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NEARBY



Capital reports 4 new cases; total number 39
NEW DELHI
Four new cases of COVID-19 were reported in the city on Thursday, taking the total number to 39. Case 10, a 38-year-old woman who travelled to Saudi Arabia, has proved to be a conundrum for the Delhi government, with her contacts reaching 1,400.

3 more test positive for COVID-19 in Noida
GHAZIABAD
Three more persons tested positive for COVID-19 in Noida on Thursday, taking the total count in Gautam Buddha Nagar to 14, the highest in Uttar Pradesh. Confirming the report, the Chief Medical Officer of Gautam Buddha Nagar said, "The three seem to be related to each other."

Constable suspended for vandalising carts
NEW DELHI
A Delhi police constable posted was suspended on Thursday for allegedly vandalising vegetable carts during lockdown, officers said. The incident happened in Nehru Nagar where a constable posted under Ranjit Nagar police station asked vegetable vendors to leave.

₹1.7 lakh cr. lockdown package rolled out

Rations doubled for three months; we do not want anyone to remain hungry: Nirmala Sitharaman

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Centre on Thursday announced a ₹1.7 lakh crore relief package in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown, providing free food and cash transfers to support the poorest and most vulnerable citizens during the crisis. Announcing the details, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the food-grain rations for 80 crore poor people would be doubled for the next three months and supplemented by 1 kg of local pulses.

Cover for healthworkers
The Centre will provide ₹50 lakh medical insurance cover for the next three months for about 22 lakh health workers in government hospitals, including ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) staff, medical sanitary workers in government hospitals, paramedics, nurses and doctors.

The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana had been announced within 36 hours of the lockdown and it would take care of the needs of poor and migrant workers, farmers, women, pensioners, widows and the disabled, said Ms. Sitharaman. "We do not want anyone to remain hungry, so we will be giving enough to take care of their foodgrain require-

Booster dose Main features of the economic relief package announced by the Finance Minister on Thursday

- Insurance cover of ₹50 lakh per person for doctors and medical workers fighting COVID-19
- 8.3 crore below the poverty line families to receive free cylinders for the next three months
- Wage-earners below ₹15,000 per month in businesses having less than 100 workers to receive 24% of their monthly wages into their PF accounts for the next three months
- The Centre has directed the State governments to use the Construction Workers Welfare Fund to give relief to 3.5 crore registered workers
- Ex-gratia of ₹1,000 to 3 crore senior citizens, disabled and widows among the poor
- Government to front-load ₹2,000 to 8.7 crore farmers in the first week of April under the existing PM Kisan Yojana
- Increase in MGNREGA wage to ₹202 a day from ₹182 for 13.62 crore families
- 20.4 crore Jan Dhan women account holders to get ₹500 per month for next three months

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announcing the measures in New Delhi on Thursday. ■ PTI

ment, protein requirement in terms of pulses. On the other hand, they should also not remain without money in hand, so several measures through DBT are being taken so that money reaches them," she said.

More wheat, pulses
Over the next three months, each person who is covered under the National Food Security Act would get an additional 5 kg wheat or rice for free, in addition to the 5 kg of

subsidised foodgrain already provided through the Public Distribution System (PDS). One kg of pulses a household would also be provided for free.

Cash transfers – a mix of advances via existing schemes and additional sums – would also be given to vulnerable groups under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana.

About three crore poor pensioners above 60 years, widows and disabled people

would be given ₹1,000 in two instalments over the next three months. The 20 crore women holding Jan Dhan Yojana accounts would get ₹500 a month over the same period.

Wages were hiked under the MNREGA scheme from ₹182 to ₹202 a day. The Minister said this would provide an additional ₹2,000 per worker.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8
MORE REPORTS ON ► PAGES 8, 11

'Rate of spread has slowed relatively'

COVID-19 toll touches 16; 694 cases



Safety zones: A Corporation worker marking waiting spaces at a wholesale vegetable market in Coimbatore on Thursday to ensure that buyers maintain distance. ■ M. PERIASAMY

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

With 16 deaths and 694 COVID-19 positive cases, India is now showing a relatively slower spread of COVID-19 infection rate, Joint Secretary, Union Health Ministry, Luv Agarwal said on Thursday. But he added, "We cannot be relaxed about restrictions put in place to contain the virus."

Reports from the States put the number of deaths at 18 with Maharashtra, Karnataka and Jammu and Kashmir each reporting a fatality. The total number of positive cases stood at 712 – Kerala had the highest number at 137, followed by 125 in Maharashtra and 52 in Karnataka.

Briefing the press, Mr. Agarwal said while these trends were not definitive indications of a reduction, the measures including social distancing, contact tracing and quarantine were important deterrents to the spread of the virus and could even enable India to keep community transmission away or delay it.

He added that measures had been put in place through the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, to educate doctors online about care of patients to ensure uniform treatment availability.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8
1,000 DEATHS IN U.S. ► PAGE 10

Lockdown forces migrant workers to leg it home from Manesar

The 21-day lockdown has suddenly left several thousand workers in the informal sector without jobs and any means of sustenance

ASHOK KUMAR
GURUGRAM

It is around 3 p.m. Carrying luggage on their backs and wearing black masks, seven men, visibly fatigued, are signalled to stop by a policeman who hurriedly jumps out of his vehicle at Rajiv Chowk on the Delhi-Gurugram highway. The officer makes a few inquiries before letting them off, asking them to walk in twos and threes and maintain a proper gap.

The men used to work as loaders at an automotive company in Bilaspur village in Manesar. But the nationwide lockdown to check the spread of the novel coronavirus, announced on March 24, has suddenly left them without jobs and little money to survive. Running out of money and with no means of support, the men, mostly from Shahjahanpur district in Uttar Pradesh, decided to walk close to 400 km back to

their villages. When this reporter met them, they had been walking for six hours.

"Yeh hartal abhi kaafi din chalne wali hai. Hamare pass khane ka bhi paisa nahi bacha hai (This lockdown is going to last for quite a few days. We have no money left even for food)," said Ramesh, the eldest in the group. He says seven other workers also set off on foot for Uttar Pradesh but he has lost contact with them.

Ajit, another member of the group, said they had returned to work after Holi barely a week ago, having taken home their savings for the festival.

"We make ₹500 one day but earn just ₹50 the next day. The pay is not fixed. We have been without jobs for five straight days now and have exhausted our meagre savings," he explained. Another worker Vijay said they did not have enough

cash to pay the room rent, and some of them had not had food for the past 24 hours.

Deepak said they hoped to find some work in their villages since it is the harvest season; they can tend to livestock and be with their families in these testing times, he said.

Mr. Ramesh said policemen at several barricades stopped them, but let them off after questioning. He claimed no help had come from the administration or the automotive company they worked for.

"We hope to reach in at least five-six days," he said with a straight face when asked how long it might take them to reach home.

The youngest in the group, his hair dyed maroon, smiled as he said he was from Nepal and had no clue how long it would take him to reach home.



Such a long journey: Daily wage earners returning to their homes in Uttar Pradesh on foot from Manesar. ■ BIBEK CHETTRI

Patna govt. doctors seek quarantine

AMARNATH TEWARY
PATNA

As many as 83 junior doctors at Patna's Nalanda Medical College and Hospital (NMCH), designated the State's first COVID-19 special hospital, have sought 15-day home quarantine as many of them have developed symptoms of the infection in the absence of protective kits and masks.

Bihar has reported six positive cases and one fatality so far.

The NMCH junior doctors' petition to the hospital superintendent has been forwarded to the Principal Health Secretary Sanjay Kumar. The junior doctors expressed serious reservation over the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), N-95 masks, gloves and protective gowns in the hospital.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8

In Delhi, 15 to a room, without a morsel to eat

SIDHARTH RAVI
NEW DELHI

Scores of migrant workers in the Capital find themselves stuck in their dwellings without work, money, access to food and are wary of stepping out to try and get some rations for fear of being attacked by police personnel following the imposition of the 21-day lockdown, they said on Thursday.

Fazlur Rahman, 22, is holed up in a shanty in Vishwas Nagar, having arrived here only a week ago to start working at a construction site. "We hadn't even worked for a day before the project was called off be-

cause of the [janata] curfew," he said over the phone. He and 15 other people are now stuck in their room at the construction site. They ran out of food on Wednesday evening, said Mr. Rahman.

"We're afraid to step out because we've seen the police beat up people," he said. In a video, he shared, Mr. Rahman is seen with folded hands, speaking in Bengali, appealing to the authorities, including the West Bengal government, to help them return home.

DETAILS ON ► PAGE 9
MORE REPORTS ► PAGES 2, 3 & 4

Sri Lanka frees soldier who killed 8 Tamils

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Thursday pardoned and released an Army man who was on death row for killing eight Tamil civilians, including a five-year-old and two teenagers, in 2000 during the civil war.

"The President has instructed the Ministry of Justice to release Sgt Ratnayake from prison," a spokeswoman at the Presidential Media Division said, confirming local media reports.

TNA SLAMS DECISION ► PAGE 10

New Parliament design will take more time

Nationwide lockdown likely to affect deadline; architect says MPs' concerns being addressed

DAMINI NATH
NEW DELHI

The design for the new Parliament building that the Centre is hoping to complete by August 2022 could be delayed by a few weeks as the country remains in lockdown, according to sources.

The Union Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry's construction agency, the Central Public Works Department, was expecting to prepare the detailed project report for the building in March and present the same to the Lok Sabha Speaker and the Vice-President soon after, according to CPWD officials.



The draft masterplan envisages a triangular-shaped building opposite the existing Parliament House. ■ SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

The tender inviting bids for the construction of the building would have been issued shortly after, in keeping with the May deadline set by

the Ministry earlier, officials said.

The timeline could be pushed back due to the lockdown.

Bimal Patel, director of the Ahmedabad-based HCP Design, Planning and Management, which was selected by the CPWD in October 2019 as its consultant for the project, told *The Hindu* that though the pandemic was "disruptive", he hoped it would not change the final deadline of the project.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is a time of much distress in the world. Yes, it is disruptive but MoHUA, CPWD, HCP DPM and all the onboard consultants are continuing to work in this period of lockdown... Many calls and video conferencing are ensuring

that we continue to work at our best possible pace in these tumultuous times. We hope to not let this disruption affect the final deadlines of the project," he said.

The draft masterplan drawn up by the HCP envisages a triangular-shaped building opposite the existing circular Parliament House. However, the design process would "continue in the coming few weeks", Mr. Patel said, adding that concerns raised by MPs at a recent meeting would be addressed.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8