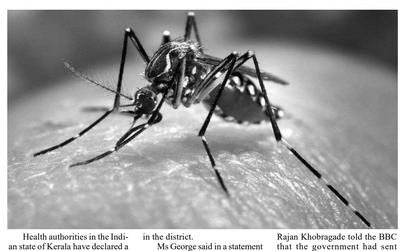
Zika virus: India's Kerala state on alert after 14 cases reported



Health authorities in the Indian state of Kerala have declared a state of alert in all districts after identifying 14 cases of Zika virus.

Kerala Health Minister Veena George confirmed the infections in Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram) district.

India reported a Zika outbreak in the western state of Gujarat in 2016-17.

The mosquito-borne virus has been linked to shrunken brains in children and a rare auto-immune disease called Guillain-Barre syndrome.

Although the virus is mostly spread by mosquitoes, it can also be sexually transmitted.

All new cases have been reported among healthcare workers in the district.

Ms George said in a statement that the first identified patient of the virus was a 24-year-old pregnant woman from a town bordering the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu.

She was admitted in the capital city of Trivandrum on 28 June with fever, headache and rashes. She delivered a baby on Wednesday.

"Her condition is stable. The delivery was normal. She has no travel history outside the state," Ms George said.

The ongoing monsoon rains have turned the affected areas into "breeding ground for the mosquitoes", she told reporters on Friday.

Kerala health secretary Dr Rajan Khobragade told the BBC that the government had sent teams for "strong surveillance in outbreak areas", making people aware of the disease; following up with pregnant mothers; and counselling couples.

Kerala is battling a continuing second wave of Covid-19 infections with the test positivity rate remaining over 10% for the past seven days. India's first case of coronavirus infection was also reported from the state in January 2020.

Zika virus was first isolated from monkeys living in the Zika jungle of Uganda in 1947. It was only formally described as a distinct virus in 1952.

But the researchers discovered that "significant numbers" of people in India had been exposed to the virus since a total of 33 of the 196 tested for the new disease had immunity.

"It therefore seems certain that Zika virus attacks human beings in India," they concluded in a paper published in 1953.

In 2016 and 2017, the western state of Gujarat reported cases of the Zika virus from the city of Ahmedabad.

Health authorities in the Indian state of Kerala have declared a state of alert in all districts after identifying 14 cases of Zika virus.

Kerala Health Minister Veena George confirmed the infections in Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram) district.

India reported a Zika outbreak in the western state of Gujarat in 2016-17.

The mosquito-borne virus has been linked to shrunken brains in children and a rare auto-immune disease called Guillain-Barre syndrome.

Although the virus is mostly spread by mosquitoes, it can also be sexually transmitted.

All new cases have been reported among healthcare workers in the district.

Ms George said in a statement that the first identified patient of the virus was a 24-year-old pregnant woman from a town bordering the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu.

She was admitted in the capital city of Trivandrum on 28 June with fever, headache and rashes.

Ms George said in a statement that the first identified patient of the virus was a 24-year-old pregnant woman from a town bordering the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu.

She was admitted in the capital city of Trivandrum on 28 June with fever, headache and rashes.

Bangladesh sees record 201 single-day COVID deaths as cases surge

Bangladesh reported 201 COVID-19 deaths on Wednesday, the highest single-day toll since the pandemic started in March last year.

It was for the first time that the death toll had crossed the 200-mark in a 24-hour cycle in the South Asian nation of some 165 million people, taking the total death count to 15,593.

The previous single-day high of 164 deaths was recorded on Monday. The first week of July saw 1,090 deaths, which is also the highest in any week during the pandemic in the country.

A total of 11,162 people were also diagnosed with the disease in the past 24 hours, taking the total tally to 9,77,568, officials said on Wednesday.

With coronavirus cases and deaths hitting new records, Bangladesh extended on Monday a strict nationwide lockdown by another week.

The Delta variant of the coronavirus, first identified in neighbouring India, is behind the surge in infections in Bangladesh, overwhelming its healthcare system and raising fears of a medical oxygen crisis.

The variant hit Bangladesh's border regions in the northern and southwestern regions last month and is now spreading fast in urban and rural areas across the country.

Most active variant

Tahmina Shirin, director of capital Dhaka-based Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) told Al Jazeera that they found the Delta variant in 78 percent of the total samples they sequenced in the past month.

The IEDCR first detected the Delta variant in Bangladesh on May 8. In the next month, they found that the variant already had community transmission in the country.

While the bordering districts with India, including Dinajpur, Chapainawabganj, Pirojpur, Khulna and Satkhira first witnessed the proliferation of the Delta variant, it has now started dominating the transmission in Dhaka, as well, said Shirin.

"We believe the strict lockdown has helped to slow down the spreading of Delta variant but it has not been able to stop it completely," she said.

Shirin said people who had taken two vaccine shots against the coronavirus were also found to be infected with the Delta variant.

"Still our best chance against fighting this variant is to get fully vaccinated," she said.

Only 3 percent of Bangladesh's population has received both doses of the vaccine.

After a promising start earlier this year, the country's inoculation programme took a hit after India, faced with a deadly second wave of the virus, stopped exporting AstraZeneca shots.

The vaccination programme, however, has been rejuvenated during the weekend after Bangladesh received 2.5 million doses of the Moderna vaccine from the United States and two million doses of the Sinopharm vaccine from China.

Experts concerned as festivities begin

Experts, meanwhile, are concerned and fear the worst in the coming days as two potential "super-spreader" events – the famous cow market and Eid al-Adha – are around the corner.

Before the Muslim festival every year, a number of makeshift camps crop up mainly in Dhaka and the port city of Chattogram where cattle traders from across the country sell the sacrificial animal. Millions attend these markets.

The two largest cities also witness an exodus of millions of people taking trains, buses, ferries and private vehicles to reach the countryside to celebrate the festival with their families.

Bangladeshi infectious disease expert Be-Nazir Ahmed told Al Jazeera that the government should extend the strict lockdown, which ends on July 14, until Eid al-Adha.

"The government should also stop cattle traders from coming to the capital from the countryside, especially from the bordering districts with India in where COVID infections are at its prime," he said.

Ahmed said that if lockdown is relaxed and people are allowed to move around, the country may witness "a major COVID explosion" after the Eid al-Adha festival.

"The number will be huge. We will face a situation like India faced just months ago," said Ahmed, a former director of disease control at Bangladesh's Directorate General of Health Service (DGHS).

DGHS spokesman Nazmul Islam said the government's policymakers are aware the situation is likely to worsen if the lockdown is relaxed before the Muslim festival.

"If the current trend of cases continues, then the strict lockdown might be extended," he said.

Islam said the government is currently focusing on raising the number of hospital beds and ensuring adequate manpower in COVID-19 hospitals.

"Besides, we are also scrutinising the need for setting up of field hospitals, especially outside of Dhaka," he said.

aljazeera

Boris Johnson urged to look into death of British woman in Pakistan

The prime minister of Pakistan and Boris Johnson have been asked to intervene in the case of a British woman who died in Pakistan, with MPs and her family calling for transparency over the circumstances.

Kelsey Devlin, a 27-year-old carer and mother of two from Burnley in Lancashire, died on 30 June in a hospital in Rawalpindi. A death certificate says the previously healthy young woman died of sepsis, a stroke and cardiopulmonary arrest, but her family in Burnley say they were concerned about her welfare in Pakistan before her death.

They are also alarmed by basic inconsistencies in the death certificate, such as getting her age wrong, incorrectly stating she was a Muslim and married, and falsely claiming she had had epilepsy since birth.

The family and a colleague of Devlin's say they were given conflicting accounts of how she fell ill shortly after arriving in Pakistan. She told the colleague she had been admitted with suspected malaria, but the family say they were first told she had a stomach bug and then coronavirus.

Two MPs have written to Johnson and to Pakistan's Imran Khan, saying: "The nature of the events that took place raises a number of suspicions and it is now essential that an independent investigation into this now takes place."

Antony Higginbotham, the MP for Burnley, and Naz Shah, the MP for Bradford West, said Devlin's family "genuinely believe that there is the possibility that Kelsey was killed, with her relationship with her partner described as one of coercion and control."

The MPs asked the two prime ministers to personally intervene in the case.

They have also requested an exhumation of Devlin's body "for the purpose of a full autopsy and repatriation to the UK, and [for] the children to be returned to the UK to their grandparents."

They wrote: "Should it be that Kelsey was in fact unwell and died due to illness … the family still has a right to transparency of the circumstances surrounding her death and the illness that caused it. They want and deserve answers to the concerns they have raised so they can get some closure and then be allowed to grieve for their daughter/sister.

This can only be achieved with your intervention and commitment to get to the bottom of how Kelsey died."

The Guardian has learned that Devlin was in a romantic relationship with a British work colleague shortly before flying out to Pakistan.

The colleague says that Devlin and her ex-partner, a Pakistani man whom she met in the UK when she was 16 and who is the father to her two children, had agreed to separate from her some time before her death.

Devlin's family in Burnley say the ex was very keen that their children receive an Islamic education in Pakistan and is now refusing to allow them to return home to the UK.

Devlin travelled to Pakistan on 3 June with her eight-year-old daughter and six-year-old son, bypassing the Covid travel ban because the children's paternal grandmother was said to be dying.

A few years ago Devlin moved to Wirral and she had recently begun training as a carer.

The colleague, whom the Guardian has agreed not to name, said he and Devlin began a non-sexual, romantic relationship earlier this year. He says Devlin planned to come back from Pakistan on her own and leave the children for six months to attend a madrasa.

The death certificate records the underlying cause of death as an "aciscemic stroke" and "VAP [ventilator-associated pneumonia]/sepsis".

It notes she was on maximum "inotropic support" to stabilise circulation and to optimise oxygen supply. As immediate and intervening causes it lists cardiopulmonary arrest.

Higginbotham said he had asked Foreign Office officials in Pakistan to check on Devlin after her family raised concerns about her wellbeing before her death. He said they went to the hospital but were unable to gain access to her to see if she was happy in Pakistan or wanted to return to the UK.

The Guardian asked the Foreign Office a series of questions, including what attempts it had made to assist the family before Devlin's death.

It did not answer the questions but sent a one-sentence statement saying: "We are supporting the family of a British national following her death in Pakistan."

The family in Burnley say they asked Lancashire police to help them before she died, and say an officer told them they could not intervene in a matter overseas.

A Lancashire police spokesperson said: "We have been made aware of Miss Devlin's death. We are liaising with relevant partners to support her family.

Our thoughts are with her family at this sad time."

Police in Pakistan said they had not been asked to investigate the case and said no one had raised suspicions about Devlin's death.

The Guardian contacted Devlin's ex-partner in Pakistan via WhatsApp and he expressed surprise at the notion that the death could be considered suspicious.

theguardian

Kyrgyzstan moves to nationalise gold mine run by Canadian company

Bishkek and Issyk-Kul Region, Kyrgyzstan – In the early 1990s, it was hoped that a large gold mine in eastern Kyrgyzstan, near the Chinese border, would lift the newly independent country's economy out of the shatters of Soviet central planning.

But 30 years into its operation, Kumtor has for many come to symbolise some of the developing world's greatest ills: corruption, environmental degradation and neocolonial greed.

In May, it became clear that dark clouds had gathered over Centerra Gold Inc, a Canadian-registered company operating the high-altitude mine, 26 percent of which belongs to the Kyrgyz state.

mining waste on glaciers, a move that caused their gradual erosion and cost the state $3bn.

Soon after, the parliament backed a proposal of the special commission on Kumtor to introduce state management at the mine for three months.

On May 14, President Sadyr Japarov approved the plan, which effectively brought the mine back into the state's hands.

Later, a number of high-profile politicians accused of financial crimes related to Kumtor were arrested.

In response, Centerra Gold initiated binding arbitration proceedings against the government for what they viewed as a violation of mutual agreements.

Its Kyrgyz units – Kumtor Gold Co and Kumtor Operating Co – applied for bankruptcy in a US court and the company says it will seek compensation from the government.

"In 1994, after the Kyrgyz people gained independence and with your help, we began building the Kumtor Gold Mine with an initial life of 18 years.

To this day, what we created together is something special that engineers from all over the world come to study," Scott Perry, Centerra's president and CEO, wrote in a statement.

"The seizure of the mine is based on false information and groundless allegations that undermine everything we have built together. We fear that the government's unjustified action will put thousands of well-paying jobs and the businesses of hundreds of Kyrgyz suppliers at risk."

Pressure grew on Centerra after January's presidential elections, which saw Japarov sweep to victory after a campaign promising national revival.

He had been designated to rule the country as interim president and prime minister following an uprising last October against political corruption and a disputed parliamentary election, the third upheaval since the country's independence.

And it was gold that brought him to power.

Months before winning a landslide, he was freed from prison where he was serving an 11-and-a-half-year sentence for kidnapping a local official during one of his protests against Kumtor.

Since 2013, he has been the main figure in the movement against foreign corporations he accuses of exploiting Kyrgyzstan's scarce resources.

He believed that the country's elite were benefitting at the expense of the people and the environment.