

7 THE OUTBREAK NATION

In foreign waters, Navy prepares: refuelling at sea, monitoring on board

SUSHANT SINGH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

JUST LIKE the Army has set in place contingency plans at 6-hour notice to counter the coronavirus, the Navy, too, has put in a series of precautionary measures to prevent any outbreak on its ships by minimising port calls at foreign shores and continuous medical monitoring of its sailors.

This, even as it continues with its operations in international waters, including missions of geostrategic importance such as anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Africa.

"We have more than 20 ships out at sea at any point in time which includes coastal patrols and harbour patrols, besides the mission-based deployments in international waters. More than 3,000 Naval personnel are on board these vessels and all precautions are being taken in view of the Covid-19 pandemic," a government official told *The Indian Express*.

Worldwide, restrictions to check the spread have reduced port calls at foreign shores to a bare minimum. These calls are significant for logistics support, including critical fuel supply to naval ships.

To overcome this problem, Navy has taken to replenishment at sea, including refuelling of ships in international waters using its own vessels. The last such refuelling was done for *INS Tarkash* this Tuesday. *INS Tarkash* has been deployed as part of Operation Sankalp, which started last July and monitors the situation in the Gulf of Oman.

Besides Op Sankalp, a naval ship, *INS Sunayna*, is currently deployed for anti-piracy missions near the Gulf of Aden, off the eastern coast of Africa. There is another naval deployment for patrolling a strategic choke point of the Strait of Malacca, the main shipping channel between the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.

Moreover, two ships of the Navy and one ship of the Coast Guard, as part of the First Training Squadron, are off the islands of Mauritius and Seychelles. These ships did a passage exercise at sea with Mauritius National Coast Guard around March 14, while *INS Shardul*, as part of this fleet, supplied 600 tonnes of rice to Madagascar on March 12.

Besides these, in international waters, the Navy, currently, has a ship on operational duty in the Bay of Bengal and one in the Indian Ocean Region, while *INS Jamuna* is undertaking a hydrographic survey in Sri Lanka.

The Navy has also instituted measures to continuously monitor the health and symptoms of its personnel who are part of any planned sailing in the coming days. Medical teams on board these vessels are monitoring the health of personnel. This has become critical after three US sailors on a US navy ship, with 5,000 US military personnel on-board, tested positive for coronavirus.

Meanwhile, the Navy continues to be prepared with its quarantine facilities at Mumbai, Vizag and Kochi to meet any exigencies in support of the civil administration. A Dornier aircraft of the Navy, with a team of four doctors from Goa State Health department, flew from Goa to Pune Wednesday. These doctors were carrying samples of Covid-19 patients for testing and will undergo training to set up a test facility in Goa.

However, the Navy doesn't have any hospital ships in its fleet. This rules out the possibility of using them off the coast for treating patients to take the load off other hospitals. The official said that "whether alternate naval platforms can be used in times of crisis is something which would require a call based on what the situation demands".

'Nipah experience helped us draw protocol — minutest details were garnered, analysed'

KERALA CHIEF Minister PINARAYI VIJAYAN tells LIZ MATHEW how the state has put up a fight to contain the spread of coronavirus and the challenges it faces. Excerpts:

Kerala has won appreciation for effective handling of the situation. What was the biggest advantage the state had in dealing with the situation?

Historically, Kerala has been performing well in the social sector. Public health, education, and awareness have always been our core areas on which we built up our social infrastructure. We have completely put to use this social infrastructure to combat the menace. We also made it a point (to ensure) that government agencies, various organisations and even voluntary associations are synchronised to take up the challenge.

Our health edifice starts from the village-level primary health centres, which are connected to an extensive network of hospitals.

We activated our health and allied departments when we came to know about the COVID-19 outbreak in China (early January this year). Our experience in dealing with the deadly Nipah (virus) helped us draw up a protocol wherein even the minutest details of information were garnered, analysed and dealt with.

When students from Wuhan affected by COVID-19 boarded their flight from China, we made arrangements to receive them and treat them even while ensuring their disconnect from the society. The government sent (Kerala) Health Minister K K Shailaja to oversee the treatment as well as the protective protocols. As the Chief Minister, I make it a point that review meetings are conducted every day — sometimes more than thrice a day — involving heads of all depart-

ments concerned. It is very important to ensure inter-department and intra-department coordination, as it is a pandemic. Kerala has a well-knit system of local self-governments and their participation was ushered in from the first phase itself.

What's the uniqueness of the COVID-specific Kerala model?

We have had the experience of facing the Nipah virus crisis. We had (then) made it a point to imbibe good experiences from across the globe. The protocol we have drawn up is on the basis of this experience, but certainly we made it Kerala-specific considering the peculiarity of our state. We were mindful of our strength as well as weaknesses. Our main strength is the advancement in social sector. We may lack resources but we certainly have a high degree of awareness, education, participation and commitment of people.

Kerala has always risen above parochial and partisan barriers when such exigencies arise.

Right from the beginning we had taken the Opposition into confidence and considered their suggestions. We undertook an intense and massive communication with the local self-governments and I did it along with the Leader of Opposition, Mr Ramesh Chennithala. We addressed representatives of different layers of local self-governments (LSG), starting with ward members in the panchayat. Before video-conferencing with representatives of LSGs, we had convened an all-party meeting to have views of all parties, irrespective of their political orientation. I should say unity and commitment are pivotal to the Kerala model.

As Chief Minister, I had a meeting with all religious leaders in the state through video-conferencing to seek their support for effective social



THE EXPRESS INTERVIEW WITH PINARAYI VIJAYAN KERALA CHIEF MINISTER

distancing. All the leaders assured their full support. Subsequently, they all put off their normal religious gatherings and festivals. Only rituals are being held nowadays; no congregation of people.

As the numbers went up, did the state change its strategies? Were there course corrections?

The situation is changing every day. We can't be adamant on any static plans. Our review meetings are intended to upgrade and improve our action plan. Even a small experience reported from elsewhere is looked into to see that our plan is meticulous. Numerous Malayalee health workers from worst-

affected parts of the globe, including Italy, rendered their experience and we hugely benefitted from such inputs.

We have opened a 24-hour war room under a senior IAS officer to monitor and deal with any exigencies at any time. I also make it a point that affected people are heard, irrespective of the timing of their calls. We have also formed a youth army which has 2.36 lakh youngsters between 22 and 40 years to participate in the process actively.

Were there moments when you felt disappointed? Or did things go as planned?

I don't have any major complaints about anybody, but we feel let down when someone

doesn't listen to our instructions. There were a couple of cases wherein people who were to observe isolation went around visiting people and places. However, the general public has understood the seriousness of the matter and are adhering to the instructions.

Kerala's step-by-step approach is much-appreciated. First, containing the spread of the pandemic and then supplementing prohibitory measures with support to people in terms of food and cash.

We have been very particular that the pandemic needs to be contained. At the same time, people should not face any serious difficulties. Even at the first meeting, I told officers that we are doing everything for the people; nobody should be robbed of their basic amenities. Kerala is a hunger-free state. COVID-19 or not, we want to maintain the state like that. No one will go to bed without food. We are opening community kitchen and we are hopeful of having more than a thousand (of these kitchens).

Even though Kerala is going through a major financial crisis you announced a package of Rs 20,000 crore.

Even before the Centre announced a (relief) package, we had announced a series of eco-

nomical measures. We are mindful of the acute shortage of resources. But that should not prevent the government from bringing relief to the people. This was the principle on which we announced the Rs 20,000-crore package. This includes health, loan assistance, free foodgrain, advance payment of welfare pension, more allocation for MGNREGS, subsidised meals, tax relief, and more.

Loans worth Rs 2,000 crore are being made available to families with the help of Kudumbashree. We will not charge any interest on these loans.

The package announced by the Centre is a welcome measure, and we have decided to make use of every scheme to ensure maximum relief to the people. However, the Centre has to go further... the state governments directly deal with any crisis...

A large expat population is a boon for Kerala when it comes to remittances. But when a pandemic such as this spreads, do you think expats create a kind of dilemma?

Kerala is one state which has got the maximum interface with global communities. The NRKs (non-resident Keralites) support the state, and their contribution is much valued. Foreign remittance is one of the mainstays of our economy. At the same time, this can turn to be a nightmare when such pandemics break out, because we have to extend our hand across the globe to help them out. We have facilitated the maximum number of people to return to Kerala. But it is impossible for all of them to return. I would request them to stay calm and listen to the protocols of respective countries. I am assuring them that their kith and kin here will be taken care of.

FULL INTERVIEW ON www.indianexpress.com

Women's grassroots network drives Kerala's community kitchen plan

VISHNU VARMA
THRIKKAKARA, MARCH 27

IT'S NEARLY 1 pm and the municipality community hall in Kakkand neighbourhood of Kochi is a hive of activity. Inside, a wooden desk blocks the passage to the hall. A wash basin, complete with handwash, is on the left. On the desk is a bottle of hand sanitiser. Around eight women in white aprons and tennis caps and cloth masks covering half their faces are working behind the desk.

The menu is simple: *ney-choru* (ghee rice) and chicken curry. The cooking's done. One set of women are filling plastic pouches with the chicken curry and the others are tending to the rice.

As soon as they are ready, a couple of men bring the pouches to the desk from where they are scooped into little bags by volunteers and delivered to homes nearby.

At a time when Kerala and the rest of the country are under a lockdown to tackle the coronavirus outbreak, these little food packets from this makeshift community kitchen in Thrikkakara municipality are central to the LDF government's pledge to let no one starve. And powering this kitchen and scores of others is Kudumbashree, a powerful self-help network of 43 lakh women.

On Wednesday, when Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan spoke of opening community kitchens to feed migrant workers and destitutes, councillors of Thrikkakara didn't have to think hard on whom to rely on. They dialled the grassroots units of Kudumbashree and their members immediately jumped on board. The kitchen opened Friday morning.



Kudumbashree, meaning 'prosperity of family' in Malayalam, was set up in 1997 as a three-tier community network aimed at empowering women. Vishnu Varma

due in large part to their enterprising abilities, have challenged male hierarchies. From driving taxis to running Metro ticket counters, and operating paper mills to orphanages, they have done it all.

"Kudumbashree's success was that it was able to discover these women who want to function as public servants. More than improving wages, they have shown an inclination to volunteer and do something for the society," said Manjeesh, a district programme manager with the network.

At the community kitchen, as the last of the food packets get bundled up, the cooks have some time to rest before they start preparing dinner.

"We distributed 380 packets of chapathi and vegetable curry in the morning. Lunch and dinner are for 500 people. Tomorrow, we are expecting to cook for nearly 1,000 people, a majority of which would be migrant workers," said Nazar, an independent councillor who helped set up the kitchen.

The process to identify beneficiaries for the meals is

straight-forward: local panchayat ward members/councillors, ASHA workers and anganwadi teachers comb through every home in their jurisdiction, making a list of those who need food.

They add a few dozens, keeping in mind the destitute and the homeless. The state government has already started assigning volunteers who have private vehicles for transporting supplies and meals.

Riyaz, a computer technician, is among those who have signed up as volunteers. Asked if such welfare programmes could turn out to be a burden for the government, he replied, "There's no burden at all. There are so many young people like us waiting to see how we can support the government. All that we spend is on fuel, it is practically nothing."

There's optimism inside the kitchen too. Nisha, one of the cooks, understands the demand for cooked food will go up, but she is not worried. "During the floods, we helped cook for 2,000 people. This is nothing," she says.

IAS officer suspended for violating home quarantine rules

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 27

AN IAS officer in Kerala has been suspended on charges of violating the home quarantine he was asked to observe on his return from abroad.

Kollam district sub-collector Anupam Mishra, an officer of the 2016 batch, visited Malaysia and Singapore before returning to Kerala on March 18. As per the COVID-19 control procedure, he was asked to be on home quarantine for 28 days starting March 19. However, instead of sticking to the guidelines suggested by the health department and staying at his official residence in Kollam, Mishra returned to his native place in Uttar Pradesh.

Accordingly, he was suspended, based on a report from the district collector B Abdul Nazer, who found that the officer's conduct infringed upon the service rules. Police have also registered a criminal case against him.

Pinarayi: Kerala govt considering revealing names of patients

SHAJU PHILIP
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 27

ON A day Kerala reported 39 fresh COVID-19 cases, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said the state government is thinking about revealing the names of the patients.

He said the new cases reported on Friday had contacted several persons and visited many places and therefore, the government is thinking about publicising their names.

Without taking any name, the Chief Minister said, "This social worker had travelled from Kasaragod to Thiruvananthapuram. The details of his travel are astounding. He had mingled with several persons working in different walks of life. He had even shared the pictures in social media. Is this the manner in which a social worker should behave? This is a warning to all of us that coronavirus is not far away from us."

Later in the day, APUsman, a Congress leader from Idukki district who has tested positive for COVID-19, issued a statement. "As a public activist, I mingled with several persons and travelled a lot. Those who have met me or mingled with me after February 29 should contact

health workers. I don't remember all of them. On many days, I travelled up to 200 km," said the statement by Usman, also a trade union leader.

The route map of Usman, released by the health department, begins with a dharna he attended in front of the state secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram on February 29. Till March 20, he went to several districts, travelled in public transport buses, stayed in hotels and visited mosques and hospitals.

However, Usman has no recent foreign travel history.

The Chief Minister's statement that the state government was considering publicising the names of those who have tested positive comes after several persons placed under home quarantine were found violating isolation guidelines and moving freely in public places.

The state health department has already started putting up stickers outside the houses of those under observation. The stickers have the name and address of the person under observation. They also mention the observation period, dos and don'ts during the period and the number of family members.

In Thiruvananthapuram and Pathanamthitta districts, this exercise has already started.



Kozhikode District Collector Seeram Sambasiva Rao and a police officer question a commuter on Friday. PTI