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THE HINDU

MARCH 29, 2020

INDIA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER SINCE 1878

DELHI
CITY EDITION
26 pages • ₹15.00

on Sunday

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Car makers to assist govt. in production of ventilators, masks
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Pujara says staying indoors will be best way to fight COVID-19
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NEARBY

Second COVID-19 death in Delhi, nine fresh cases

NEW DELHI

The Capital reported its second COVID-19 death on Saturday, while nine new cases came to light. Delhi has so far had 49 COVID-19 cases out of which 41 are active. The deceased has been identified as a 60-year-old man from Aden, Yemen.

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Gautam Buddha Nagar reports nine fresh cases

GHAZIABAD

Nine new cases of COVID-19 were reported in Gautam Buddha Nagar on Saturday, taking the total cases in the district to 27. "Three persons tested positive in Noida, while a couple tested positive in Greater Noida's Dadri," said CMO, Gautam Buddha Nagar.

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Manipur legislator Shyamkumar disqualified

IMPHAL

Manipur Speaker Yumnam Khemchand on Saturday disqualified Thounaojam Shyamkumar as a member of the Assembly for defection to the BJP. Mr. Shyamkumar was elected as a Congress candidate in 2017, from 7-Andro constituency.

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Govt. shifts focus to hotspots as fresh COVID-19 cases rise to 185

No change in testing strategy, says ICMR; Kerala reports first death in Ernakulam

BINDU SHAJAN PERAPPADAN
NEW DELHI

With 185 new cases and two deaths due to COVID-19 reported in the last 24 hours, the Union Health Ministry on Saturday announced a change in strategy with increased focus on high-diseases burden hotspots across India. Working with the State governments, there will be intensified efforts to strengthen community surveillance, contact tracking and containment strategy, officials said.

There, however, is no change in testing strategy, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) said.

Joint Secretary in the Health Ministry Lav Agarwal said details regarding high disease burden hotspots would be announced soon.

In combat mode

A look at the key focus areas of the government to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic

The big fight: Srinagar Municipal Corporation workers getting ready to spray disinfectant in the city on Saturday. ▪ NISSAR AHMAD

Attention on hotspots: Focus on high-disease burden hotspots, details of which will be announced by the Health Ministry

Tracking the spread: Centre and States will work on strengthening community surveillance, contact tracing and containment strategy

Medical facilities: States asked to ensure adequate number of beds, ventilators and ICU facilities

Online assisstance: AIIMS in Delhi to provide online clinical assistance and training to doctors and nurses across India

Dedicated hospitals

Considerable spikes in cases have been reported from Kasargod district of Kerala and Bhilwara in Rajasthan. Kerala also reported its first COVID-19 death after a 69-year-old man being treated for the virus died at Ernakulam Medical College Hospital.

"While social distancing and lockdown continue to be vital, our focus is also on setting up dedicated COVID-19 hospitals in every State, ensuring that there are adequate number of beds, ventilators and ICU facilities," Mr. Agarwal told reporters.

"Over 17 States across India have already started work on identifying dedicated hospitals. As for the other States we are constantly engaged in discussion for earmarking dedicated COVID-19 hospitals," he added.

The number of confirmed cases, according to data from the Union Health Ministry stood at 909 cases (862 Indian and 47 foreigners), with 819 active cases and 19 deaths so far. Maharashtra (177), and Kerala (168) have reported the highest number of cases so far.

870 active cases

Reports from State health departments put number of confirmed cases at 974 with 870 active cases. In addition to Kerala's first fatality, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Telangana also reported one more death each, taking the nationwide toll to 24.

Uttar Pradesh now has 61 confirmed patients with 11 new cases while 28 new cases were confirmed in Maharashtra.

Twelve new cases were confirmed by the Karnataka Health Department, taking the total number of in the State to 76. Punjab has 38 cases, while Haryana reported 33 including 14 foreigners. Madhya Pradesh has recorded 30 cases, Jammu and Kashmir 20 with eight fresh cases, West Bengal 15, Andhra Pradesh 14 and Ladakh has reported 13.

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PM sets up new fund to fight virus

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday called for donations to the newly instituted PM-CARES Fund, which he said, has been formed on popular demand to help fight the novel coronavirus.

In a series of tweets, Mr. Modi said, "People from all walks of life expressed their desire to donate to India's war against COVID-19. Respecting that spirit, the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund has been constituted. This will go a long way in creating a healthier India," he said.

He also said the fund will cater to "similar distressing situations if they occur in the times ahead".

As per a PIB statement, the fund will be a public charitable trust under the name of 'Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund'. The Prime Minister is the Chairman of this trust and members include the Defence Minister, Home Minister and Finance Minister. There is already a Prime Minister's National Relief Fund for identical purpose.

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We were proactive, pre-emptive: Centre

'Not lenient towards foreign travellers'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

India has been "proactive and preemptive, and graded" in its response to the COVID-19 crisis, the government said on Saturday.

Amid criticism that the three-week lockdown announced on March 24 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was without prior planning, the Centre released a timeline of its actions since the breakout of the global pandemic.

As lakhs of migrant labourers remain stranded without food and supplies in several parts of the country due to the lockdown, the government countered criticism that its response system was lenient towards foreign travellers.

"...The statement that 'prosperous Indians' were allowed to return without screening, is preposterous. The government took swift action to put in a place a comprehensive and robust system of screening, quarantine and surveillance are part of its robust response to the public health crisis right from the beginning. This covered every traveller, Indians returning after business, or tourism, students as well as foreigners," the release by the Press Information Bureau said. It said India acted much before WHO declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, to put in place a "comprehensive response system" at its borders.

"Screening of incoming air passengers followed by suspension of visas and and ban on international flights was much ahead of any other country," the government said, pointing out that Italy and Spain, which are devastated by COVID-19, started screening of travellers after 25 days and 39 days respectively of first reported case.

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'Lockdown was ill-planned'

The Congress and the CPI(M) slammed the Modi government for the "ill-planned" lockdown and general unpreparedness in tackling the coronavirus outbreak. Posting a picture of the crowd of migrants in Delhi, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi tweeted that the government was to blame for the "alarming" situation. ▸ PAGE 7

Despite U.P. CM's appeal, workers throng bus stands

Without work or money, they see little point in staying put

OMAR RASHID
LUCKNOW

"*Do din ho gaye khana nahi mila abhi* (it's two days since we have got proper food)," said Neeraj Yadav as he trudged along a deserted street, hefting his meagre belongings.

With a small group of friends, Mr. Yadav is heading towards the Qaiserbagh bus station in the heart of Lucknow, hoping for transport back home.

A mason, Mr. Yadav had arrived in Lucknow from the Terai district of Lakhimpur Kheri two weeks ago, hired by a contractor to work at a site near the airport.

Physical distancing norms go for a toss at a bus station in Lucknow. ▪ OMAR RASHID

Abandoned

However, after the nationwide lockdown was announced to check the spread of the novel coronavirus on March 24, the contractor shut down the business, leaving the labourers stranded, without work or food.

Apprehensive that the lockdown would be extended beyond 21 days, the construction workers decided to head home after the government announced that special buses would be run on Saturday.

"What will we do sitting here when we don't get food or water," asked Mr. Yadav, who has walked 20 km to reach the bus station, surviving on the biscuits and water offered by some residents and the police on the way.

The appeal by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Friday, that migrant labourers should stay on wherever they are rather than trying to return home, was met with little enthusiasm from the workers.

"Had we got basic facilities here, why would we not stay back," remarked Ravindra Yadav. "After all we had come all the way to work."

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One destination

Rush hour: People waiting to board buses at Kaushambi on the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border on Saturday after the U.P. government started plying buses to evacuate those stranded in the Capital following a nationwide 21-day lockdown. ▪ PTI (REPORT ON PAGE 2)

'If I stay on, I will die of hunger'

JATIN ANAND
GREATER NOIDA

"If I stay here, I will die of hunger, if I contract the infection, I can at least die on my own soil," says Manish Kumar, a migrant worker from Kanpur. He used to work at a cloth factory at Kasna here, which has been shut for a week now.

He was among the thousands of migrant workers – rendered jobless by the lockdown – who converged at the 'Zero Point' on the Yamuna Expressway to go home on Saturday. Many of them were bound for Agra, Aligarh and Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, and some for Bihar.

The U.P. government said 200 buses had been arranged to ferry them to various locations.

FLIGHT FROM HUNGER BEATS FIGHT AGAINST VIRUS ▸ PAGE 7

Nitish upset with States sending back migrants

'Bus rides will defeat lockdown purpose'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
PATNA

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Saturday disapproved of some States sending back scores of migrant workers to Bihar in buses.

"The very purpose of the lockdown will be defeated if thousands of migrants are sent to Bihar by buses. My government has asked the Bihar Resident Commissioner in Delhi to coordinate with various State governments and reimburse the costs of their food and stay," he told a news channel.

"COVID-19 will spread if they are ferried together in buses," Mr. Kumar said. "It is better to organise camps locally. The State government will reimburse the costs of these camps," the Chief Minister said.

Mr. Kumar recently announced that ₹100 crore would be released from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund for the food and shelter of Bihar workers stranded in other States. Several MLAs and MPs have announced donations to the State to deal with the situation.

The Bihar government on Friday created a Corona Eradication Fund and said the planning and development department would deduct a minimum of ₹50 lakh from the funds under the MLA and MLC Local Area Development Scheme. The health department would open a separate bank account for the CEF, and the amount would be utilised for buying medicines, masks, kits and other equipment, a senior official told *The Hindu*.

Lockdown: Wildlife reclaims its territory

Had animals undertaken NRC, humans would have been ejected, says resident

RAHUL KARMAKAR
GUWAHATI

Walking around the Dighalipukhuri, meaning 'Long lake', was a regular morning habit for retired bureaucrat Rajib Prakash Baruah until the 21-day lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic began from March 24 midnight.

He couldn't recall seeing the *kharali haanh* (lesser whistling duck) in the lake when an acquaintance with a better view from his house reported a flock on Friday.

"We were used to seeing several species of local and migratory waterfowl in Dighalipukhuri when we were young. They have returned after decades possibly because there aren't any humans around to interfere because of the lockdown," said Kailash Sarma, a cultural activist who lives beside the Jorpukhuri (Twin lakes), a few metres east of Dighalipukhuri.

Return of the native: A flock of lesser whistling duck in Guwahati's Dighalipukhuri lake. ▪ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

"If boating and recreational activities in and around the lake are restricted, the ducks might keep coming," said Bibhav Talukdar, who heads the green NGO Aaranyak.

He said Guwahati has always had a 'wild' side with the city recording some 200 species of mammals. This is because it is woven around 11 forest reserves, several wetlands including a Ramsar site and hills.

Instances of animals venturing out into human habitations have also been reported elsewhere in Assam. A one-horned rhino ambled to Sonapur from the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, 28 km away. Officials said it was probably because the animal did not face any human obstacles en route.

In Barpeta town, residents have been hearing the howls of the rare black fox more frequently than in the past. One was spotted during the day too.

"Animals once used to roam these areas. If they could undertake an exercise like the NRC [National Register of Citizens], we might all have been ejected and our homes dismantled for the trees to grow again," said Dhanjit Das, a resident of the town.

Sri Lanka terms Chennai COVID-19 'high-risk zone'

Alert as 4 test positive after city visit

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka on Saturday reported its first COVID-19 death, of a 65-year-old patient, who had diabetes and renal health complications, Health Ministry officials said. The island nation has 113 confirmed coronavirus patients so far.

Sri Lanka's health officials have also detected four COVID-19 positive cases in people who recently returned from Chennai, prompting authorities to term Chennai a "high-risk" zone.

"Two cases detected today and two more cases from earlier this week were all Chennai returnees, Chennai is definitely a high-risk zone" Director-General of Health Services told *The Hindu* on Saturday. The government has asked all those returned from Chennai in the last 14 days to report to health authorities for quarantine.

Mid-March, Sri Lanka reported four persons – an Indian tourist and three Sri Lankans – who tested positive on arrival from India. With the latest detections, a total of eight cases have originated from India, according to authorities. Nine patients have recovered and been discharged from hospital, according to an official bulletin.

Sri Lanka stopped flight arrivals in all its airports on March 17. For a week now, the island has been on a near-total shutdown and travel between districts has also been banned.