As Modi government eases lockdown, coronavirus cases surge in India

Wasantha Rupasinghe
19 May 2020

India's Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is further relaxing the nationwide anti-COVID-19 lockdown it first imposed for 21 days on March 25, even as cases of the highly contagious and potentially lethal virus surge.

According to a statement issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs on Sunday, during the "fourth stage" of the lockdown, which is slated to last until May 31, inter-state movement of passenger vehicles and buses will be allowed with the "mutual consent" of the states and Union Territories involved except in "containment zones," where strict stay-at-home orders are in force.

State governments will also be allowed to decide the "delineation of Red (hotspots), Green and Orange zones." Intracity rail and subway services, education institutions, hotels, restaurants (excluding "home delivery of food items"), cinemas, and shopping malls are to remain closed, says the ministry statement, and religious and political gatherings "shall continue to remain prohibited throughout the country."

However, the Modi government, egged on by big business, is pushing for a quick resumption of manufacturing and other productive industries. In recent weeks, large sections of industry, especially in Special Economic Zones and those that are significant exporters, have been greenlighted to reopen.

Yesterday, India's largest auto manufacturer, Maruti Suzuki, reopened its Gurgaon, Haryana car assembly plant with 4,000 workers or about a third of the normal workforce called in to work. On May 12, Maruti Suzuki already relaunched operations at its nearby Manesar assembly plant.

On the very day the Modi government announced the relaxation of the lockdown under its so-called phase four, the country surpassed China for total coronavirus cases. Indian authorities also reported that there had been a daily increase in new cases of more than 5,000 for the first time, with 5,242 new infections. Sunday also saw the highest number of new fatalities in a single day, with 154 new deaths announced.

As of yesterday, India's total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases stood at 95,679, with 3,023 deaths.

Since May 5, the total number of infections has more than doubled, rising from 46,711 to 96,169 yesterday. Only one month ago on April 18, India had recorded only 14,792 confirmed COVID-19 cases, less than a sixth of the current tally.

Maharashtra, India's second most populous and most economically important state, continues to be the state worst affected by the pandemic, with 33,053 infections as of yesterday. At least 1,135 people have lost their lives in the state.

Gujarat has registered 11,380 cases, while Tamil Nadu has 11,224. With 1,794 deaths between them, Maharashtra and Gujarat (659 deaths) account for about 60 percent of India's coronavirus death toll.

Three states—Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu—and the Delhi national region (9755 cases and148 deaths) currently account for three out of every four confirmed COVID-19 cases in India.

Other states deemed to be hotspots for the virus include Madhya Pradesh, with 4,977 cases and 248 deaths, and Rajasthan (5,202 cases and 128 deaths). Each of these states reported large numbers of new cases Sunday—Maharashtra 2,347, Gujarat 391, Tamil Nadu 639, Delhi 422, Rajasthan 242, Madhya Pradesh 187, and Uttar Pradesh 213.

West Bengal, India's fourth most populous state with 91 million people, is experiencing one of the fastest growth rates of COVID-19 cases, with 10 districts having been declared hotspots. On Sunday, WB reported 101 new cases, increasing the overall total to 2,576 infections and 232 deaths.

Andhra Pradesh, India's tenth most populous state with 49.5 million inhabitants, has reported 2,355 cases and 49 deaths. At least five districts have been designated as hotspots in the state. Other states with COVID-19 hotspots include: Bihar (five); Karnataka (three), Punjab (three), Telangana (six), and Jammu and Kashmir (four).

Given the very limited number of tests carried out by India

authorities and the lack of medical facilities especially in rural areas, the actual number of coronavirus cases is undoubtedly much higher.

India has performed just 1.81 tests per 1,000 people, less than one twentieth the inadequate US per capita testing rate, and far less even than Turkey and Iran.

Even prior to the coronavirus pandemic, India's large urban centres were highly vulnerable to, and breeding grounds for, diseases such as tuberculosis. A process of social devastation impoverishing large sections of India's population has occurred over recent decades, driven by the pro-market reforms enforced by successive governments.

The massive COVID-19 outbreak in Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra and India's second largest city with a population of 19.8 million, is revealing in this regard. On Sunday, the total number of cases in the city reached 20,150, with 734 deaths. The city's overcrowded slums have provided ideal conditions for the virus to run rampant. According to the *Times of India*, 57 percent of families in Mumbai live in single-room houses. The number of cases in Dharavi, Asia's largest slum, has crossed the 1,200 mark, with 44 new cases reported on Sunday. Some 56 deaths have been reported from Dharavi, which has a population density of 270,000 per square kilometer.

Already, the hospital system in Mumbai is in the process of becoming overwhelmed. Last week the city municipal corporation, which runs Mumbai's public hospitals, announced that due to a lack of beds it was placing COVID-19 patients on a waiting list, while trying to find beds at private hospitals.

A shocking account of the disastrous situation at the state-run Lokmanya Tilak Municipal General Hospital, better known as Sion, was given by AFP on May 16. The 1,300-bed facility was overcrowded, with three patients sharing some beds. Morgues were packed with bodies.

AFP referred to a widely shared video showing corpses wrapped in black plastic covers lying on beds in a ward where other patients were being treated. Aditya Burje, a junior doctor working at Sion hospital, told AFP, "The emergency area gets full in a matter of hours," and added that by the end of April, "we were seeing 50-100 patients a day, 80 percent of whom would turn out to be positive (for COVID-19) and many would need to be on oxygen."

In Tamil Nadu, India's sixth largest state, with a population of 72 million, the cases are mainly concentrated in big cities. 2,600 cases were recently reported from the Koyambedu market, a wholesale market in the state capital, Chennai. This has emerged as India's biggest active cluster following the state government's decision to keep the market open during the countrywide lockdown. About 12 districts in the state are currently designated as hot spots or Red Zones.

According to the 2011 Survey of India, 31 percent of Chennai's population lived in slums, as did more than a fifth of the population in Salem and Trichy. Wikipedia notes that over a third of these slum dwellers had no latrines, resulting in the spread of diseases even in normal times, and that 67 percent of slum households were one-room dwellings.

An article in the *Hindustan Times* on March 23 noted, "India is home to about one-third of the global slum population with an average of one in six city residents living in slums where population densities vary between 277,136 person persons per square kilometer in Dharavi to 125,000 person per sq. km at the Rasolpoora slum in Hyderabad."

These shocking revelations underline that the official COVID-19 case figures presented by the government only provide a pale reflection of the true scale of the disaster. Countless people infected by the virus are simply not being counted or are ignored. Millions more are at great risk to be infected by the coronavirus in a country where public health systems are virtually nonexistent in some areas.

It is under these conditions that Modi, speaking on behalf of India's ruling elite, has, in the name of reopening the economy, effectively announced a policy of "herd immunity" that will allow COVID-19 to spread unchecked.

Brought to power by Indian capital to more aggressively pursue its predatory interests, the far-right Hindu supremacist BJP government is calculating that the deaths of hundreds of thousands, even of millions of people, is a price worth paying to secure India's position as a leading destination for global investment and sweatshop labour.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact