

## International

# India launches jobs plan for migrants in 'testing times'

## Thousands of migrants returning from Gulf amid crisis

**NEW DELHI:** India on Wednesday unveiled a jobs plan for "testing times" in a bid to get migrants back at work after the world's biggest coronavirus lockdown stripped millions of their livelihood.

With a mammoth repatriation effort underway, tens of thousands of migrant workers are returning to India and the government scheme aims to hook up the incomers with vacancies and kickstart the slowing economy.

"These are testing times," Mahendra Nath Pandey, Minister of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, said in a statement. India put commercial jets, military aircraft and naval warships into action last month to bring back nearly a million Indians from neighboring countries, the Middle East, Singapore, Britain and the United States. [

More than 57,000 people have so far come back, according to the civil aviation ministry, in a repatriation mission spanning workers, students and vulnerable citizens stranded overseas by travel bans and closed borders. India recorded more than 211,700 confirmed infections and nearly 5,900 deaths on Wednesday, according to a tally by the Johns Hopkins University.

The government enforced one of the world's strictest lockdowns on March 25, shutting most commercial and industrial activity and leaving millions who rely on daily wages without a job. India has since eased its lockdown rules, allowing restaurants, malls and religious places to reopen from

June 8. Now that Indians are returning home, the government said it would create a database collating their skills and experience to help fill jobs in Indian and foreign companies "and bridge the demand-supply gap".

Migrants fill out a form online, listing their sector of work, job title, employment and years of experience. About 7,000 people had registered between May 30 - when the program went live - and Wednesday afternoon, when the program was official unveiled. Most said they worked in the sectors of oil and gas, construction, tourism and hospitality in the Middle East. Critics said the scheme failed to address low and semi-skilled workers, who make up more than 90 percent of Indian laborers in the Gulf and Southeast Asia, according to the International Labor Organization.

Others said the government was not doing enough to provide jobs to millions of internal migrants who have been pushed into hunger and poverty after losing their livelihoods. The country has witnessed scenes of mass internal migration, with countless workers forced to walk thousands of miles back home in scorching heat after losing their work, many dying of exhaustion or in accidents along the way.

India has announced a slew of measures to regularize the employment of migrant workers - from offering universal minimum daily wages to the launch of a registration system that opens the door

billion from Facebook and money from private equity firms Silver Lake, Vista Equity Partners, General Atlantic and KKR & Co Inc, value Jio Platforms, where Reliance last year announced it was consolidating its digital offerings, at roughly \$65 billion.

They also put Jio on track toward a goal Ambani described last year: an eventual listing that would mark a milestone for his effort to unite the digital offerings of his sprawling conglomerate, from set-top boxes to e-commerce and home automation.

Reliance declined to make Ambani, Asia's richest man, available for interview or respond to a detailed list of questions. But interviews with a dozen people familiar with the company's development efforts show how Reliance has pushed aggressive pricing for a one-stop digital commerce platform that incorporates features modeled on the American tech heavyweights it sees as rivals.

When Jio set out to launch a set-top box, it tasked a team with analyzing - and in some cases replicating - some 100 features of an Apple TV set-top box last year, according to a person close to the project and internal Jio documents seen by Reuters. "Presentation and listing of menu items should be similar to Apple TV," one of the documents says, assigning the task a "Priority 1" rating. One document compares the products' features, like average weight. Another includes instructions like "Matching the background theme of Launcher



**MUMBAI:** Migrant workers and families wait outside Dharavi slums for transportation to a railway terminus to catch a train back home after the government eased a nationwide lockdown imposed against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Mumbai.—AFP

to aid for workers who have lost their job.

But Nilanjan Ghosh, a director at the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation think tank, said economic slowdown risked unleashing a "survival of the fittest" syndrome. "If governmental

schemes do not work and the service sector shrinks, there will be large-scale unemployment that can be associated with increase in crime rates, social unrest and conflicts," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. — Reuters

## Amid pandemic, investors bet on India's Jio

**MUMBAI:** From its Silicon Valley-like campus near Mumbai, Indian billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Jio telecom carrier is emerging as a winner from changes in the way Indian consumers plug into a digital economy made more urgent by the coronavirus pandemic.

For Indian shoppers who prefer to order online, it is launching a grocery ordering service with Facebook Inc's popular WhatsApp messaging. For Bollywood fans who would prefer to avoid a crowded theater, it is readying same-day-release on the Jio platform.

Those plans had been in the making for months, but the pandemic has given them a shot in the arm. India's 10-week lockdown has also led to a surge in demand for data, boosting Jio's phone and broadband offerings.

And, over the past six weeks, the digital business of Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd, known as Jio Platforms, raised a striking \$10 billion from global investors. The investments, including \$5.7

(home screen) to that of Apple TV."

Jio's set-top box comes included in its broadband plans, with the cheapest annual deal costing around \$110, whereas Apple TV 4K is selling for around \$210 to \$230 on Indian e-commerce sites.

Apple Inc did not respond to requests for comment. Jio also analyzed Amazon's Alexa voice assistant with the aim of coming up with its own offering, according to one person with knowledge of Jio's strategy. "They wanted to say: 'Hey Jio, can you switch on the lights?'" said the person. Reuters could not determine the status of the project. Amazon declined comment. In other areas, Ambani has shown a willingness to bet big on emerging technology. In India, Jio was an early adopter of voice-over-LTE, which is more efficient than traditional networks. The company expects that to give it an edge in rolling out 5G services.

"Few companies have the potential to transform a country's digital ecosystem in the way that Jio Platforms is doing in India," said KKR's co-founder Henry Kravis in announcing his investment.

In partnership with Facebook's WhatsApp, Reliance has launched a new service that allows consumers to order from their local grocery stores at a time when many Indian consumers, like shoppers elsewhere, are trying to minimize trips to stores. The service was rolled out in April in three areas of Greater Mumbai.

"Reliance wants to be a global technology pow-



erhouse," said Rahul Malhotra, an analyst with Bernstein. "With the Facebook partnership, they will build the WeChat of India," he added, referring to Tencent Holdings' messaging, payments and social media app that is ubiquitous in China.

Ambani dominates a dizzying array of sectors: Jio is India's leading telecoms carrier, Reliance Retail Limited is its top brick-and-mortar retailer, Reliance's Network18 Media & Investments Limited is one of its biggest news networks, and Reliance's Jamnagar is its largest oil complex.

His empire also produces films at Jio Studios and runs India's top soccer tournament, the Indian Super League. By providing Indian consumers access to everything from groceries and clothes to banking and home automation via an integrated system running through Jio, Ambani hopes Reliance can become what he calls an "everything company."—Reuters