

Trade unions ask PM to help transfer money to workers amid lockdown

LIZ MATHEW & MANOJ CG
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

WITH THE country under a 21-day lockdown, trade unions, irrespective of party allegiance, have sought a financial assistance for the unorganised sector.

Both the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), affiliated to the RSS, and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), linked with the CPI(M), have asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to see that Rs 5,000 is transferred to every worker as wage relief in this lockdown period.

In a letter to Modi, the BMS made a list of demands, including sufficient budget allocation as a relief for those who do not get their wages or (small traders) who have shut down their units due to crisis, distribution of essential commodities through PDS, and making available essential medicines at affordable prices to everyone.

"The government should urgently transfer Rs 5,000 as income support/wage relief to every worker in the unorganised sector as well as other unpaid workers through DBT (direct benefit transfer) by depositing directly to their bank accounts for subsistence for one month. Such money will sustain the purchasing power of people and if spent, will activate the market and economic activities without getting paralysed," the union wrote, according to BMS national president Saji Narayanan.

In his letter to Modi, CITU general secretary Tapan Sen asked the government to ensure transfer of Rs 5,000 for workers in the unorganised and informal sector aged up to 25 years, and Rs 10,000 to those above 25 on a monthly basis through their jan dhan bank accounts.

Both BMS and CITU leaders also pointed out that the worst hit in the coronavirus crisis would be the daily wage workers in the unorganised sector.

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87 new cases, telemedicine guidelines issued by govt to take load off doctors

65-year-old dies in Mumbai; Delhi death case off list after patient found negative for coronavirus

ABANTIKA GHOSH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

ON THE first day of a nationwide lockdown — 75 districts have been on a lockdown since Sunday — India reported 87 confirmed coronavirus cases, the highest single-day jump so far.

The total now stands at 606, including 42 recovered patients and 10 dead. Health Ministry officials maintained there is no community transmission.

A 65-year-old died in Mumbai on Wednesday, while a death in Delhi that was initially marked as a COVID-19 death was taken off the list after the tests came out negative.

Meanwhile, the Health Ministry Wednesday issued telemedicine guidelines in a bid to reduce the load on hospitals and doctors in the middle of the

TELEMEDICINE GUIDELINES

THE GUIDELINES define telemedicine as: "Delivery of health care services, where distance is a critical factor, by all health care professionals using information and communication technologies for exchange of valid information for diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease and injuries, research and evaluation, and for the continuing education of

health care providers..."

Telemedicine includes all channels of communication with the patient that leverage, Information Technology platforms, including voice, audio, text and digital data exchange. Only a registered medical practitioner can provide it, who has to complete a course on telemedicine within three years of notification of the guidelines.

pandemic. This comes after Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his address to the nation, had asked people to refrain from crowding hospitals and get advice as far as possible over the telephone.

In a statement, the Health Ministry said approximately

64,000 people have arrived from other countries since March 21, of which 8,000 have been put in various quarantine facilities and 56,000 are in home isolation.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) said that 25,144 samples, taken from 24,254 indi-

viduals, have been tested for COVID-19 as of 8 pm, Wednesday. Of these, "581 individuals have been confirmed positive among suspected cases and contacts of known positive cases", the ICMR said in a statement.

Following reports from many parts of the country that delivery personnel of different online facilities were stopped, and that e-commerce companies ceased home delivery of essential products, Home Ministry officials said during a briefing that they are in touch with both the companies and the state governments to ensure delivery.

On Wednesday, the Group of Ministers (GoM) discussed ways to prevent and manage the outbreak. The GoM discussed actions taken so far, the current status of social distancing measures as a preventive strategy, and stringent actions taken so far by the states to

contain the spread of COVID-19.

The GoM discussed strengthening capacity of the states, which need to devote adequate resources for creating dedicated COVID-19 hospitals, equipping medical institutions with personal protective equipment (PPEs), ventilators and other essential equipment. States have been asked to ensure that essential services and supplies remain open. These include hospitals, medical shops and establishments engaged in manufacturing of medicines, vaccines, sanitisers, masks and medical devices.

The GoM also said Gujarat, Assam, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Goa, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and the UT of Jammu and Kashmir are setting up hospitals dedicated for management of COVID-19. A total of 118 laboratories have been included in the ICMR network of coronavirus testing.



DELHI CONFIDENTIAL

LOCKDOWN ENGAGEMENT
WITH POLITICAL activities shelved during the 21-day lockdown, BJP president J P Nadda has decided to engage party workers in social activities. Mindful of the social distancing requirements, Nadda has decided to convene meetings of party's national office-bearers through video conferencing in the evenings. In the first such meeting on Wednesday, the party chief suggested that the BJP should tap into its vast network of members across the country to feed the needy and the vulnerable during these 21 days. He set a target of identifying 1 crore party workers across the country to take up this task immediately — the aim is to get each member to take responsibility of feeding five people each.

Centre postpones NPR update, first phase of Census

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

AMID THE nationwide lockdown to curb the COVID-19 spread, the Centre has decided to postpone the process of the updating the National Population Register (NPR) and the houselisting phase of Census 2021. Both were supposed to start on April 1 and be completed by September 30.

A statement by the Registrar General of India's office on Wednesday said that keeping in view the nationwide lockdown,

"the first phase of Census 2021 and update of NPR, which was to begin on various dates decided by the State/UT governments beginning 1st of April 2020 and various related field activities, are postponed until further orders".

The Indian Express on Saturday reported that the NPR exercise was likely to be postponed due to the coronavirus outbreak and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call to maintain social distancing. Several states had even written to the Centre, expressing their inability to implement the process given that their manpower was engaged in fighting the pandemic.

"Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, high alert has been declared by the Government of India as well as the States/Union Territories. The Ministry of Home Affairs vide order dated 24th March, 2020 has

...the first phase of Census 2021 and update of NPR, which was to begin on various dates decided by the State/UT governments beginning 1st of April 2020 and various related field activities, are postponed until further orders"

— RGI STATEMENT

issued Guidelines with the directions for their strict implementation, on the measures to be taken by the Ministries/Departments of Government of India and State/Union Territory Governments for containment of COVID-19 Epidemic in the country. Lockdown has also been declared by many State/UT governments. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India has issued advisories for various precautionary measures, including social distancing," the RGI statement said.

It said the Census 2021 was scheduled to be conducted in two phases — House listing & Housing Census during April-September 2020 and Population Enumeration between February 9 to 28, 2021. The update of NPR was proposed to be done along with Phase I of Census 2021 in all States/UTs, except Assam, as it has already gone through the process of preparing National Register of Citizens.

Ramlalla shifted, Yogi faces flak for 'flouting' social distancing

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW, MARCH 25

UTTAR PRADESH Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath shifted the Ramlalla idol to a new site at Manas Bhavan on Wednesday morning, following which he drew criticism for reportedly not adhering to the social distancing norm amid coronavirus outbreak. Photographs and videos of the ceremony that have gone viral show the CM standing close to a group, including Ayodhya District Magistrate Anuj Kumar Jha, security personnel, priests and members of Ram Teerth Kshetra Trust, office bearers of RSS and VHP.

The shifting of the idol clears the site to begin construction of the Ram temple. Speaking during the occasion, the CM said, "All of us are lucky to have witnessed the shifting of Maryada Purushotam Ram to his new throne in Ayodhya..."

Seeking blessings of Ram to fight the outbreak, the CM said, "Whenever humanity across the world faces crises, challenges and difficult situations, it has taken inspiration and light from Ram."

However, Congress state chief Ajay Kumar Lallu questioned his visit to Ayodhya. In a tweet Wednesday, Lallu said in Hindi, "It was the first day of Navratri and it was my wish to visit the goddess's court. But I listened to the PM's appeal. The CM of UP does not. He went for darshan amid a crowd. In a scenario like this, why will the people of the state listen to the PM?"

Chidambaram calls lockdown watershed moment, offers plan for transfer of money

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

A DAY after India was placed under an unprecedented 21-day lockdown, former Finance Minister and senior Congress leader P Chidambaram on Wednesday called the Prime Minister's announcement a "watershed moment" in the battle against coronavirus and suggested a 10-point plan to put money in bank accounts of the poor and marginalised workers.

He also demanded a cut in GST rates by 5 per cent on essential goods and services for a three-month period.

In a statement, Chidambaram said, "We should put behind us the debates that took place before March 24 and look upon the nationwide lockdown as the beginning of a new battle in which people are the foot-soldiers and the PM is the Commander. We owe a duty to extend our total support to the Prime Minister and the Central and state governments."

The Congress leader also argued that the Centre should immediately announce a relief for the poor and the vulnerable.

For farmers, Chidambaram asked the government to double the "amount paid/payable" under the Prime Minister's Kisan scheme to Rs 12,000 and transfer the additional amount immediately to bank account of each



P Chidambaram

beneficiary. Tenant farmers, he said, should be brought under the scheme and Rs 12,000 in two installments transferred to their bank accounts.

He asked the government to transfer Rs 3,000 into bank account of each registered MGNREGA worker. For the urban poor, Chidambaram said, "take the Jan Dhan accounts in urban branches of banks and transfer Rs 6,000 into account of each beneficiary. Offer every ration card-holder, through ration shops, 10 kg rice or wheat free as a one-time measure in the next 21 days. Arrange for home delivery."

He said the government should ask all employers registered under any law to "maintain current levels of employment and wages", and guarantee to these employers that "wages will be reimbursed by the government within 30 days of payment".

FULL REPORT ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Double-digit MGNREGA hike for all states, UTs

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

THE CENTRE has hiked wage rates for unskilled manual workers by double digits across all states and Union territories under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for the financial year 2020-21. This comes after the allocation of the rural job guarantee scheme was increased to a record level in the revised estimate of the current year.

Some states saw zero increase in the wages rates for 2019-20 as against 2018-19. The increase this year ranges from Rs 13 to Rs 34 for all States and UTs. The new wages will be effective from April 1, 2020.

The step comes when demand for work under the scheme has seen a decline amid a slowdown in the economy. This has forced the government to increase the allocation under MGNREGA from Rs 60,000 crore to an all-time record of Rs 71,001 crore in the current financial year at the revised esti-

mate stage. For the next year, the Centre has allocated Rs 61,500 crore for the scheme.

As per a notification issued by the Ministry of Rural Development, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Maharashtra have seen the highest increase of Rs 34 (from Rs 224 to Rs 258) and Rs 32 (from Rs 206 to Rs 238), respectively. The lowest hike of Rs 13 has been recorded in the states of West Bengal (from Rs 191 to Rs 204), Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura (Rs 192 to Rs 205 in all four states).

After the increase, the average

wage per day will be Rs 202 during 2020-21 and this is Rs 20 higher than the current financial year, a ministry official said. He further said the hike is due to the increase in CPI-AL (consumer price index for agriculture labourers) which reflects the increase in the inflation in rural areas.

Mizoram, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh have seen an increase of Rs 14 whereas Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Jammu & Kashmir recorded a hike of Rs 15, Rs 16 and Rs 17, respectively.

Manipur, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Odisha have

seen a hike of Rs 19 while Assam and Kerala registered an increase of Rs 20. Wages have been hiked for Rajasthan (Rs 21), Punjab (Rs 22), Bihar and Jharkhand (Rs 23). There is an increase of Rs 25 in wages in Haryana, Gujarat and Daman and Diu, of Rs 26 in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Goa, and Rs 27 in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

During 2019-20, Karnataka, Goa, Kerala, Lakshadweep, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and West Bengal did not see any increase in MGNREGA wage rates.

BOOKMARK THIS

FOR BOOKWORMS under lockdown, Attorney General of India K K Venugopal has opened up his personal collection of rare books, albeit virtually. The 89-year-old veteran lawyer, who has a passion for collecting antiques, particularly antiquarian books, has digitised his library and shared access to kkvlibary.com, which has over 500 rare books, dating back to the 17th century. The collection ranges from religion, mythology and the Vedas to Indian art and sculpture, historical battles, the British Empire in India and tales of travels across the world.

CLASSICALLY VIRTUAL

THE INDIAN Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)'s centres across the world is moving to the virtual mode. The organisation's president, Vinay Sahasrabudhe, who spoke to the heads of these ICCR centres overseas, noted in a tweet that while classroom teachings of yoga, Indian classical dances or Sanskrit and Hindi, etc, stand halted due to the coronavirus pandemic, "many have switched to Virtual Classes in right earnestness".

Railways to make ventilators, coaches to be isolation units

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

AS THE government prepares for a long battle against COVID-19, isolation wards in trains for rural and remote areas, and manufacturing of ventilators in its factories are at the top of the agenda for the Indian Railways.

While the Rail Coach Factory (RCF) in Kapurthala has been tasked with the duty of converting LHB coaches into isolation wards, the Integral Coach Factory (ICF) in Chennai, the makers of Train 18 (India's first electric semi-high speed train), is attempting to manufacture ventilators.

Addressing a video conference on Wednesday, Railway Minister Piyush Goyal and Railway Board Chairman V K Yadav told the top brass to be prepared in the event of community transmission of COVID-19, which would then require reinforcement of healthcare facilities across India, especially in rural and remote areas.

"The instructions are to achieve preparedness and be on standby," a top Railway Ministry official told The Indian Express on the condition of anonymity. "This is keeping in mind the scenario of a long battle beyond the 21-day lockdown."

RCF Kapurthala will be initially making a prototype by converting an existing LHB coach

into an isolation ward. This will be a non-AC coach because it would be difficult to sanitise air for a communicable disease in case of an AC coach. The layout is being prepared and a decision will be taken as to how many patients can be accommodated in a coach keeping in mind various factors—distance, hygiene, necessary equipment to monitor health, and most importantly, exclusive bathroom usage.

Once the design is finalised, turning a rake into an isolation ward won't be difficult even in short time, officials said, adding that the coaches are anyway lying idle due to the lockdown.

However, according to officials, it is the manufacturing of ventilators that is turning out to be a challenge. ICF Chennai had made a prototype using "reverse engineering" but it has failed. More attempts are being made. "Making the machine is not difficult, but calibrating it is the challenge. Let's hope we can crack it. Gone are the days of mechanical ventilators. So what we make has to be of the existing standards," said a senior official.

India lacks an official figure on the number of ventilators it has. Rough estimates peg it at around 40,000. Many countries have also pressed into service non-health sectors to supplement their medical capability to fight the outbreak.

THE WORLD

Facing HC order, Israel parliament speaker resigns

ASSOCIATED PRESS
JERUSALEM, MARCH 25

ISRAEL'S PARLIAMENT speaker resigned Wednesday after seven years on the job rather than comply with a Supreme Court order to convene a vote on his replacement.

Yuli Edelstein had suspended parliamentary activities last week, citing procedural issues and restrictions on large gatherings. But opponents accused him of blocking a vote after his right-wing bloc failed to win a majority in March 2 elections.

He dismissed a Supreme Court call to explain his delay in

convening the Israeli Knesset, or parliament, and that sparked an unprecedented judicial rebuttal, with the Supreme Court chief justice ordering him to hold a vote. With other top members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party urging him to defy the order, he responded that he would "not agree to an ultimatum" and resigned instead.

"The Supreme Court decision destroys the work of the Knesset. The Supreme Court decision marks a harsh and arrogant intervention of the judicial branch in the affairs of the elected legislative branch," Edelstein charged in his last appearance as speaker.

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISTANBUL, MARCH 25

TURKISH PROSECUTORS have charged 20 suspects including two former top aides to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over the 2018 murder of Riyadh critic Jamal Khashoggi.

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 against Khashoggi and giving orders to a Saudi hit team.

Khashoggi, 59, a commentator who wrote for The



Jamal Khashoggi, 59, was killed in October 2018

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.

The Saudi insider-turned-critic was strangled and his body cut into pieces by a 15-man Saudi squad inside the consulate, according to Turkish officials.

His remains have never been found despite repeated calls by Turkish officials for the Saudis to cooperate. Riyadh insists he was killed in a "rogue" operation.

But the CIA, a UN special envoy and Ankara have directly linked the Saudi crown prince to the killing, a charge the kingdom vehemently denies. Turkey carried out its own investigation after being unhappy with Saudi Arabia's explanations.

The Istanbul prosecutor's of-

lice said in a statement that Assiri and Qahtani were charged with "instigating the deliberate and monstrous killing, causing torment".

The murder caused relations to between Ankara and Riyadh — which have a longstanding geopolitical rivalry — to worsen. Saudis, who enjoy investing and holidaying in Turkey, were urged to boycott the country last year.

Turkey is a key backer of Qatar, especially after a Riyadh-led economic blockade began against the Gulf state in 2017, and is accused of supporting groups including the Muslim Brotherhood.

Boko Haram kills 92 in Chad

N'djamena: Boko Haram extremists have killed at least 92 Chadian soldiers in the deadliest attack on the nation's forces, Chad's president said.

The attack took place overnight Sunday into Monday in the village of Boma in the Lac province near the border with Nigeria and Niger.

President Idriss Deby gave the toll on state television late Tuesday after visiting the site. "Never in our history have we lost so many men at one time," he said.

Boko Haram extremists have killed tens of thousands and forced millions from their homes during their more than decade-long insurgency. **AP**