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NEARBY



Delhi police ban gatherings, protests

NEW DELHI
The Delhi police on Sunday imposed Section 144 of the CrPc banning protest and assembly of four or more people in one place in the national capital till March 31 in view of the novel coronavirus outbreak.

NEWS PAGE 11

Court meeting to decide on closure of apex court

NEW DELHI
A full court meeting of all the 33 judges of the Supreme Court is scheduled at 12.30 p.m. on Monday to consider the repeated requests made by lawyers' associations to close the court till further notice on account of the COVID-19 infection spread.

NEWS PAGE 10

Anti-CAA stirs continue despite 'janata curfew'

GHAZIABAD
The ongoing protest against the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act in Deoband's Idgah ground continued during the 'janata curfew' on Sunday. An organiser said they are ensuring that no more than 10 protesters are at the site at any given time.

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80 districts in lockdown to contain virus spread

With first deaths reported in Bihar and Gujarat, toll rises to seven; inter-State transport, suburban trains, bus services suspended

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

All train, metro and inter-State transport services across the country were suspended on Sunday till March 31 as the death toll from COVID-19 rose to seven nationwide, and the number of confirmed cases stood at 396. Unprecedented restrictions were imposed in 80 districts across 17 States and five Union Territories affected by the pandemic.

The Union Health Ministry said Bihar and Gujarat had reported their first casualties from COVID-19. A 38-year-old man with a kidney ailment and recent travel history to Qatar died at AIIMS-Patna and a 67-year-old man died at a hospital in Surat. Another death of a 63-year-old man was reported from Mumbai.

Only essential services

"State governments will issue orders allowing only essential services to operate in districts with confirmed COVID-19 cases. The focus should be on closure of all activities except essential services such as hospitals, telecom, medicine shops and provision stores," an official release said.

Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba described the new measures as further "pre-emptive" actions, given the "sharp increase" in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the country after curbs on international travel,

COVID-19 curbs

A look at the essential services and commodities notified by the government



Locked down: An aerial view of the deserted Koyambedu flyover in Chennai during the Janata Curfew on Sunday. ■ K. PICHUMANI

FOOD AND PRODUCTS
Groceries, fruits and vegetables, milk and dairy related products, loading and unloading of wheat and rice at FCI and State food depots, cattle feed and fodder

OTHER SERVICES
Newspapers, banks and ATMs, post offices, telecom, petrol and diesel pumps

MEDICAL
Medicines and other pharmaceuticals, health services, manufacturing of health and medical equipment

HOUSEHOLD SERVICES
Electricity and water supply, sanitary services, LPG supply

contact tracing and efforts at social distancing.

COVID-19

Indicating that the 'Janata Curfew' on Sunday was a precursor of more stringent measures, Mr. Gauba, in a letter to the Chief Secretaries, said the States need to "build on the momentum" of the 14-hour lockdown.

Calling on the States to operate transport within their boundaries at a "skeletal level", the Centre said all these

measures were temporary in nature but "vital to break" the chain of transmission of the pandemic.

Earlier in the day, the Railways announced suspension of all passenger services until March 31, including suburban services. Only goods trains will run during the period, the Railways said, adding that trains that had commenced their journey prior to 4 a.m. on March 22 would complete their journeys.

Joint Secretary in the Health Ministry Lav Agarwal

said the nature of "essential services" would be decided by the individual States. "We want to control the movement of people," he said at a press briefing.

In response to questions, Mr. Agarwal was clear that more districts could be brought under curbs if they were affected. According to him, the lockdown was temporary in nature.

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Isolation best weapon: ICMR

Isolation, and not indiscriminate testing is the only way to limit the spread of COVID-19, ICMR Director-General Balram Bhargava said. A lockdown is the most important step in breaking transmission of the disease. PAGE 11

Banks reduce services

The Indian Banks' Association said banks would only provide essential services from Monday. They will provide services such as cash deposit and withdrawal, clearing of cheques, remittances and government transactions. PAGE 7

Networks under stress

With social distancing measures like work from home putting pressure on telecom networks, the operators have reached out to 12 video streaming platforms to implement measures such as reducing video quality to standard definition. PAGE 7

Kejriwal announces curbs in the Capital till March 31

'We must take extraordinary measures'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Delhi government on Sunday announced a lockdown of the Capital from 6 a.m. on Monday till midnight on March 31 to implement social distancing and isolation measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.



Arvind Kejriwal

Flight operations

Delhi's borders with Haryana and Uttar Pradesh will be sealed and all international and domestic flights arriving in the city would be suspended, the government said. The Union Ministry of Civil Aviation and various airlines were taken by surprise at the announcement, and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation later said that flight operations to and from Delhi would continue and the Indira Gandhi International Airport would continue to operate.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Lieutenant-Governor Anil Bajjal announced the measures at a joint press conference on Sunday evening. "Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. We are fortunate that the virus reached India late and we can learn from the

best practices taken up by other countries. People will face difficulties due to the lockdown but it is necessary to contain the spread of the virus," said Mr. Kejriwal.

Public transport

During the lockdown, there will be no public transport service or private buses, taxis, auto-rickshaws, rickshaws, and e-rickshaws.

The DTC buses will operate at 25% capacity to cater to personnel engaged in essential services. The DMRC has already announced that it has shut its services till March 31. The Delhi government said that "people are required to stay at home and come out only for basic services within the vicinity of their residences while strictly following social distancing".

PM thanks people for staying indoors, says battle not over

He urged citizens to adhere to restrictions

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

An eerie silence descended on the country as millions of Indians stayed indoors on Sunday following a call given by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a "people's curfew" to break the transmission chain of the novel coronavirus. Traffic was negligible as people struggled in some places to find transport from airports. Trains and public buses also did not ply.

Just before 5 p.m., sirens sounded in several cities and people came out onto the roads and balconies clapping their hands and banging steel plates to express gratitude to those providing essential services during this crisis.

In many places, conch shells sounded as people milled around.

In a series of tweets, Mr.



Showing gratitude: Children clapping during the 'people's curfew' in Patna on Sunday. ■ RANJEET KUMAR

Modi thanked the people for adhering to his call, but warned against any celebration when it came to an end at 9 p.m. on Sunday night. "Don't treat this as a success. This is the beginning of a long battle," Mr. Modi said.

Appealing to the people to adhere to the new restrictions being imposed by the Centre and the State governments, Mr. Modi said people should not move out of their houses in the 80 districts where a "lockdown" had been declared. "Even in oth-

er parts of the country [where there was no lockdown] people should stir out of their houses only when necessary," he added.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan warned that anti-social elements were "spreading misinformation that after #JanataCurfew, the virus will be wished away". "They're exhorting people to come outdoors after 9 pm. This is false & an attempt to mislead the public. #SocialDistancing must be adopted as a habit," he stressed on Twitter.

Maoists kill 17 policemen in Chhattisgarh

VIJAITA SINGH
NEW DELHI

Seventeen members of a police patrol were killed in an ambush by Maoists in Chhattisgarh's Sukma on Saturday.

Police sources said around 350 Maoists, including women cadres, opened fire on a police patrol, consisting of 100 personnel, in an attack that lasted around five hours.

The bodies of the policemen could be retrieved only on Sunday.

Director General of Police, Chhattisgarh, D.M. Awasthi told *The Hindu* that most policemen who were presumed to be missing after the encounter, were either killed at the spot or died due to "loss of blood" following gunshot injuries.

Fifteen policemen were injured, with two in a critical condition.

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Silent Sunday



The New Delhi railway station wears a deserted look during the one-day 'janata curfew', which was imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19, in the city on Sunday. ■ V.V. KRISHNAN (SEE ALSO PAGES 2, 3 & 4)

IIT-D team develops cheaper COVID-19 test

'Probe-free detection assay' sent to NIV, Pune

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology here have developed a method to detect COVID-19 that can significantly reduce the test cost, making it affordable for large sections.

The National Institute of Virology, Pune, is in the process of validating this test on clinical samples.

The "probe-free detection assay" has been optimised and tested for sensitivity at the research laboratories of IIT.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

The Centre on Saturday recommended that the maximum charge for a COVID-19 test by private laboratories should not exceed ₹4,500.

However, the team at IIT claimed their test could be performed at a much cheaper cost. "Using comparative sequence analysis, we have identified unique

regions in COVID-19. These unique regions are not present in other human coronaviruses, providing an opportunity to specifically detect COVID-19," said Prof. Vivekanandan Prerna, lead member of the team.

'Accurate results'

According to Professor Manoj Menon, the current testing methods available are "probe-based", while the one developed by his team is "probe-free", which reduces the testing cost without compromising on accuracy. "Primer sets targeting unique regions in the spike protein of COVID-19 were designed and tested using real time

polymerase chain reaction. The primers designed by the group specifically bind to regions conserved in over 200 fully sequenced COVID-19 genomes. The sensitivity of this in-house assay is comparable to that of commercially available kits," said Parul Gupta and Prashant Pradhan, members of the team.

"This assay can be used as a qualitative (yes or no) assay without the need for extensive instrumentation. In addition, it can also quantitatively assess virus loads," they added.

The research team also includes Ashutosh Pandey, Praveen Tripathi, Akhilesh Mishra, James Gomes and Bishwajit Kundu.

Srinagar tracking locals who hid travel history

Four flyers arrived on Sunday but declined to declare history: administration

PEERZADA ASHIQ
SRINAGAR

The Srinagar administration is tracking down local travellers hiding their overseas travel history, especially to COVID-19-hit countries such as Italy and the U.S., to escape screening.

"Four passengers arrived from Mauritius, Dubai and Kazakhstan on Sunday but declined to declare their travel history. A girl coming from the U.S. posed as a student returning from Bangladesh," said Deputy Commissioner, Srinagar, Shahid Choudhary, who is spearheading the government's efforts to contain any spread of COVID-19 in the Valley.

He said a man coming from the most COVID-19-hit



Security force personnel check vehicles in Srinagar.

country, Italy, reached New Delhi and made an attempt to escape screening before entering J&K.

"He took a train to Jammu and a cab to home in Srinagar just to hide the travel history. He has been traced," Dr. Choudhary said.

FIR lodged

The J&K police on Sunday lodged a First Information

Report against a person in south Kashmir's Pulwama for hiding his travel history to Pakistan.

Dr. Choudhary warned that those hiding travel history may face jail as per the National Disaster Act.

The Srinagar administration has launched a crackdown in the past 24 hours against travellers who are hiding symptoms and avoiding the necessary quarantine. "It needs a collective focus to handle it. Things are not that simple as they appear from homes and office rooms. It's like World War III," Dr. Choudhary said.

The crackdown comes amid reports of students forging their identity cards before arriving at the Srinagar

airport to escape screening, which is a must for overseas travellers.

The J&K administration has approached the Immigration Bureaus of all international airports to secure details of travel history of the locals who are travelling back to J&K from different countries.

According to the official figures, 1,166 travellers, mostly students, have been quarantined on arrival in the past four days in Srinagar.

The administration is in the process of procuring the premises of 65 hotels and government accommodations to be used as quarantine facilities for citizens arriving in Srinagar from other countries.