing results from a 30-patient Shanghai study of hydroxychloroquine. It showed the drug worked no better than standard care for patients with COVID-19.

PRESCRIPTION ONLY!

Health officials caution that no one should be taking these drugs to treat or prevent coronavirus infection without medical supervision and a prescription. In Arizona, a man died and his wife was hospitalized after taking a nonmedical form of chloroquine used to fight parasites in aquariums.

SOURCE: REUTERS



Social media sees virus solidarity bloom in UK

More than 170,000 volunteer to help NHS

AGENCIES

Help groups on social media are connecting people with those most in need during the coronavirus lockdown, fostering a community spirit often neglected in the capital's fast-paced life.

Londoner Stephanie Cheung, 31, is one of those chipping in, leaving a bag of groceries on the doorstep of a stranger in her neighbourhood after getting the call on Facebook.

Many more people have found themselves in similar need over recent days, having been ordered to stay home if elderly, experiencing coronavirus symptoms or suffering from serious underlying health issues.

Along with more than 7,000 other people, Cheung is a member of "Hackney Covid 19 Mutual Aid", in northeast London. Many other similar groups are flourishing around the country on social networks, set up to help to solve problems posed by the pandemic, primarily to the elderly or frail.

Meanwhile, more than 170,000 people have signed up to help Britain's National Health Service tackle the coronavirus outbreak just hours after a request for a quarter of a million volunteers.

Britain had called for 250,000 volunteers to deliver food and medicines, provide transport for patients and supplies, and to telephone those who are becoming lonely because of self isolation. The system aims to reach up to 1.5 million people who are "shielding" - keeping themselves at home for 12 weeks under government advice to protect those with serious health conditions.

The death toll from coronavirus in the United Kingdom jumped on Tuesday by 87 to a total of 422 - the biggest daily increase since the crisis began.

Trump seeks virus kits from S Korea

AFP, Seoul

US President Donald Trump has requested novel coronavirus test kits from South Korea, his counterpart Moon Jae-in said yesterday. The South was once the hardest-hit country outside China, where the virus first emerged, but appears to have brought its outbreak under control thanks to a huge testing and contact-tracing effort. By midnight on Tuesday more than 367,000 people in the South had been tested.

Thailand bans entry to foreigners

REUTERS, Bangkok

The Thai government banned entry for all non-resident foreigners yesterday but held off on restricting people's movement inside the country as the government prepared to roll out emergency measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus. A state of emergency will take effect from midnight local time (1700 GMT) until April 30. Thailand has recorded 107 new coronavirus cases yesterday, bringing the known total to 934. Four people have died.

Libya reports first coronavirus case

AFP, Tripoli

Libya has reported its first case of the novel coronavirus, a particular source of concern in the North African country where civil war has badly degraded the public healthcare system. Libya has been mired in chaos since the 2011 overthrow of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi and is divided between the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNA) and forces loyal to eastern-based military strongman Khalifa Haftar.