

## International

# India's migrant workers fall through cracks in lockdown

## The biggest mass movements of people since partition of India

**JUGYAI:** Most days, you can find Dayaram Kushwaha and his wife, Gyanvati, hauling bricks for stonemasons in a booming northern suburb of New Delhi. They bring their 5-year-old son, who plays in the dirt while they work. But now a hush has come over the clattering construction site, silenced by India's nationwide order to shelter in place to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus. Site managers no longer come to the intersection where Dayaram and many others stand, hoping to pick up work.

And so, with no way to feed his family or pay the rent, Dayaram hoisted his son Shivam onto his shoulders and began to walk to the village where he was born, 300 miles away. He tried not to worry about what would happen once he got there, with empty pockets instead of the money he usually sent home to help support those left behind. At least he would have a home. By dusk on the second day, Dayaram and around 50 others from his extended family had reached a deserted expressway running south out of the capital.

The family was hungry, thirsty and tired, and the police were never far away. Every time they stopped to rest, officers would shout at them to keep moving in single file, to maintain distance from one another to avoid spreading the virus. Officers are under orders to enforce the lockdown, but on that day they were allowing people to move. Dayaram, 28, looked around. Thousands of other migrant workers were doing the same thing, in one of the biggest mass movements of people in the country since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

It began to rain. Dayaram's thoughts turned to his other son, 7-year-old Mangal, who had been left behind in the village with elderly relatives because it was too hard to care for two children while he and his wife worked. He missed him. In the middle of a

pandemic, there was one consolation: "At least I will be with him."

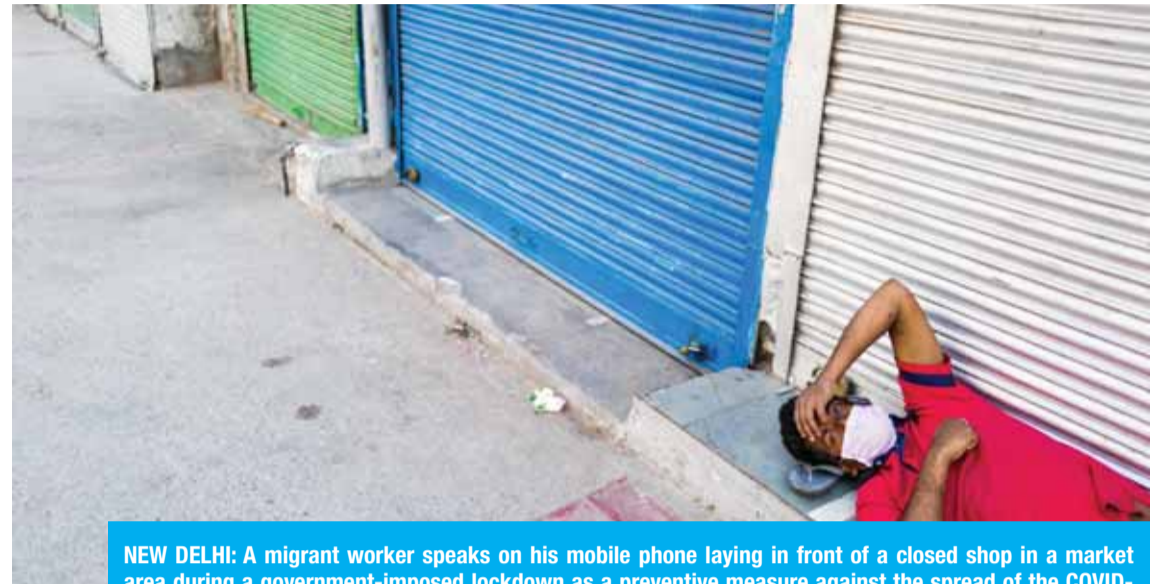
### Push and pull

For decades, villages across India have been emptying out. To many people, the decision is one of simple arithmetic: to earn \$6 per day instead of \$3 back home. In areas like the parched Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh state, home to Dayaram's ancestral village, living off the land has become increasingly difficult as rainfall recedes. Others seek something more abstract: the prospect of escape that pulls anyone toward a big city.

But after the shutdown, the cities themselves began to empty. Dayaram and his family were among the first to move. As the days went on, and the situation became more desperate, hundreds of thousands of migrants emerged from factories and workplaces in search of a way home.

Indian officials say the shutdown is necessary to beat coronavirus in the densely populated country of 1.3 billion people, with a health infrastructure that can ill afford a widespread outbreak. But for Dayaram and many of India's estimated 140 million migrant laborers, the epidemic is much more than a threat to their health - it endangers their very economic survival. In the shutdown, India has banned domestic and international travel, and factories, schools, offices and all shops other than those supplying essential services have been shut. Taken together, the measures amount to one of the harshest lockdowns in the world. Cases here have spiked to nearly 17,000, with more than 500 deaths. On April 14, the government extended the curbs until at least May 3, prompting clashes between police and migrants trying to leave India's financial capital, Mumbai.

Migrants are the backbone of the urban econo-



**NEW DELHI:** A migrant worker speaks on his mobile phone laying in front of a closed shop in a market area during a government-imposed lockdown as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

my. Construction workers such as Dayaram are a necessity for India's rapidly expanding cities. Others clean toilets, drive taxis and deliver takeout. They predominantly earn daily wages, with no prospect of job security, and live in dirty, densely populated slums, saving money to send back home. That money is essential to the young and elderly left behind in villages. Around \$30 billion flows from urban to rural areas in India each year, according to government and academic estimates. Now that infusion of money, transferred through rural banks or in worn stacks of rupees borne home on rare visits, has come to a halt. The journey from New Delhi deep

into rural India is one not just of distance, but of traveling back in time. Skyscrapers and well-paved toll roads give way to fields of wheat and okra. Bare-backed men till the land with buffalo; an elderly shepherd herds his goats down a dusty lane. After four days of walking and hitching lifts on a series of goods trucks, Dayaram, Gyanvati and Shivam reached their family's two-room concrete hut in Jugyai, a farming village of 2,000 people. In a dingy room in the house filled with sacks of grain and clothes, an unframed poster hangs on the wall. It depicts a handsome red-roofed house on a lake, sun setting behind snow-capped mountains. — Reuters

## US failed to block UN virus vaccine resolution

**UNITED NATIONS:** The UN General Assembly has demanded equal access for any future COVID-19 vaccine but its seeming unanimity was a fluke. The United States in fact opposed the resolution but acted too late to stop it, diplomats say. The 193 members of the General Assembly adopted by consensus Monday a resolution led by Mexico that calls for "equitable, efficient and timely" access to any vaccine developed to fight the pandemic. But the non-binding resolution irked the United States for another reason. It highlighted the "crucial leading role" of the World Health Organization, which President Donald Trump has strongly criticized for not doing more to halt the virus after it was detected in China.

The adoption of the text was announced three hours after the vote, an unusually long gap. The reason for the delay, diplomats told AFP, was that the United States had tried unsuccessfully to block it after the fact. There is no veto at the General Assembly, which includes every UN member state, unlike the more powerful Security Council where five powers—Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States—can stop any resolution.

In ordinary times, the General Assembly adopts resolutions either by consensus or by majority votes—displayed openly on an electronic board or held secretly in the case of elections. But faced with the coronavirus pandemic, the General Assembly has changed its way of doing business until at least late May to avoid physical meetings at the UN headquarters in New York. Under the temporary setup, a country puts forward a text which is adopted after a "period of silence" of several days in which any member can voice objections—effectively a veto.

The United States did not "break the silence" before Monday's deadline for the resolution—but, according to diplomats, tried to voice objections just afterward. "One delegation wanted to break the silence after the silence," a diplomat told AFP, with another diplomat confirming the United States was the country. The US mission at the United Nations did not respond to requests for comment. Trump has ramped up his broadsides against the WHO amid criticism at home over his handling of the crisis.

### Concerns for upcoming votes

For the United Nations, the temporary procedures were seen as vital to ensure that texts, not to mention budgetary authorizations, can move forward. But the arrangement effectively lets any one of 193 nations hold up the entire United Nations. On April 3, no country broke the silence to stop a resolution that called in general terms for international cooperation to fight COVID-19.

But a separate bid the same day by Russia to urge the lifting of economic sanctions amid the pandemic was blocked by Ukraine, Georgia, the United States and European Union. Russia has moved forward this week with another resolution that targets sanctions. It calls on all nations to "face global challenges as good neighbors, refraining from implementing protectionist and discriminatory measures inconsistent with the World Trade Organization rules." — AFP

## Fleeing pandemic, many Venezuelan migrants head home

**CALI:** For the second time in less than a year, Jesus Pena is on the run. The first time, he was fleeing poverty in his native Venezuela. Now, he's heading back to his crisis-stricken home to escape the death spread by the novel coronavirus. "We want to go back so we don't die," the 49-year-old explained during a stop in Cali, Colombia. He arrived after 12 days of traveling, mostly on foot, from neighboring Ecuador—one of the Latin American countries worst hit by the pandemic.

The blisters dotting his feet are the least of his worries. He is relieved because he, his wife, their son and his sister-in-law will soon board a bus chartered by the city to ferry Venezuelan migrants the 595 miles (957 kilometers) to the border. Dozens of others wait along with them. They fled Ecuador and other countries in the region, carefully sneaking through closed borders or taking advantage of opened humanitarian corridors.

Many attempted to rebuild their lives in Colombia but have since given up. They decided to

## COVID-19: Mistrust and black market flourish in Nigeria

**LAGOS:** A black market in coronavirus test kits is flourishing in Nigeria, spurred in part by negligible faith in the country's health system to defeat an emerging threat. Testing is a crucial weapon in combating COVID-19. It not only identifies where the stealthy virus has invaded—it also helps to prevent frontline workers, in health care and the economy, from falling sick in turn. Every country is struggling to carry out sufficient testing, but in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, the situation is dire. Just 7,100 tests have officially been carried out in a population of around 200 million people.

By comparison, neighboring Ghana, which has a population of 30 million, has carried out 68,000 tests, while South Africa, with 58 million people, has conducted nearly 114,000. Right now, Nigeria's 36 states have 12 official coronavirus labs, which together have a capacity to test 1,500 people per day. "We have no idea of the status of propagation of COVID-19 in Nigeria," a representative of a private medical lab said. The lab is awaiting government approval to purchase thousands of test kits and a machine able to carry out several hundred tests per hour.

But "demand for these tests on the black market is off the scale, off the scale," the source said. Lacking the equipment, the lab had to turn away a request from a foreign embassy to carry out tests for its citizens. Nigeria's extreme need and its dextrous entrepreneurs have unsurprisingly combined to create an instant black market. Aware of the danger that this represents, the government has warned Nigerians against fake do-it-yourself kits that are emerging online.

### Mistrust

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) is carrying out doorstep testing in Abuja and the state of Lagos—the epicentres of the country's 627 infections, of which 21 have been fatal. The authorities are also putting boots on the ground, in the form of neighborhood virus tracers, and opening brand-new quarantine centers in their show of diligence. But they are facing a deep lack of faith in a



**CALI:** Health workers wearing biosafety suits take a test of a local family during a checkup for the COVID-19 novel coronavirus at Nueva Floresta neighborhood in Cali, Colombia. — AFP

go home after finding themselves without jobs or income during government-imposed COVID-19 lockdowns—or out of fear of epidemic-fueled xenophobia. Pena lived only nine months in Loja, in the south of Ecuador. But he quickly grew afraid: "People are dying, no one pays attention or wears a mask, everyone is out in the streets."

### 35,000 migrants returned

He also worried about what would happen if he



**LAGOS:** A vehicle drives to distribute relief palliatives to cushion the effect of lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19 coronavirus in Lagos. — AFP

public health system left crippled by decades of neglect. Nearly four of every five public health facilities across Nigeria do not even have running water, Dr Francis Faduyile, president of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), said last month.

Thousands of Nigerian doctors work in Europe's well-funded health services but at home, there are just 0.4 physicians per 1,000 people. Mistrust of the public health system is such that many patients are terrified of being declared to the NCDC, a physician in a private medical clinic said. "My patients don't want to come to the hospital, they think we are the NCDC police who will take them to Yaba," the source said, referring to a government-run facility for COVID-19 patients.

"They tell me on the phone, 'If we come, you don't send us to Yaba!'" The doctor recounted that, at the start of the month, he had already seen half a dozen patients with coronavirus. Just one of them consented to being tested, which entailed notification to the NCDC. The authorities carried out the test, but the exercise was a waste of time. The test was eventually carried out more than two weeks after the doctor alerted the NCDC—a period longer than the virus's incubation period.

Since then, the doctor has gone through back channels to procure around 20 test kits for his patients. Official testing is "too slow," said Zouera Issoufou, head of the Dangote Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Aliko Dangote, Africa's wealthiest man. The foundation has partnered with the government in the fight against coronavirus and ordered 250,000 test kits. But world demand for the kits has exploded, Issoufou said. — AFP

or one of his family members fell ill. At the hospital, "they would never move an Ecuadorian to make room for a Venezuelan," he said. "It's better to go back to our country," he added. More than 35,000 Venezuelans have already crossed the region, coming from Colombia and elsewhere, according to Felipe Munoz, an official at the border between the two countries.

Colombia is home to about 1.8 million of the 4.9 million Venezuelan migrants who fled their country in recent years as the former oil power's economy crumbled. Bogota, which like the US does not recognize Nicolas Maduro as Venezuela's president, has appealed for international aid to manage a migrant crisis made more acute by the pandemic's attendant health and economic emergencies. Colombia has recorded more than 3,700 cases of the coronavirus, versus some 250 reported in Venezuela. Ecuador, at 10,000 cases, is the region's worst-hit country after Brazil.

Pena is aware that the low number of Venezuelan cases has been doubted by Maduro's opposition and he is bracing himself for the worst. "There's no food, no water nor gas. But what can we do?" he said. Colombia said the migrants are leaving of their own accord and is checking their temperatures as they leave. Luis Plazas, 24, considers himself one of the lucky ones. — AFP

## Fifty-two villagers killed by jihadists in Mozambique

**MAPUTO:** A shadowy Islamist group that has terrorised northern Mozambique killed 52 villagers on April 7 after locals refused to be recruited to their ranks, according to police cited by local media Tuesday. "Recently, the criminals tried to recruit young people to join their ranks, but there was resistance on the part of the youths. This provoked the anger of the criminals, who indiscriminately killed—cruelly and diabolically—52 young people," police spokesman Orlando Mudumane told the state-owned broadcasting service.

The killings took place in the village of Xitaxi in of Muidumbe district. Mudumane said the villagers were "massacred", either shot dead or beheaded. Police said they have launched a manhunt for the attackers to bring them to justice. Militants have in recent weeks stepped up attacks as part of a campaign to establish an Islamist caliphate in the gas-rich region, seizing government buildings, blocking roads and briefly hoisting their black-and-white jihadist flag over towns and villages across Cabo Delgado province.

For more than two years the jihadists mainly targeted isolated villages, killing more than 900 people, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). The unrest has forced hundreds of thousands of locals to flee and raised concern among energy giants operating in the gas-rich region. More than 200,000, according to a local Catholic archbishop, Dom Luiz Fernando, have escaped. Some have sought refuge among friends and relatives in the port city of Pemba, the capital of Cabo Delgado.

Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), affiliated with the Islamic State group, has claimed some of the attacks in the region since last year. Since October 2017, when they first staged an attack in the province, the group hid their identities, but in recent weeks, it has unmasked its fighters and openly declaring its goal of turning the gas-rich region into a caliphate. "We don't want a government from unbelievers, we want a government from Allah," the group member added, speaking in the local Kimwani language to residents rounded up for a rally. — AFP