

India's Covid cases top 30 million as economist warns against reopening too quickly

A health worker administers a dose of Covid-19 vaccine to a beneficiary at a vaccination center on June 10, 2021 in New Delhi, India.

India has reported more than 30 million Covid-19 cases since the pandemic started last year. Government data showed there were 59,144 infections recorded over a 24-hour period on Wednesday, bringing the total reported cases to 30.92 million. The reported daily death toll was 1,351.

The United States is the only country in the world that has reported more cases than India. The South Asian nation suffered a devastating second wave when reported coronavirus cases spiked between February and early May. It left hospitals overwhelmed and medical resources like oxygen and medicines in short supply.

A highly contagious variant of the coronavirus — known as the delta variant — was first reported in India and is reportedly partly responsible for the rapid rise in cases there.

In late June, several reports from the 191 countries of the World Health Organization said delta is becoming the dominant variant of the disease worldwide. Last year, India's central government imposed a month-long



national lockdown to slow the outbreak that had hit millions of people going out at work. This time, state governments imposed more localized measures to stem the spread of the virus.

Some economists, including Kunal Kohli from Socio Gen Capital, say that multiple waves of job losses, lost income, the unprecedented health crisis and related expenses are likely to leave Indian consumers "deeply nervous."

The second wave also took a toll on rural India, which likely affected demand in the country. The decline in rural incomes, Kohli said, is a major concern.

Planning for a third wave. Government officials, epidemiologists and other health experts say a third wave is inevitable, and some predict it could hit India by October.

In a Reuters poll of 60 health-care specialists, doctors, scientists, virologists, epidemiologists and professors from around the world, the consensus is that the third wave will be better controlled than the current wave.

India's Covid crisis. While experts say that vaccination is the way forward for India, many caution against lifting restrictions too soon.

To date, less than 5% of the

adult population has received two vaccine doses that are reported to be considered fully effective — the vaccination rollout faced challenges this year including supply shortages.

Statistics compiled by scientific online publication The World in Data showed that around 16% of the population has received at least one vaccine dose in India.

The country set an ambitious target of producing more than 2 billion Covid-19 vaccine doses by December — theoretically, that's enough to inoculate most of its population. But some public health experts say the vaccine rollout will not help minimize

the virus's spread. Vaccination rates are far below the levels deemed to be safe for easing social distancing measures substantially in the more populous and economically important states.

They say the country needs to set up temporary infrastructure in rural India to roll out vaccination drives and convince people to get their shots as many, especially in the countryside, are still hesitant.

The central government has rolled out a campaign to vaccinate all adults by the end of Monday, reports said. India gave out a record 7.5 million doses.

The decline in Covid-19 cases in recent weeks has prompted plans to begin reopening institutions, including the planned resumption of the education building for schools and colleges. Some observers say the move could potentially backfire.

"Vaccination rates are far below the levels deemed to be safe for easing social distancing measures substantially in the more populous and economically important states," said Piyanka Kachru, head of India and South

Asia economics at Oxford Economics, an Oxford-based consultancy.

She noted that partial restrictions are likely to stay in the country, but the reopening started at a faster-than-expected

"We think this reopening strategy is not prudent and may result in a renewed rise in infections and tightening of restrictions in the future," Kachru said. She explained that states with low vaccination rates could be forced to reimpose measures to fight new coronavirus outbreaks, which could have spillover effects that may force other states to step up restrictions again.

Oxford Economics remains cautious about the outlook and maintains its 2021 growth forecast for India at 9.1%.

Any attempts to cross border into Uzbekistan to be suppressed, Foreign Ministry says

Uzbekistan closely follows the situation in Afghanistan, especially in its northern provinces bordering with Uzbekistan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan said in a statement issued on June 24.

"The growth of violence in the neighboring country arouses deep concern. Escalation of terrorist and new waves of coronavirus infection makes life of people in Afghanistan even more difficult," the statement said.

"We regard all sides involved in the conflict to refrain from use of force and to prevent casualties among civilians," the statement added.

According to the Foreign Ministry, 53 servicemen of Afghan government forces crossed the border into Uzbekistan near Shertepa area after interrogation and investigation the Afghan nationals were returned back to Afghanistan.

"Any attempts to illegally cross the border into Uzbekistan will be strongly suppressed. The most strict measures will be adopted towards border violators," the Foreign Ministry said.

Uzbekistan remains committed to maintenance of traditionally friendly and good neighborly relations with Afghanistan, keeping neutrality and non-interference into internal affairs of the neighboring country," the statement said.

The government of Uzbekistan will continue providing all possible economic and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, including through implementation of major energy, transport and communication projects, which will also bring peace to the country, the statement concluded.

ANKHRESS



Death row inmates in Sri Lanka protest ex-lawmaker's pardon

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — About 10 anti-war inmates were on a hunger strike Friday to demand their sentences be commuted after Sri Lanka's president pardoned former lawmaker who had been condemned to death who were demanding their sentences be commuted to life terms, prison spokesman Christian Kanakasabesan said.

He said prison officials were discussing with the Justice Ministry and other government officials to resolve the issue but declined to give further details.

Sri Lanka's prisons are highly congested with more than 26,000 inmates crowded in facilities with little capacity of 10,000. Inmates in COVID-19 reported in more prisons last year, and at least 450 inmates were killed and more than 100 wounded when guards opened fire to control the unrest.

Prisoners' families and had been serving a death sentence over the killing of a rural lawmaker from his own party in an election-related attack about 10 years ago.

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Bangladesh govt suspends transport services connecting Dhaka to other parts

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According to the Bangladesh Railway (BR), it has suspended the capital city have been suspended from 12:01 a.m. on Wednesday, reports Xinhua news

agency. Senior Bangladesh BR official, told journalists on Thursday that the suspension would remain in force till June 30.

Also, long road buses to and from the capital city were suspended from Tuesday as part of emergency measures to contain the transmission of the disease.

Movement of forces from the capital Dhaka to various districts have already been halted due to ongoing concerns over the virus. Bangladesh has so far reported 187,555 coronavirus cases and 13,840 deaths.

Most of the ventilators needed to help severely ill COVID-19 patients breathe, were in the capital, Kathmandu, leaving regional and rural hospitals vulnerable.

While daily infections have slowed down from peak of more than 9,000 cases in mid-May, authorities say hospitals remain under pressure.

The Nepal Ventilator Services, a non-profit that has bought 85 of those machines through donations since the start of the pandemic last year, has helped meet the surge in demand.

"Nepal is essentially, insufficiently equipped with machines like ventilators," the group's co-founder, 42-year-old doctor Bishal Dhakal, told AFP news agency.

Nepal's ventilator 'bank' boosts COVID fight in rural hospitals

A ventilator "bank" where hospitals can rent critical care machines for COVID-19 patients has given Nepal's cash-strapped health system a much-needed lifeline.

The Himalayan nation, like its South Asian neighbors, experienced a spike in infections in April and May with hospitals overwhelmed and rural facilities running low.

As the coronavirus disease started to spread across the impoverished nation a year ago, Nepal only had 140 ventilators for a population of nearly 19 million, according to government data.

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Learn Bokray, 29, was struggling to breathe a week after she was infected in May.

Her brother, Kamaya Magar, was unable to find a spare ventilator in Kathmandu, until they reached Karnali.

"They (Nepal Ventilator Services) rescued us. I don't know if we would have found a ventilator without them," Magar told AFP, adding that Bokray was placed on a ventilator for two days and released from the hospital just over a week later.

Dhakal said all of the organization's 85 ventilators were loaned out during the peak.

The country has reported more than 800,000 infections and at least 8,900 deaths so far. Even as the second wave wanes, officials are concerned a third is around the corner.

Dhakal is working on increasing the ventilator stock and training more people to operate the specialized equipment.

"Hospitals can come to us for critical equipment that they might not need long-term," he said. "We want to make sure the public has access to healthcare when in need."

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