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Migrant workers stuck with nowhere to go

A police official deployed at Zero Point during the two-day drive by the government to help stranded workers return home, said, "All those fortunate enough" to board them had done so till midnight on Saturday.

The likelihood of bus services being on offer on Monday was "highly unlikely" he said.

"Whoever was destined to go back home mostly went yesterday. From tomorrow, we will begin enforcing the lockdown again

using any means necessary," he added.

After four hours of having run after every passing bus, Mr. Gupta's roommate, Anand Kumar, was finally able to persuade him and Anil to return to their shared digs at around noon.

"We will go back, what else; there is no point in being stuck here with nothing on either side," Mr. Gupta said as he joined a growing number of disappointed workers returning to the city they had sought to leave.

'Migrant workers to be quarantined at borders'

If any landlord is forcing labourers and students to vacate their premises, they will be liable for action under the Disaster Management Act, the order said. District magistrates and police officers concerned will be personally liable for implementing these orders and the lockdown measures announced by the government, the order added.

"In case of violation of

any of the above measures, the respective State or Union Territory government shall take necessary action under the Act," said the order.

The Cabinet Secretary and the Union Home Secretary are in constant touch with the State Chief Secretaries and the respective Director-Generals of Police via video conferencing to review the situation.

I apologise for tough steps, says Modi

"I have had to take some decisions that has created hardship for you, especially my poor brothers and sisters... They [the poor] must be thinking what kind of Prime Minister is this who has locked up all of us. I specifically ask for forgiveness from them. But looking at the world, this looks like the only option," the Prime Minister said.

Striking an optimistic note, Mr Modi wrapped up

his 36-minute address by asserting that India would successfully defeat COVID-19 and hoped to put it behind by his next radio broadcast in April.

On those violating the lockdown rules, Mr. Modi said, "This is sad... Many people across the world did the same mistake. Those who are defying lockdown are playing with their own lives."

Rahul Gandhi calls for a 'nuanced approach'

"It is critical for us to understand that India's conditions are unique. We will be required to take different steps than other large countries who are following a total lockdown strategy. The number of poor people in India who are dependent on a daily income is simply too large for us to unilaterally shut down all economic activity. The consequences of a complete economic shut down will disastrously amplify the death toll arising from the virus," Mr. Gandhi said in the letter released by the Congress party hours after the Prime Minister's *Mann Ki Baat*.

"Our priority must be to protect and isolate the elderly and vulnerable, and to clearly and strongly communicate to the young, the dangers of proximity to older people," he said.

"Millions of India's elderly live in villages. A complete lockdown and the resulting shut down of our economic engine will almost certainly ensure that millions of unemployed youth rush back to their villages, increasing the risk of infecting their parents and the elderly population living there. This will result in a catastrophic loss of life," Mr. Gandhi added.

Cases surge; ICMR denies community transmission

Since the lockdown was announced on March 24, India has added between 75-100 cases a day on average.

According to district-wise updated figures from the Union Health Ministry, Mumbai recorded the highest number of cases at 81, followed by Kasargod in Kerala with 78. Bangalore came

next with 26. The National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority has asked States to coordinate with manufacturers of gloves, hand sanitisers and masks to address shortages in these products.

The list mentions 35 manufacturers of gloves, 49 makers of sanitisers and 34 mask makers.

Store staff held for denying entry to Nagas

The video accompanying the post, which went viral on social media platforms, showed one of the students standing near the entrance, pleading with the staff members to allow them entry.

"Why are you discriminating. We too are Indians. We too are human beings. We too need grocery like you. We have Aadhaar cards. Why can't you accept us," he was heard telling the

store representative.

Tweeting the video, anthropologist and author Dolly Kikon said, "Meanwhile, in Karnataka, Naga migrants from Northeast India not allowed to buy food. Shameful. Racism in India is an everyday affair."

The Mysuru police took note of the video on Sunday and arrested the manager and three staff members of More Megastore.

PMO working in teams to battle virus

10 more groups formed on Sunday for coordination

NISTULA HEBBAR
NEW DELHI

Inside the fight against COVID-19 in India, there is no "war room" for a disease that is best fought by maintaining physical distance.

Instead it is being fought by forming discrete groups of officials and Ministers who communicate remotely and whose linchpin at the Centre, apart from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is his



Rajiv Gauba

Principal Secretary, P.K. Mishra, and Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba.

Government sources told *The Hindu* that contrary to

the "war room" narrative, the PMO has been working in small teams (10 teams looking at various aspects of the crisis were set up additionally on Sunday). "P.K. Mishra, along with Health Minister Dr. Harsh Vardhan, Health Secretary Preeti Sudan and the Director-General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Dr. Balram Bhargava, take care of the medical aspects of the crisis

Modi interacts with 200 people daily

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacts with over 200 people daily to get first-hand information on India's fight against the COVID-19, the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement on Sunday.

It said his interactions included phone calls to the Governors, the Chief Ministers and the State Health Ministers.

It also pointed out that he reaches out to some of those infected with COVID-19 and those who have recovered from the

virus to keep an update on their progress.

Since January, Mr. Modi has held several rounds of meetings and discussions with people from various walks of life and officials.

The Prime Minister is also updated by a Group of Ministers.

in terms of treatments, protocols, how to enforce them and coordinate with international agencies. A second group headed by Mr. Gauba is coordinating with the Chief Secretaries of all States and looking into requests for expediting regulatory permissions for treatment equipment and kits. Basically to coordinate with regulatory agencies to validate data a little faster than it would

you usually do," said a source. Technical issues like the creation of apps for monitoring the virus are handled by the IT Ministry.

A committee headed by Rajnath Singh and including Amit Shah has been constituted to ensure the smooth running of the supply chains and logistics.

"Prime Minister Modi has a direct line to all of them and they too can access him

via Mr. Mishra. While the minutiae is dealt with by his office, Mr. Modi also believes that the challenge needs to be fought with unity and a positive morale, which is why he held a series of video conferences with different stakeholders like media (print and TV), industrialists and radio jockeys. He has been calling up frontline warriors like nurses and doctors," said the source.

Principal Secretary, P.K. Mishra, and Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba.

Government sources told *The Hindu* that contrary to

275 from Iran taken to Jodhpur

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

SpiceJet and IndiGo aircraft took 275 Indians evacuated from Iran to Jodhpur on Sunday, Civil Aviation Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said.

"Operation Namaste! Efforts to safeguard Indian citizens against Covid19 continue," Mr. Puri wrote on Twitter.

"The 275 Indians who were evacuated from Iran have been screened & shifted by IndiGo and SpiceJet aircraft to Army Wellness Centre at Jodhpur for quarantine," he said.

All 139 passengers on the IndiGo aircraft tested negative prior to the flight, the airline said.

SpiceJet pilot tests positive for COVID-19

DGCA suspends breathalyser checks as pilots' body raises fears of infection spread

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI/CHENNAI

After a SpiceJet pilot tested positive for COVID-19, the Director-General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) on Sunday issued an order waiving the mandatory breathalyser test for aviation personnel to ensure that the use of the testing device does not cause the infection to spread.

According to SpiceJet, a junior pilot went under self-quarantine after his last flight on March 21 from Chennai to Delhi and tested positive for COVID-19 on Saturday. The airline has now asked all staff who came into contact with the pilot to undertake self-quarantine for 14 days. The airline also said the pilot did not operate any



The airline has asked all staff who came into contact with the pilot to undertake self-quarantine for 14 days. • V. V. KRISHNAN

international flight in March.

Following the SpiceJet announcement, a letter from the Indian Commercial Pilots Association (ICPA) to the DGCA said "continuing BA Tests in these circumstances is extremely dangerous" as

the machine for the test remains the same and droplets or aerosols of infected pilots may infect the healthy. Saturday's letter is the second from the ICPA, which had made a similar request on March 20.

The DGCA in its order temporarily suspending the requirement of pilots, cabin crew, Air Traffic Controllers and other personnel from undergoing the test for alcohol consumption, said all such personnel will have to give an undertaking that they have not consumed alcohol in the 12 hours before duty time.

In operation

While all commercial flights, domestic and international, are grounded until April 14 following a nationwide lockdown, several flights ferrying evacuees from different parts of the world as well as medical supplies are in operation.

SpiceJet said the pilot had

been admitted to a hospital in New Delhi. "All measures are being taken to provide appropriate medical care to him. As a precautionary measure, all crew and staff, who had been in direct contact with him, have been asked to self-quarantine by staying at home for the next 14 days," an airline statement said.

"Safety of our passengers and employees is our top-most priority. We have been diligently following the guidelines issued by the WHO and the Government of India. All our aircraft are being disinfected thoroughly since the end of January and the disinfectants used are as per the WHO standards," a SpiceJet spokesperson said.

SC hearings on religious freedom lie in limbo

Only urgent cases are being heard

LEGAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The hearings before a nine-judge Supreme Court Bench on the ambit and scope of religious freedom practised by multiple faiths across the country lie in limbo due to the COVID-19 scare.

The Bench led by Chief Justice of India S.A. Bobde is hearing this reference on the question of religious freedom in connection with the Sabarimala case.

The apex court complex is completely shut down. Extremely urgent cases are being heard via videoconferencing.

However, none of the Constitution Bench cases, including the challenge to the abrogation of special status to Jammu and Kashmir

under Article 370, has been listed. The fate of the reference is also uncertain because the seniormost puisne judge on the Bench, Justice R. Banumathi, is set to retire in July.

The Bench has gone on to frame "larger issues" concerning essential practices of various religions.

It clubbed other pending cases on subjects such as female genital mutilation among Dawoodi Bohras to entry of Parsi women who married inter-faith and Muslim women into mosques and referred them to a larger Bench. It also asked the larger Bench to consider its ruling on the prohibition of entry to women of menstruating age into the Sabarimala temple.

India cuts back on Afghan missions

As COVID-19 adds to security threat, operations at Herat, Jalalabad suspended

SUHASINI HAIDAR
NEW DELHI

With a growing number of cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection from Iran and Pakistan and the worsening security situation, India has decided to suspend operations at its missions in the Afghanistan cities of Jalalabad and Herat, highly placed sources confirmed to *The Hindu*.

Diplomatic staff and personnel of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) are being pulled out.

On Sunday, all Indian personnel at the Consulate in Jalalabad, near the Pakistan border, were moved to Kabul, and are likely to return to India by special flights coming in to transport Afghan citizens back. Those at the Consulate in Herat near the Iranian border are likely



Afghan refugees from Iran at a check point in Herat.

to return later this week.

Officials say that an influx of Afghan refugees over the porous borders from Iran, which has seen more than 38,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and from Pakistan that has seen a rapid rise to more than 1,200 confirmed cases, has raised concerns

about Herat and Jalalabad in particular. Last week, Afghan Health Minister Ferozuddin Feroz had said there were predictions that as much as half the population would contract the virus at some point.

The move to pull out Indian personnel also follows a deep security assessment undertaken by the government on the situation in Afghanistan following the deadly attack by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) on a gurdwara in Kabul on March 25, in which 25 people, including an Indian were gunned down.

A senior official said the government's view of the security situation and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was that it cannot be "business as usual" for the

Indian missions.

"For Pakistan, Afghanistan has always been about strategic depth, and now the ISI is emboldened to do as it pleases," a senior official told *The Hindu*. He added that two-thirds of ISKP recruits are Orakzai tribe members, living on the Pakistan side of the Durand Line.

As a result, India's assessment is that the month-old U.S.-Taliban deal, which only stipulates that the Taliban will ensure no attacks on American forces and interests, will lead to an increase in attacks on Indian missions. New Delhi is re-strategising the impact on all Indian missions, installations and projects, sources said.

(With inputs from Dinakar Peri & Vijaya Singh)

Lenders ready with EMI holiday offer

Banks and other finance institutions will send texts, emails to their customers

MANOJIT SAHA
MUMBAI

The Housing Development and Finance Corporation (HDFC), the country's largest mortgage lender, and some other lenders will reach out to customers and give them the option to skip equated monthly instalment (EMI) for the next three months as announced by the Reserve Bank of India on Friday.

The move will enable customers, particularly those who have opted for the electronic clearing service (ECS) facility, to opt for deferring payments for the next three months.

"We will give our customers an option to defer EMIs," Keki Mistry, vice-chairman and CEO, HDFC, told *The Hindu*.

HDFC will reach out to its customers via email and SMS, informing them to exercise their choice through a



Customers can now defer their payments.

link in their website. The customer will also have the option to continue with the EMIs.

Private sector lender Kotak Mahindra Bank has also communicated through social media that the bank is working on the issue and will inform the customers via email and SMS.

The other alternative for the borrower to defer EMIs is to instruct the bank from where the EMI is debited to

stop the ECS facility.

A borrower who has not opted for the ECS facility can simply avoid paying the instalment for three months.

On Friday, the RBI allowed all banks and financial institutions including non-banking finance companies to extend a three-month moratorium on the instalments falling due between March 1, 2020 and May 31, 2020 for all term loans.

Consumer loans

This relaxation is also applicable for consumer loans like auto loans, home loans and personal loans, as well as credit card outstanding.

This would mean a consumer may choose not to pay monthly equated instalments on their loans for the next three months.

The move is a part of several measures announced by the central bank to fight the economic impact caused by

a nationwide lockdown enforced due to the outbreak of COVID-19.

Lenders will not have to classify the borrower account as non-performing due to the relaxation, RBI had said. There will also be no impact on the borrowers credit score.

Interest to accrue

The banking regulator has clarified that interest will continue to accrue on the outstanding portion of the term loans during the moratorium period.

"Customers need to understand that moratorium is not a waiver of any kind but just a facility provided to customers to tide over their temporary liquidity issue and once the moratorium period is over, they will need to repay the loan with accrued interest," said an official of a housing finance company.

EPF scheme members handed COVID-19 lifeline

Non-refundable advance made available

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Union Labour and Employment Ministry said on Sunday that it had notified an amendment to the Employees' Provident Scheme (EPS) allowing members to withdraw non-refundable advance amounts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As announced by Finance

Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on March 26, the Ministry notified the amendment on March 27, making it effective from March 28.

"The notification permits withdrawal not exceeding the basic wages and dearness allowance for three months or up to 75% of the amount standing to member's credit in the EPF account," a statement said.



APPEAL
Mast Sanjay 8 years old is a special child diagnosed with Pulmonary Valve repair with ASD. The cost of his Open Heart Surgery (ASD Closure) is Rs. 2,00,000/- which will be conducted at Public Health Centre, Chennai. Kindly help him. Only the donations sent through Ch.D/D/NEFT Transfer (Syndicate, Nungambakkam Branch, A/C No.60182010063310, IFSC No. SYNB0000018) favouring **WOMEN'S WELFARE SYNDICATE** are entitled for exemption under 80G IT. Please give us your email id.

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