

Britain already in third wave of pandemic as Indian variant surges ahead of June 21 reopening

Robert Stevens
31 May 2021

The UK has already entered a third wave of the coronavirus pandemic, according to Professor Ravi Gupta, from the University of Cambridge.

Speaking on Monday to the BBC Radio *Today* programme, Gupta, a member of the government's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (Nervtag) said, "Of course the numbers of cases are relatively low at the moment—all waves start with low numbers of cases that grumble in the background and then become explosive, so the key here is that what we are seeing here is the signs of an early wave."

Gupta called for a delay in the "irreversible" roadmap to reopen the entire economy announced by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, culminating in an end to all legal limits on social contact in just three weeks, on June 21.

A dramatic escalation in identified cases is underway due to the spread of the highly transmissible Indian variant (B.1.617.2) nationwide, since first being detected in the UK on April 1.

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) published data on May 27 recording figures up to May 22 that included the number of Indian variant cases for the first time. Detected cases of this strain have doubled in the past week and by last Thursday B.1.617.2 accounted for more than half and possibly up to three quarters of all new cases.

The rise of the strain to dominance in the UK has been facilitated by the Conservative government's reckless reopening of the economy. Much of the economy has already been reopened since May 17, including pubs, cafes, restaurants, shops and non-essential retail.

Nearly every day over the last week, over 3,000 new cases of Covid were recorded and last Friday 4,182 were reported. As of 9am yesterday, there had been a further 3,383 lab-confirmed cases of Covid.

Separate figures published by the ONS show there have now been 153,000 deaths registered in the UK where Covid-19 was mentioned on the death certificate.

The spread of the Indian variant has resulted in an increase of the *R* (Reproduction) value of the virus from between 0.8-1.1 to between 0.9-1.1—a level allowing a further exponential rise in cases.

In England, the virus is spreading fastest in the capital, London, and the North West, with daily growth rates of 0-3 percent and 0-4 percent every day respectively. In Croydon, 94.1 percent of positive Covid cases resulted from the Indian variant in the two weeks to May 22. A surge in Indian variant cases is responsible for driving coronavirus cases upwards in Hounslow and Hillingdon.

By last week, hospital admissions for the several variants of Covid in circulation had increased 20 percent week-on-week across the UK. The North West of England saw a 25 percent rise.

In Scotland, a surge of cases has seen the *R* rate reach 1.3 and Glasgow remains under Level 3 restrictions (with levels 2, 1 and 0 less restrictive).

Dr Deepti Gurdasani, a clinical epidemiologist at Queen Mary University and a member of Independent SAGE, which has criticised aspects of the government's Covid policy, warned that the domination of B.1.617.2 "makes a huge difference... This is highly transmissible—it so far appears to be 60 percent more transmissible than the Kent variant, which is 60 percent more than the one before that which was 20 percent more transmissible than the original Wuhan variant."

The government is nevertheless proceeding with its reopening agenda, citing the relative successes of the vaccination programme. But there is evidence that the Indian variant can infect those who are not fully vaccinated with two doses, and more than half of the

UK's adult population is still not fully vaccinated. More than five million Britons over 50 are still either unvaccinated or only partially protected.

Professor Sir Tim Gowers was among those scientists who opposed the government's initial plan last year to impose a herd immunity strategy with no lockdowns in place, under conditions in which Public Health England (PHE) were wargaming a confidential scenario involving 800,000 deaths. Interviewed by the *Guardian* last Friday, Gowers said of the June 21 reopening, "You should be very, very cautious about every step you take... And maybe everything [will] be OK, maybe the number of people who are vaccinated will be just enough, ... 'R' will broadly speaking stay below one even with Indian variants.

"But if it's not OK, we know, because of mathematics, that things will get bad very, very quickly. Or at least, maybe it won't look that quick to start with, but it'll grow exponentially. So it'll pick up speed and become a big problem."

The spread of the B.1.617.2 variant is replicating the pattern of explosive growth of the Kent variant, first detected last autumn and which quickly became the dominant strain in Britain, much of Europe and other countries internationally.

The Kent variant was able to evolve and spread unhindered after the government ended last spring's national lockdown, including sending millions of children back to school.

More evidence of government criminality was published in the *Sunday Times*, with the newspaper reporting that "Ministers were given the news of the [Indian] variant's arrival on April 1 but no official statement was made until April 15. India was not placed on the red list banning travellers from the country for another eight days."

This was under conditions in which hundreds of thousands of new cases and thousands of deaths were being reported daily in India. The *Sunday Times* noted that "thousands of potentially infected people were allowed to enter the country... At least 20,000 passengers—who could have been infected with the virulent new strain—were allowed to enter Britain in the first three weeks of April."

The government is doing everything to ensure that nothing impedes the June reopening. This includes having the nominally independent Public Health England body withhold data on the spread of the Indian variant in schools.

As reported by the WSWs, there have been hundreds of

coronavirus outbreaks in schools in recent weeks. Advocacy group Citizens and AWO, a data rights firm, have sent a pre-legal action letter to PHE saying it has "surrendered its independent judgement".

Calling on PHE to publish information originally set to be published on May 13—before it was leaked on by Downing Street—Citizens executive director Clara Maguire said in a statement seen by the *Independent*, "We believe that there is an immediate risk to life... The public needs this data now and we believe that PHE is acting unlawfully in withholding it.

"It is unbelievable that a matter of vital importance to our public health can be subject to political interference," she said.

The representatives of big business in Downing Street are solely concerned with the health of corporate balance sheets, not with the immense danger to public health posed by another wave of the pandemic.

Ahead of the final June 14 decision on whether to proceed with ending the "last lockdown", big business and its media echo chambers are stepping up the pressure to insist all restrictions on profit making are lifted.

In a May 30 *Telegraph* article, Baroness Ruby McGregor-Smith, president of the British Chambers of Commerce, stated, "With such huge swathes of the population vaccinated and strong evidence of the protection that this offers even the most vulnerable against the threat of coronavirus, it would be quite astonishing if the Government changed tack now."

Even as a highly contagious Covid strain takes a grip nationally, McGregor-Smith insisted, "It cannot be said that the UK is still in the grip of a pandemic. At some point, we need to learn how to operate a fully open economy, while still protecting public health. That time is now."

On Monday, the *Telegraph* followed up with an editorial, "The Government must hold its nerve on the June 21 deadline," declaring there was "no good reason, or excuse, for delaying the country's liberation."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact