

## International

# As cases rise, India fearing another COVID catastrophe

## Urban centers moved to impose curbs • Court allows huge Hindu festival

**NEW DELHI:** Haunted by the specter of last year's crisis, India is bracing for a deluge of COVID-19 cases, with authorities of various megacities bringing in restrictions in a bid to keep infections in check. Case numbers have yet to match the enormous figures seen last spring, when thousands died each day and the Hindu holy city of Varanasi maintained round-the-clock funeral pyres for the mass cremation of virus victims.

New cases passed 100,000 on Friday, a surge driven by the highly contagious Omicron variant that some experts worry could again see the country's hospitals overwhelmed. An overnight curfew has been imposed in the Delhi area that includes the capital, where weekend movement restrictions began on Friday evening, with all non-essential workers asked to stay home.

Tech hub Bangalore has also declared a weekend curfew, while sprawling financial center Mumbai introduced a night curfew. "Even a small percentage of a large number of cases translates to a large number in absolute terms," Gautam Menon, a professor at India's Ashoka University who has worked on COVID infection modelling, told AFP. "This could potentially stress out healthcare systems to levels comparable to or worse than the second wave."

Doctors and nurses who spoke to AFP have so far been optimistic, with fewer severe cases among those patients admitted to hospital - and with the benefit of experience. "Last year, we didn't know what exactly we were dealing with. I think now, mentally, it's a little

better," one frontline worker at a Delhi hospital said. Suresh Kumar, director of Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital in the capital, where cases have quadrupled from a handful at the start of the week to 20, said the rise was "not a cause for panic".

Meanwhile, an Indian court on Friday rejected a bid to cancel a major Hindu festival despite fears the vast gathering could spread coronavirus infections. Hundreds of thousands of people are expected to attend the annual Gangasagar Mela festival, which began yesterday on an island where the holy river Ganges enters the Bay of Bengal. It marks the harvest season and will reach a climax next weekend ahead of the new moon on Jan 17.

Kolkata-based doctor Avinandan Mondal sought a court order to ban the festival over coronavirus concerns. But the Calcutta High Court rejected the request, instead asking the regional government - which estimated attendance at no more than 500,000 and supported the gathering - to issue advertisements warning people about the risks of attending. "People from all states in the country will attend the religious festival and take a holy dip," environmentalist Subhash Dutta told AFP. "They may carry variant viruses and this religious festival may end up being the biggest superspreader in the coming days," he added.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has so far shied away from the drastic nationwide lockdown introduced during last year's catastrophic outbreak. But local officials have watched the sharply rising case numbers with alarm and some of India's



**KOLKATA:** Pilgrims wait in a queue for their turn to get themselves tested for the coronavirus at a transit camp ahead of the upcoming annual Gangasagar Mela annual religious fair at Sagar Island yesterday. — AFP

biggest urban centers have moved to impose restrictions again. Earlier virus lockdowns were a hammer blow to the Indian economy and many are worried about the financial impact of new restrictions.

"I will be working only for 15 days this month," said Delhi resident Tumul Srivastava, whose office is subject to the 50 percent occupancy limits imposed by the city. "My salary may be deducted. All this is adding to my anxiety."

India appears better placed to weather Omicron than it was ahead of the calamitous Delta wave it suffered last spring, when more than 200,000 people

died in a matter of weeks. Back then, hospitals ran out of oxygen and patients desperately scrambled to source medicine after a run on pharmacies. In the time since, Indian health workers have injected nearly 1.5 billion vaccine doses, with government data showing nearly two-thirds of the country fully vaccinated.

That campaign, combined with last year's Delta sweep of towns and villages around the country, may help lessen the impact of the latest spread. "Though we do not have data, this may give strong hybrid immunity against severe outcomes," University of Michigan epidemiologist Bhramar Mukherjee told AFP. —AFP

“ I think now, mentally, it's a little better ”

## Taleban issue posters ordering women to cover up

**KABUL:** The Taleban's religious police have put up posters around the capital Kabul ordering Afghan women to cover up, an official said Friday, the latest in a string of creeping restrictions. The poster, which includes an image of the face-covering burqa, was slapped on cafes and shops this week by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Since returning to power in August, the Taleban have increasingly curtailed freedoms - particularly those of women and girls.

"According to Sharia law, Muslim women must wear the hijab," the poster reads, referring to the practice of covering up. A spokesman for the ministry, responsible for enforcing the Taleban's interpretation of Islamic law, confirmed to AFP on Friday that it was behind the orders. "If someone does not follow it, it does not mean she will be punished or beaten, it's just encouragement for Muslim women to follow

Sharia law," Sadeq Akif Muhajir said.

In Kabul, women already cover their hair with headscarves, though some wear modest western clothing. Outside of the capital the burqa, which became mandatory for women under the Taleban's first regime in the 1990s, has remained common. "What they're trying to do is to spread fear among the people," a university student and women's rights advocate, who did not want to be identified, told AFP. "The first time I saw the posters I was really petrified, I thought maybe (the Taleban) will start beating me. They want me to wear a burqa and look like nothing, I would never do that."

The Taleban, which is desperate for international recognition to allow funding flows to reopen to the war-ravaged country, have so far refrained from issuing national policies. Instead, they have published guidance for men and women that has varied from province to province. "This is not



**KABUL:** A sticker reading "According to sharia law, Muslim women must do the hijab" is seen on the window of a shop on Friday. — AFP

good. 100 percent, this will create fear," said Shahagha Noori, the supervisor of a Kabul restaurant where the poster had been put up by the Taleban. "I think if the Taleban get international recognition, then they will start to enforce it."

Although the Taleban have promised a lighter version of the headline rule that characterized their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, women

are largely excluded from government employment, and secondary schools for girls have remained shuttered in several provinces. They have also been banned from travelling alone on long journeys. No nation has yet formally recognized the Taleban government and diplomats face the delicate task of channeling aid to the stricken Afghan economy without propping up the hardline Islamists. — AFP

## 'I am not a virus,' insists Indian man named Kovid

**NEW DELHI:** What's in a name? For Indian travel start-up founder Kovid Kapoor, it has made him a social media sensation. The 31-year-old's Twitter profile declares: "My name is Kovid and I am not a virus." He posted this week that he had travelled outside India for the first time since the onset of the pandemic "and got a bunch of people amused by my name". "Future foreign trips are going to be fun!" he said in a tweet that had been liked 40,000

times and received 4,000 retweets by Friday.

The comment triggered a barrage of jokes, memes, messages and interview requests, in a moment of light relief as the highly contagious Omicron variant sees case numbers surge in India. Kapoor has joined in himself, declaring that he was been "Kovid positive since 1990" and posting a picture holding a bottle of Corona beer. "I am Kovid that wants more travel," the co-founder of Holidify quipped.

The sudden spurt of attention was "totally unexpected" but he hoped it would bring some publicity



Kovid Kapoor

to his business during a "very difficult time" for the sector, he told AFP. He has never had a shortage of icebreakers at business meetings since the start of the pandemic, but has told coffee shops not to announce his name when handing him a beverage.

Kovid is a highly unusual name in India but means a scholar or a learned individual in Hindi and Sanskrit, with the 'd' pronounced with a very soft emphasis. Kapoor's mother picked the name well before his birth. "It's a memorable name with a beautiful meaning," he said. "It makes for a striking introduction with anyone. I'd never change it." — AFP

## In Chavez fiefdom, a fight for survival

**SABANETA, Venezuela:** Venezuela's governing party is leaving nothing to chance in its bid to reclaim a fiefdom of ex-president Hugo Chavez which shocked the establishment by seemingly siding with the opposition in a recent election. The western state of Barinas, controlled by the Chavez family for over two decades, voted in large numbers in November 21 regional elections for an outsider - opposition figure Freddy Superlano.

The vote count was stopped by a court as Superlano claimed what would have been the first defeat in Barinas since 1998 for the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), now run by President Nicolas Maduro. Superlano is an ally of opposition leader Juan Guaido, recognized by the United States and dozens of other governments as Venezuela's true president over Maduro, whose 2018 reelection was not seen as legitimate by

part of the international community.

As the opposition participated in regional and local elections for the first time since 2017, Superlano took the lead over incumbent Barinas governor Argenis Chavez - the deceased ex-president's older brother, who subsequently resigned his post. But the opposition triumph was not to last. The ballot count was suspended in the region of 870,000 voters and Venezuela's Supreme Court - accused of pro-government bias by the opposition and observers - annulled the preliminary result a week later.

It granted a request by the country's public finances watchdog to declare Superlano "ineligible" due to "administrative and criminal investigations" into accusations of corruption, and ordered new elections to be held.

### 'A warning'

Superlano's Popular Will party replaced him with Sergio Garrido, an unknown regional lawmaker, who faces off today against the PSUV's Jorge Arreaza - a former foreign minister and father to Chavez's oldest grandson. Arreaza has been campaigning fervently, taking no chances. The November defeat was "a warning", said Reinaldo Chavez, a

lawmaker in the local council in the town of Sabaneta and a relative of the ex-president. "Perhaps we were beaten by our own triumphalism," he told AFP.

Maduro's party won 19 gubernatorial races in the Nov 21 vote. Barinas was alone among Venezuela's 23 states not to have the outcome confirmed by election authorities. EU observers said the vote countrywide was marred by irregularities, including the widespread use of state resources by the PSUV, and "arbitrary disqualifications" of challengers.

### 'The people are sick'

In Sabaneta, a town of 28,000, stands a six-meter bronze-and-granite statue of Chavez, its most famous son, who died of cancer in 2013. Murals everywhere honor the man beloved by many for redistributing Venezuela's vast oil wealth to the poor, but also blamed for the country's now miserable economy and sky-high crime rate. There are no opinion polls to test the voters' pulse ahead of Sunday's re-run.

"We have no electricity," a woman shouted from her home as Arreaza campaigned Wednesday in an open-roof car emblazoned with the slogan: "Hope returns." Edixon Nieto, a 22-



**SABANETA:** A motorbike ride past a mural depicting the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in Barinas state on Jan 5, 2022. — AFP

year-old farmer, said he had voted for Superlano. "Here in Sabaneta, I won't lie, people are sick," he told AFP, citing problems with basic services such as water and electricity.

Impoverished Venezuela is battered by recession and hyperinflation, and three in four of its citizens live in extreme poverty, according to a recent study. Millions have left the country in recent years to try their luck elsewhere. But Arreaza still hopes to profit from what remains of Chavez's

popularity. "Arreaza is the father of a beloved symbol of our commander Chavez: The beloved grandson of our commander," Maduro said when announcing Arreaza's gubernatorial run.

The boy, Jorge Arreaza Chavez - nicknamed "El Gallito" (Little Rooster) accompanied his father on his campaign to Sabaneta, riding in the 4x4 with him through the streets as Arreaza waved in a red shirt with a white star on the left sleeve, like Chavez used to wear. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Nine bodies found on road

**VERACRUZ, Mexico:** Nine bodies were found Friday on a road in eastern Mexico, officials said - the latest gruesome discovery in a country plagued by drug cartel-related violence. The corpses were left on a highway in the municipality of Isla in the state of Veracruz, state governor Cuatlahuac Garcia said. The region, which borders the Gulf of Mexico, is a flashpoint in turf wars between rival drug gangs, and one of the country's most violent states. — AFP

#### Charity gets back access to funds

**KOLKATA:** The Indian government renewed permission for late Catholic nun Mother Teresa's charity to receive foreign funds, weeks after rejecting it, the organization said yesterday. On Christmas Day the Narendra Modi government moved to cut off foreign funding to the Missionaries of Charity and refused to renew its license under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA). "The FCRA application has now been renewed," said Sunita Kumar, a close aide to Mother Teresa. — AFP

#### HK officials to leave quarantine

**HONG KONG:** Multiple Hong Kong officials and lawmakers will be allowed to leave a quarantine camp after one of two coronavirus cases detected at a party they attended was declared a false positive on Saturday. Dozens of senior officials and lawmakers were ordered into Hong Kong's 21-day quarantine facilities this week as health officials warn of an imminent outbreak due to the Omicron variant. Hong Kong's top cop Raymond Siu and financial services and treasury chief Christopher Hui will be among those leaving quarantine after a day-long stay. — AFP