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Coronavirus crisis in India drives global COVID-19 surge

COVID-19 is surging out of control in India. Crematoriums have been running at capacity while bodies pile up. As a resident of Delhi told the *Times of India*, “I have lived here all my life and pass through this area twice a day. I have never seen so many bodies burning together.”

Official figures indicate that the country saw another record one-day high with almost 380,000 cases of COVID-19 and 3,647 deaths yesterday. There were an unprecedented 5 million cases in less than three weeks. The country just surpassed 200,000 COVID-19-related deaths.



Travelers register themselves with health workers before getting tested for COVID-19 outside a train station in Bengaluru, India, Wednesday, April 28, 2021. India, a country of

nearly 1.4 billion people, Wednesday became the fourth to cross 200,000 deaths, behind the United States, Brazil and Mexico. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

Experts insist that the crisis in India is far more massive than official reports indicated. The actual caseload may be 10 to 30 times higher than official statistics. Based on the unprecedented number of funerals taking place, some have placed the death toll at 10 times the figures cited by state epidemiologists and political representatives.

India's reporting system for all-cause mortality is woefully inadequate. One in seven deaths is never registered. Of those that are, barely one in four is certified by a physician. The pandemic has further exacerbated this situation, as a death attributed to COVID-19 requires a recent positive test result. Despite the massive surge in cases, testing outside major urban centers remains very limited.

According to the *Economist*, "Even with more than 1.5 million Indians now getting tested each day, the rate of testing relative to population is still less than a tenth of that in Britain. And because of the surge in cases, labs, even in Delhi, India's capital, are overwhelmed. They now take days to deliver results; many die without knowing they are positive, or after getting a false negative." The positivity rate in Delhi is above 30 percent, implying that one in three tests results in a confirmed infection.

Social media apps are being flooded with panicked requests by people and pleas for oxygen, medicines, and basic medical supplies to care for their families at home because hospitals can no longer admit patients. According to *Becker's Health IT*, Aanchal Agrawal, a 29-year-old "content creator," is working with 200 volunteers combing through her 42,000 Twitter followers to source oxygen, beds, antivirals for residents infected with the coronavirus.

They wrote, "Along with Twitter and Tinder, Instagram, Facebook, and Google Docs have been used by ordinary citizens in India to crowdsource financial help and medical equipment. Experts have criticized the country's government for allowing massive gatherings and not ordering enough of the vaccines needed to meet its inoculation targets." India, with its status as the "world's pharmacy," the largest producer of generic drugs, has been unable to meet the health demands of the population.

Friends and families, overwrought to find life-saving oxygen and medicines, turn to the black markets and “profit gougers” for these supplies. Pharmacists tell their customers that the only place left to purchase the antiviral agent, Remdesivir, is on the black market for 100,000 Rupees (\$1,340 US dollars), or over 30 times its regular price. The average monthly salary of a worker in India ranges from around 12,000 (mechanic) to 23,000 (Business development manager) Rupees.

With many public hospitals having exhausted their supplies of medicinal oxygen, desperate families begin the frantic search for another facility that can render medical treatment. Empty beds at private hospitals are now available through bidding wars. A 46-liter oxygen cylinder is up to 10 times the regular price. Many who can scrounge the money have to pay in advance and hope to get it the next day.

Heart-wrenching have been the scenes of loved ones carting their parents, siblings, or children from one medical center to another only to be shunned. A recent grim account on Twitter from Dr. Eric Ding recounted, “A desperate mother pleaded at the front steps of a hospital for someone to save her 16-month-old with COVID-19. The toddler died at the doorstep of the hospital soon after.”

Meanwhile, according to *Business Insider*, India’s “uber-rich” are escaping in droves, fleeing in private jets as the pandemic crashes through the country. The wealthy Indian families pay tens of thousands of dollars to catch last-minute flights before travel restrictions are imposed, flying to popular destinations such as the United Arab Emirates. A spokesman for charter company Air Charter Services India told the *Economic Times* that interest in private jets has been “absolutely crazy.”

As reports of horrific asphyxiation from exhausted oxygen supplies become familiar news headlines, “oxygen express” trains are being rerouted throughout India, attempting to supply medical grade oxygen to areas depleted of the life-saving gas. One report cited in *New Scientist* said that demand for medicinal oxygen in the intensive care units has jumped 600 percent in recent days.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the White House’s chief medical adviser, told the *Guardian* on Tuesday that the tragic development in India was a product of failure of wealthier nations to provide equitable access to health care worldwide. “The only way that you’re going to

adequately respond to a global pandemic,” he said, “is by having a global response, and a global response means equity throughout the world. ... We’re all in this together, It’s an interconnected world. And there are responsibilities that countries have to each other, particularly if you’re a wealthy country and you’re dealing with countries that don’t have the resources or capabilities that you have.”

Meanwhile, neighboring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka face their challenges as the virus is now rapidly disseminating throughout their communities. The pandemic’s global toll continues to rise, with more than 150 million cases worldwide. Today, over 865,000 infections were confirmed, and close to 15,000 people died.

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