

India risks plunging into 'social unrest'

Warn industries amid lockdown

AFP, New Delhi

Key industries are warning of social unrest unless India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi makes concessions when he announces any extension Tuesday to a three-week pandemic-lockdown for the country's 1.3 billion people.

The lockdown ends at midnight today, but several state chief ministers have already said they plan to extend it for at least two more weeks. With time running out, the government has not laid out any national plan.

Modi, who is to make a nationwide address at 0430 GMT yesterday, is caught between growing fears over the pandemic -- cases have surged in recent days to more than 9,150 with 308 deaths -- and the need to get the economy moving again.

Reserve Bank of India governor Shaktikanta Das called the coronavirus an "invisible assassin" that could cause havoc with the economy.

The national restaurants association, which said its members employed seven million people, warned there could be "social unrest" if it did not receive financial relief.

The government is considering making people stay at home in Delhi, Mumbai and other major cities while opening up rural parts of the country that have so far been relatively untainted by coronavirus, according to some reports. Media have predicted it would be relaxed for key sectors such as agriculture.

The commerce ministry has also reportedly urged the government to consider opening more activities "with reasonable safeguards" even if the lockdown is extended.

The possibility of arranging staggered shifts for different sectors is also being considered by authorities as a way of cutting down contact between workers.

India to test 'cold spots'

Plan to use colour codes on map to navigate lockdown

AGENCIES

In a bid to widen testing and ensure that no significant number of Covid-19 cases are being left out, the government plans to expand testing in clusters chosen in 'cold spots' or areas where there are no cases reported as of now. This will be a significant decision that takes the focus beyond hotspot areas in around 133 districts where there is a high incidence of the disease.

The districts that will be taken up for sampling are being identified and a combination of pool and rapid testing will be adopted to check for the presence of Covid-19. The move, besides providing additional clinical data of the disease, is also intended to respond to criticism that India is not testing enough and positive cases might be under-reported.

The sampling will be on the basis of surveillance and tests will be conducted on ILI (influenza like illness) patients to track the presence

of coronavirus.

As of now, at least half of India's 720 districts are yet to report Covid-19 and the cases so far are concentrated in certain districts and cities in a pattern that can vary from state to state and



even within states, reports TOI.

While pool testing is a RT-PCR process, seen as a reliable means of detecting the disease, the rapid test option is intended to test for antibodies.

The arrival of rapid test kits from China has been delayed but the first lot of kits is expected to reach soon.

The government has also decided

to use colour code on the country's map to Covid-19 and virus-free zones, and therefore people's movement.

After a meeting with at least 13 Chief Ministers on Saturday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had indicated that the lockdown will be extended -- but there will be relaxations in certain areas and cases to ensure the survival of the economy as well.

This is where the colour coding comes in, some of the participating Chief Ministers, including the Chief Minister of Puducherry, told the media after the meeting, reports NDTV.

Green zones will be districts where there is no Covid-19 case. Sources said there are 400 districts, where there have been no Covid-19 cases.

Orange zones will be places which saw less than 15 cases and there have been no increase in the number of positive cases. Here, minimum activities like opening of limited public transport, harvesting of farm products will be allowed.



Guinness world record holder, world's smallest living woman, Jyoti Amge, appeals citizens to stay inside their homes during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the Covid-19 coronavirus, in Nagpur, India yesterday.

'Medibot' to do rounds on Malaysian virus wards

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian scientists have created a barrel-shaped robot on wheels that they hope will make the rounds on hospital wards to check on coronavirus patients, reducing health workers' risk of infection.

"Medibot" is a 1.5 metre tall (five foot) white robot, equipped with a camera and screen via which patients can communicate remotely with medics.

The invention, built by scientists at the International Islamic University Malaysia, is also fitted with a device to check patients' temperatures remotely.

It is aimed at helping nurses and doctors working on the wards with social distancing. Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, a member of the team behind the invention, told AFP.

It cost about 15,000 ringgit (\$3,500) to develop, and the university plans to trial it soon in their own private hospital, which does not treat virus patients, said Zulkifli.

If that proves a success, the scientists hope it can be used in government hospitals where people with Covid-19 are sent.

Malaysia has reported 4,683 coronavirus cases, including 76 deaths. From Thailand to Israel, robots are being used in the fight against the coronavirus, which has killed over 114,000 people worldwide.

They are being increasingly relied on as fast, efficient, contagion-proof champions in the war against the virus.

Tunisia has deployed police robot to patrol areas of Tunis, to ensure that people are observing a coronavirus lockdown.

If it spies anyone walking in the largely deserted streets, it approaches them and asks why they are out.

They must then show their ID and other papers to the robot's camera, so officers controlling it can check them. This is the second week of a nationwide lockdown to contain the virus, which has killed 14 people.

No festivities but resolve to fight ills

FROM PAGE 1

caste, creed and religious beliefs -- was to come out of their homes, many heading for Ramna Batamul to welcome Pahela Baishakh -- the first day of Bangla New Year 1427 -- amid traditional fanfare and lively pageants.

This year, however, would be completely different.

As the novel coronavirus is taking a grim toll on the country like elsewhere in the world, there would be no one singing along to Rabindranath's "Esho hey Boishakh, esho esho" under the banyan tree. The cultural troupe from Chhayanaut would not be opening the biggest secular celebration of Bangladesh this year.

There would be no "Mangal Shobhajatra", a colourful, ceremonial procession, which is the mainstay of the Pahela Baishakh celebrations.

Traditional Baishakh attire -- white saris with red borders for women and panjebees for men -- would gather dust in shop racks.

The only thing that may be like other years is the smell of different bhartas (dishes made of different mashed vegetables) and fried hilsha wafing through households.

After the coronavirus hit Bangladesh, all celebrations have been cancelled, and the normal way of life has come to a halt.

So far, 39 people have died and 803 people have been infected while the country has been under virtual lockdown in its fight to stem the spread of Covid-19.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has directed all to celebrate Pahela Baishakh with their families within the confines of their homes and to refrain from holding mass gatherings.

The government has already suspended all public programmes in order to avoid gatherings amid growing concern over the spread of the virus.

For the first time since the country's liberation, Chhayanaut has had to cancel the celebration at Ramna Batamul. It started the programme in erstwhile East Pakistan in 1967 as a protest against the cultural domination of the Pakistan military regime.

The organisation even held celebrations in 2002, a year after Islamic militants carried out a bomb attack at Batamul celebrations. The attack killed 10 people and injured 50.

"This is the first time except during the Liberation War in 1971 that we are not holding a programme," Sarwar Ali, executive president of Chhayanaut, told The Daily Star yesterday.

In the Pakistan era, Chhayanaut used to arrange the programme to protest the cultural domination of the Pakistan regime and to create a "Milon Mela" for Bangalees, he said.

"After independence, the programme started to spread nationwide and eventually got a national form," he added.

"But this year, Pahela Baishakh comes amid a global disaster. In this situation, we can't consider holding such a programme."

However, renditions of selected songs and poetry from the last three programmes would be telecast on BTV at 7:00am today.

At the end of the hour-long programme, Dr Sanjida Khatun, founder and chair of the organisation, will give a speech, he said.

He also said that the funds collected for the programme are being distributed among poor people or artistes from the low-income bracket.

The Mangal Shobhajatra has also been cancelled for the first time since it started in 1989. Organised by teachers and students of Dhaka University's fine arts faculty, the procession has been inscribed in Unesco's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

"This is certainly painful for us," said Prof Nisar Hossain, dean of DU's fine arts faculty.

"Everyone eagerly waits for the largest social festival of the country. But it [the coronavirus outbreak] has obstructed the programme entirely," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

"However, our main focus is now on fighting coronavirus," said Nasir.

He said they usually start taking preparations for Mangal Shobhajatra a month before the programme. But as the World Health Organisation declared Covid-19 a pandemic, they feared that they might not be able to hold the programme. "That's why we did not take any preparations."

"The purpose of arranging the Mangal Shobhajatra is to seek blessings for and unite people. But it goes against the method of fighting of coronavirus, which is maintaining social distance," he said.

Like every year, Mangal Shobhajatra Research Center has prepared a poster for this year with a theme considering coronavirus to make people self-reliant to fight the disease.

The poster starts with a quote from famous American author Ernest Hemingway's novel "The Old Man and the Sea" -- "Man can be destroyed but not defeated", and ends with Rabindranath Tagore's song -- "Mukta Karo Bhoy, Apona Majhe Shakti Dharo, Nijere Koro Joy."

"We are circulating the poster online," Nisar said.

Mughal Emperor Akbar introduced the tradition of celebrating the Bangla New Year -- Nabu Barsa -- to mark the closing of the annual tax collection.

Traditionally, traders and shopkeepers open a new "halkhata" (account register) on this day and celebrate it by offering sweetmeats to their clients.

In the course of time, it evolved into a day of mass celebration and an integral part of the Bangalee culture. It has been considered a non-communal festival as people irrespective of religion, sect, class and creed celebrate the day as one nation.



Health workers wearing protective face masks react during a tribute for their co-worker Esteban, a male nurse that died of the coronavirus disease, amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, outside the Severo Ochoa Hospital in Leganes, Spain, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

LATEST UPDATES



SPAIN EASES LOCKDOWN

Spain reopens parts of its economy, with some factory and construction staff returning to work within strict safety guidelines. But Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez warns his country is "far from victory", and lockdown restrictions in place since March 14 remain in place for much of the nation's 47 million people.

OVER 114,000 DEAD WORLDWIDE

At least 114,539 people have died worldwide from the coronavirus in 193 countries and territories, according to an AFP tally around 1100 GMT Monday based on official sources. There have been more than 1,853,300 reported infections since the virus emerged in China in December. The United States has 22,109 deaths, making it the hardest-hit country. It also has the highest number of reported infections with 557,590 cases. Italy has 19,899 deaths, Spain 17,489, France 14,393 and Britain 10,612.

NEW RISE OF INFECTIONS IN CHINA

Officials in China report 108 new cases, 98 of which were imported from overseas, the highest number of confirmed infections in a single day in over a month.

MOSCOW'S DIGITAL TRAVEL PASSES

Moscow authorities launch a digital permit system to control people's movements. A website to apply for the passes starts working Monday for people travelling by car or public transport and the permit system will be operational from Wednesday.

US EYES MAY GRADUAL REOPENING

The US government's top infectious diseases expert Anthony Fauci says parts of the country could begin easing restrictions in May, but remains cautious. South Korean firms will make their first shipment of test to the US this week after a request by US President Donald Trump.

INDIA TO EXTEND LOCKDOWN

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to extend a national lockdown, due to end Tuesday, for another two weeks, state ministers say after talks at the weekend.

ADB'S \$20B RESCUE PACKAGE

The Asian Development Bank said it will roll out a massive \$20 billion package to help developing member nations weather the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. Up to \$13 billion in loans will be made available to help virus-hit developing members fill in budget gaps, with another roughly \$2 billion set for the private sector.

SOURCE: AFP