



Union Home Secretary writes to States to curb black marketing

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Battle against the virus should be at the human level, says Sachin Pilot

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Afghan government to release 100 Taliban prisoners, says official

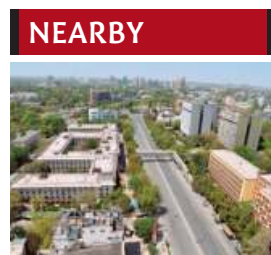
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Bernie Sanders drops out of 2020 Democratic race for President

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Delhi seals 20 areas to contain COVID-19 spread

NEW DELHI
 Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia on Wednesday said the Delhi government has sealed 20 areas in the city and people will not be allowed to enter or exit them to control the spread of COVID-19 in the city.

CITY PAGE 3

U.S.-based firm sacks staff at Gurugram unit

GURUGRAM
 At least a hundred employees have been terminated by Fareportal, a New York-based tech travel firm, in Gurugram amid the COVID-19 outbreak, without assigning any reason. The company laid off employees at its Pune firm as well. Many of those laid off had been working with the company for five to 10 years.

CITY PAGE 2

Masks must for stepping out of homes in Odisha

BHUBANESWAR
 The Odisha government has ordered that people coming out of their homes across the State should wear masks from Thursday. The public has been directed to cover their mouth and nose with any kind of mask. A handkerchief or any piece of cloth in at least two layers can also be used for the purpose.

NORTH & EAST PAGE 4

It will not be possible to lift the lockdown in one go, says Modi

The country is going through a 'social emergency', PM tells political parties

SOBHANA K. NAIR
 NEW DELHI

At a videoconference on Wednesday with parties' floor leaders in Parliament, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said it won't be possible to lift the 21-day nationwide lockdown in one go as scheduled for April 14. He, however, noted that he would consult the Chief Ministers before deciding the exit strategy.

Speaking at the end of a nearly three-and-a-half-hour meeting, Mr. Modi said the country was going through a "social emergency".

Many countries are using lockdown and physical distancing to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. "In the coming days, you have suggested that the

COVID-19

lockdown should not be lifted all of a sudden, it should be staggered. Till now, the suggestions I have been getting are that it won't be so simple to lift the lockdown. We will have to take some strong measures to ensure social distancing," he said.

Mr. Modi thanked the parties for their support. "Today, the situation in the country is akin to a social

Till now, the suggestions I have been getting are that it won't be so simple to lift the lockdown. We will have to take some strong measures to ensure social distancing
 NARENDRA MODI, Prime Minister

No question of supporting or opposing it. It is a decision to be taken by the government. If they consult everyone before taking the decision, then we shall welcome it
 GHULAM NABI AZAD
 Congress leader

If U.S. is struggling to control the spread of the virus without stringent social distancing norms, then how can we, considering we have limited health-care amenities?
 RAMGOPAL YADAV
 Samajwadi Party leader

emergency; it has necessitated tough decisions and we must continue to remain vigilant," he said, and sought their continued support. "Kareeb, Kareeb yeh mood ban raha hai ki ek dum se lockdown uthana sambhav nahi hoga (The general mood is that it won't be possible to lift the lockdown at one go)."

Leaders from 18 political parties attended the interaction. Top Central officials gave presentations on the steps being taken to meet the emerging challenges, including the status of distribution of benefits under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana.

The Congress supported an extension to the lockdown. Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad said, "There is no question of supporting it or opposing it. It is a decision to be taken by the government. If they consult everyone before taking the decision, we shall welcome it." The majority of the parties felt that there should be a calibrated exit from the lockdown, he added.

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MORE REPORTS ON PAGES 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10 & 11

WUHAN LOCKDOWN LIFTED AFTER 76 DAYS PAGE 14

Restrictions on spending

With the Centre expecting an extreme cash crunch due to the COVID-19 crisis, most Central government departments have been asked to cut their first quarter expenditure to 15-20% of the year's budget estimates. Departments considered crucial to dealing with the pandemic and the resultant lockdown will not be affected by these restrictions. PAGE 15

Tax refunds to be released

The Centre has decided to immediately release tax refunds to the tune of ₹18,000 crore, in a bid to provide relief to individual taxpayers as well as businesses. All pending income tax refunds up to ₹5 lakh would be released immediately by the Income Tax Department. Similarly, all pending refunds for Goods and Services Tax and Customs will also be issued. PAGE 15

Focus shifts to contact tracing, infrastructure

32 deaths reported in the past 24 hours, taking toll to 149

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
 NEW DELHI

With 32 deaths reported in the past 24 hours, the Union Health Ministry on Wednesday said building hospital infrastructure, aggressive contact tracing and total enforcement of the lockdown with the help of people were the main focus now in the fight against COVID-19.

The country has 5,194 cases and 149 deaths, with 402 patients recovered. The Indian Council of Medical Research said 1,27,919 tests had so far been done and 13,143 samples were reported on Wednesday.

Reports from the State Health Departments put the number of confirmed cases at 5,598, with 4,932 active ones. The death toll in the country stood at 182, while 404 people have recovered. The most number of cases have been reported from Maharashtra (1,135), followed by Tamil Nadu (738) and Delhi (576).

'Early identification key'

At a press conference here, Lav Agrawal, Joint Secretary, Health Ministry, said: "We are speeding up infrastructure-building and grading up our response as the number of cases...has shown a rise over the past few days."

He added that the country

Status check

Maharashtra had the highest number of COVID-19 related deaths and cases as of Wednesday. Eighteen States have recorded at least one death. Table lists 10 States that have reported the most deaths

State	Deaths	Cases
Maharashtra	72	1,135
Madhya Pradesh	23	308
Gujarat	16	186
Telangana	11	364
Delhi	9	576
Punjab	8	106
Tamil Nadu	8	738
Rajasthan	6	363
Karnataka	5	181
West Bengal	5	92



An IAF aircraft ferried medical equipment from Chennai to Bhubaneswar on Monday for setting up COVID-19 testing facilities in Odisha.

was facing an unprecedented challenge, in which "we are getting cases of both symptomatic and asymptomatic patients acting as carriers. The need of the hour is to break the transmission, and for that, the lockdown is the key, and we seek the cooperation of people."

"When we are dealing with an infectious disease, it is an everyday battle, and even a single slip-up will cost us [dear]. Early identification is the key to managing the cases," he said.

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SC bats for free testing

Tests relating to COVID-19, whether done in approved government or private laboratories, shall be free of cost, the Supreme Court ordered on Wednesday. A Bench of Justices Ashok Bhushan and S. Ravindra Bhat held that tests must be carried out only in NABL accredited laboratories or any agencies approved by the WHO or the ICMR. PAGE 9

Muslim men carry Hindu woman's bier

Relatives refused to help the family; neighbours arranged material for last rites

SIDHARTH YADAV
 BHOPAL

When the sons of Draupadi Bai Verma's sister refused to tend to her as she suffered from high fever, suspecting she had contracted COVID-19, there was no one left to take her to hospital.

The next morning she died. Even then, her relatives refused to touch the body. That's when 10 Muslim neighbours got together to buy things for her last rites, put together a bier, and carried her body to the cremation ground on their shoulders.

"This is the purpose of humanity, to serve each other," said Abdul Rehman Sheikh, one of the neighbours in South Toda of Indore, who carried the bier.

Ailing with paralysis for three months, Draupadi Bai lived with the family of her son, a daily wage labourer, who doesn't even own a bicycle. The other son lives in



The men carrying the bier of Draupadi Bai in Indore. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

another locality 6 km away, and couldn't reach South Toda because of barricading. When she was suffering from high fever on Sunday night, the neighbours guided the children of the son to tend to her, apply wet towels on her forehead to bring down the temperature. "She had no one to help her. Even the son

was helpless. We had tears in our eyes," said Mr. Sheikh, 30, a businessman. That's when they called her sister's sons, who live just 100 metres away. "The sister and her sons refused to step inside the house. If she was taken to a hospital the same day, she probably wouldn't have died," he said.

Funeral procession

The next day, the neighbours woke up to the news of Draupadi Bai's death. "We asked the son about the material we could buy for the last rites. And put together her bier," said Mr. Sheikh. Around 11 a.m. on Tuesday, the 10 men, along with the her two sons and their children, took out the procession to the cremation ground around a kilometre away.

The number of COVID-19 cases are spiralling in Indore, with health workers yet to locate a source, as most pa-

tients have had no contact or travel history. South Toda falls in the containment area of the outbreak, which has Jhanda Chowk, 350 metres away, as its epicentre. As most patients are testing positive for the virus after death, owing to the limited testing protocol, local residents are wary of approaching anyone ailing with cough, cold or fever, common symptoms of the infection. So far, 16 persons have succumbed to the disease in the city, which has recorded 213 cases.

The act of the neighbours earned praise from former Chief Minister Kamal Nath. "The example of humanity and brotherhood they have presented is commendable," he wrote on Twitter. "This is our Ganga-Jamuna *sanskriti*. Such visuals represent the harmony and our brotherhood," he said, while sharing a photograph of the men carrying the bier.

OMAR RASHID
 LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh government on Wednesday decided to completely seal COVID-19 hotspots within 15 districts till the end of the lockdown on April 14. The announcement, first made orally by a senior official, triggered panic buying among anxious public who stepped out to the markets in big numbers as confusion prevailed over which areas would come under the purview of the total lockdown. Several hours after the government decision, officials were yet to declare the names of the hotspots in many districts.

The government listed 100 such hotspots spread across 15 districts, including Lucknow, Noida, Ghaziabad, Agra, Varanasi and Meerut. The actual names were still trickling in till late on Wednesday evening. The district-wise hotspots to be sealed



Flag march: Police personnel in Lucknow asked people not to crowd outside. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

stood as - Agra (22 hotspots), Ghaziabad (23), Noida (62), Kanpur (12), Shamli (3), Meerut (7) including some rural areas, Varanasi (4), Bareilly (1), Bulandshahr (3), Basti (3), Firozabad (3), Saharanpur (4), Maharajganj (4), Lucknow (12) including 8 major ones, and Sitapur (1).

The "affected areas" in these 15 districts, which have reported six or more positive

cases, should be "completely sealed" to make the lockdown secure, the State's top official Rajendra Kumar Tiwari said in instructions to District Police and administrative heads.

Mr. Tiwari instructed officials to review the movement passes issued in these districts and cancel those that were "unnecessary". Officials were asked to en-

sure 100% home delivery in affected areas. Shops and vegetable *mandis* would also not be allowed to open, so there is strict implementation of lockdown and social distancing, the Chief Secretary said.

The complete lockdown was first implemented in some areas of Agra and it produced "good results," said Awanish Awasthi, Additional Chief Secretary-Home Department, explaining the rationale behind the decision.

Confusion among the public started after Mr. Tiwari told media that affected areas in 15 districts would be sealed to prevent community spread but did not elaborate which areas would be included. Many television channels initially reported that the entire 15 districts, and not just the hotspots identified, would be completely sealed.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

17,000 seafarers will return only after policy is finalised

Shipping companies working on plans to send them back

JAGRITI CHANDRA
 NEW DELHI

Indian seafarers around the world would be allowed to return to the country after the ban on flights goes and the Government of India finalises a policy on repatriation of Indians, according to a senior official of the Shipping Ministry.

As per government estimates, there were "16,000-17,000" seafarers who need to be brought back to the country. "How they are brought back will depend on the Government of India's policy on allowing people to come from outside. Whatever policy is finalised, the same will be followed in the case of the seafarers. We will wait for the policy to be



A file photo of seafarers stuck in Iran. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

firmed up. We are in touch with the shipping companies and they are willing to follow that policy," the official said.

Various shipping companies were also finalising different modalities for sending back their staff to their countries and until then "seafarers are safe on cruise ships," the official said. "These sai-

lors have been accommodated in separate passenger cabins on board different cruise ships. They are being monitored, paid salaries and provided all amenities."

It was the responsibility of the shipping companies to repatriate their staff. "They realise that. They are only waiting for the right opportunity," the top source said.

On whether the government is likely to make special allowance to facilitate mariners to return before the ban on flights is lifted on April 15, or in case it is extended, the official said, "There is hardly a week left for the lockdown to be lifted; there is no point in rushing into it. It is also safer for the seafarers..."

Escaping quarantine centres at night, returning by day

Migrant workers slip out of Bihar shelters, allegedly lacking basic facilities, only to return for free food

AMARNATH TEWARY
 PATNA

Many of Bihar's migrant workers, who have been quarantined in village schools and panchayat buildings after returning from elsewhere in the country, are found missing from these centres at night, with most of them likely heading home to join their families before coming back to the quarantine facilities in the morning, according to village heads.

After the countrywide lockdown was imposed last month to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, Bihar's government set up quarantine centres at 3,115 government schools and panchayat buildings in rural parts of the State.

The government said



A file photo of migrant workers lodged in a government-run shelter home in Patna. RANJEET KUMAR

more than 1.7 lakh people had returned to the State in the wake of the lockdown, and as many as 27,300 of them had been lodged in these quarantine centres opened in different districts.

However, several of those staying in these centres,

village *mukhias* (heads), who have been asked to monitor the movement of those quarantined, often feel helpless under local pressure.

"In my village school building 14 migrants have been quarantined for the last three days but the building has no window, toilet, door or bed," admitted a village head of Saraiya block in Muzaffarpur district, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "Only food is being served to them three times a day. So many of them go to their family at night and return to the quarantine centre in the day for free food."

Similar reports have also come from several village heads in Madhubani, Munger, Samastipur, Sitwan, Sita-

marhi, Araria and Katihar districts. The migrants placed in quarantine centres quietly slip away at night to join their families while coming back to the centre in the daytime. "Yes, free food is the only attraction for them, otherwise they would have not come to the centre even in the daytime," asserted several village heads, who all declined to be identified.

The infrastructure at several village schools and panchayat buildings in Bihar is barely adequate with no toilets or washrooms. Many schools are windowless, have no doors separating rooms and are without running water or electricity supply.

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