

## Coronavirus

## Surge breaks health system

## India tops 200K deaths amid record virus spike

NEW DELHI, April 28, (AP): India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse.

The health ministry reported a single-day record 3,293 COVID-19 deaths in the last 24 hours, bringing India's total fatalities to 201,187, as the world's second most populous country endures its darkest chapter of the pandemic yet.

The country also reported 362,757 new infections, a new global record, which raised the overall total past 17.9 million. The previous high of 350,000 on Monday had capped a five-day streak of recording the largest single-day increases in any country throughout the pandemic.

India, a country of nearly 1.4 billion people, is the fourth to cross 200,000 deaths, behind the United States, Brazil and Mexico. And as in many nations, experts believe the coronavirus infections and fatalities in India are severe undercounts.

The first known COVID-19 death in India happened on March 12, 2020, in southern Karnataka state. It took five months to reach the first 50,000 dead. The toll hit 100,000 deaths in the next two months in October 2020 and 150,000 three months later in January this year. Deaths slowed until mid-March, only to sharply rise again.

For the past week, more than 2,000 Indians have died every day.

India thought it had weathered the worst of the pandemic last year, but the virus is now racing through its population and systems are beginning to collapse.

Hospitalizations and deaths have reached record highs, overwhelming health care workers. Patients are suffocating because hospitals' oxygen supplies have run out. Desperate family members are sending SOS messages on social media, hoping someone would help them find oxygen cylinders, empty hospital beds and critical drugs for their loved ones. Crematoriums have spilled over into parking lots, lighting up night skies in some cities.

With its healthcare system sinking fast, India is now looking at other nations to pull it out of the record surge that is barreling through one state and then another.

## Assistance

Many countries have offered assistance, including the US, which has promised to help with personal protective equipment, tests and oxygen supplies. The US will also send raw materials for vaccine production, strengthening India's capacity to manufacture more AstraZeneca doses.

Health experts say huge gatherings during Hindu festivals and mammoth election rallies in some states have accelerated the unprecedented surge India is seeing now.

They also say the government's mixed messaging and its premature declarations of victory over the virus encouraged people to relax when they should have continued strict adherence to physical distancing, wearing masks and avoiding large crowds.

The national capital New Delhi is in lockdown, as are the southern states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Some other states, too, have enforced restrictions in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus.

India has also called on its armed forces to help fight the devastating crisis. India's chief of Defense Staff, General Bipin Rawat, said late Monday that oxygen supplies would be released from armed forces reserves and its retired medical personnel would join health facilities to ease the pressure on doctors.

Meanwhile, India's vaccination program appears to be struggling. So far nearly 10% of the country's population have received one jab, but just over 1.5% have received both vaccines.

Indians 18 and older will be eligible for a vaccine from Saturday.

Meanwhile, the loss of lives is accelerating. Radha Gobindo Pramanik is among the countless Indians who lost a family member to the virus. His daughter, Navanita Paramanik Rajput, died on April 18.

At first, Rajput complained of colds and fever. But when the 37-year-old's oxygen levels started to drop, her father and husband decided to take her to a government hospital.

Pramanik said she came out of the ambulance smiling but by the time her husband finished filling the hospital registration form, her daughter was gasping for breath.

"Before I could understand anything, she collapsed in the arms of her husband," Pramanik said, sobbing.

Meanwhile, some Africans are hesitating to get COVID-19 vaccines amid concerns about their safety, alarming public health officials as some countries start to destroy thousands of doses that expired before use.

## Destroy

Malawi and South Sudan in recent days have said they will destroy some of their doses, a concerning development on a continent where health officials have been outspoken about the need for vaccine equity as the world's rich nations hold the bulk of the shots.

Africa, whose 1.3 billion people represent 16% of the world's population, has received less than 2% of the COVID-19 vaccine doses administered around the world, according to the World Health Organization.

The continent has confirmed more than 4.5 million COVID-19 cases, including 120,000 deaths, a tiny fraction of the global fatalities and caseload. But some experts worry that the 54-nation continent will suffer in the long term if it takes longer than expected to meet the threshold scientists believe is needed to stop uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 - 70% or higher of the population having immunity through vaccination or past infection.

Africa seeks to vaccinate up to 60% of its people by the end of 2022.

Achieving that goal will require about 1.5 billion vaccine doses for Africa if the two-shot AstraZeneca vaccine continues to be widely used. But safety concerns relating to that vaccine, often the main shot available under the donor-backed COVAX program to ensure access for developing countries, have left some Africans worried.

Vaccine-related suspicions have been spread widely on social media, driven partly by a general lack of trust in authorities. Uganda's health minister had to refute allegations she faked receiving a shot, even posting a video of herself getting the jab on Twitter, along with the admonition: "Please stop spreading fake news!"

## 'Relaxed guidance a reward, motivator for people to get vaccinated'

## Many Americans can now go outside without mask

Prescribers can treat up to 30 patients at a time

NEW YORK, April 28, (AP): The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eased its guidelines Tuesday on the wearing of masks outdoors, saying fully vaccinated Americans don't need to cover their faces anymore unless they are in a big crowd of strangers.

And those who are unvaccinated can go outside without masks in some situations, too.

The new guidance represents another carefully calibrated step on the road back to normal from the coronavirus outbreak that has killed over 570,000 people in US.

For most of the past year, the CDC had been advising Americans to wear masks outdoors if they are within 6 feet of one another.

"Today, I hope, is a day when we can take another step back to the normalcy of before," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said. "Over the past year, we have spent a lot of time telling Americans what you can't do. Today, I am going to tell you some of the things you can do, if you are fully vaccinated."

The change comes as more than half of US adults - or about 140 million people - have received at least one dose of vaccine, and more than a third have been fully vaccinated.

Walensky said the decision was driven by rising vaccination numbers; declines in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths; and research showing that less than 10% of documented instances of transmission of the virus happened outdoors.

## Expert

Dr. Mike Saag, an infectious disease expert at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, welcomed the change.

"It's the return of freedom," Saag said. "It's the return of us being able to do normal activities again. We're not there yet, but we're on the exit ramp. And that's a beautiful thing."

Some experts portrayed the relaxed guidance as a reward and a motivator for more people to get vaccinated - a message President Joe Biden sounded, too.

"The bottom line is clear: If you're vaccinated, you can do more things, more safely, both outdoors as well as indoors," Biden said. "So for those who haven't gotten their vaccinations yet, especially if you're younger or thinking you don't need it, this is another great reason to go get vaccinated now."

The CDC, which has been cautious in its guidance during the crisis, essentially endorsed what many Americans have already been doing over the past several weeks.

The CDC says that whether they are fully vaccinated or not, people do not have to wear masks outdoors when they walk, bike or run alone or with members of their household. They can also go maskless in small outdoor gatherings with fully vaccinated people.

But unvaccinated people - defined as those who have yet to receive both doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine or the one-shot Johnson & Johnson formula - should wear masks at small outdoor gatherings that include other unvaccinated

## US lifts barriers to prescribing addiction treatment drug

NEW YORK, April 28, (AP): The Biden administration is easing decades-old requirements that made it difficult for doctors to treat opioid addiction using medication.

New guidelines announced Tuesday mean doctors and other health workers will no longer need extra hours of training to prescribe buprenorphine, a gold standard medicine that helps with cravings. And they no longer have to refer patients to counseling services.

Under the loosened guidelines, prescribers will be able to treat up to 30 patients at a time with the drug. It comes in a pill or film that dissolves under the tongue. It costs about \$100 a month. A common version of buprenorphine is Suboxone.

Because of how opioids act on the brain, people dependent on them get sick if they stop using. Withdrawal can feel like a bad flu with cramping, sweating, anxiety and sleeplessness. Cravings for the drug can be so intense that relapse is common.

Buprenorphine helps by moving a patient from powerful painkillers or an illicit opioid like heroin to a regular dose of a legal opioid-based medication.

Besides doctors, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, certified nurse midwives and some other types of nurses will be able to prescribe buprenorphine without first getting special training.

The Trump administration tried to make a similar change in its final days but it would have applied only to doctors.

The Biden administration put the matter on hold for a legal and policy review, ultimately deciding to expand the easier guidelines to more prescribers.

people, the CDC says. They also should keep their faces covered when dining at outdoor restaurants with friends from multiple households.

And everyone, fully vaccinated or not, should keep wearing masks at crowded outdoor events such as concerts or sporting events, the CDC says.

The agency continues to recommend masks at indoor public places, such as hair salons, restaurants, shopping centers, gyms, museums and movie theaters, saying that is still the safer course even for vaccinated people. "Right now it's very hard to tease apart who is vaccinated," Walensky explained. She said the CDC guidance should be a model for states in setting their mask-wearing requirements.

The advice to the unvaccinated applies to adults and children alike, according to the CDC. None of the COVID-19 vaccines in use in the U.S. is authorized for children under

"What it does is provide more on-ramps to treatment," said Brendan Saloner, an addiction researcher at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "This will help in health centers, hospitals, jails and prisons - places where these folks sometimes show up for treatment."

Stricter requirements will remain for prescribers who want to treat more than 30 patients at a time.

The American Medical Association welcomed the change and urged Congress to remove other roadblocks to prescribing buprenorphine.

"Patients are struggling to find physicians who are authorized to prescribe buprenorphine; onerous regulations discourage physicians from being certified to prescribe it," said Dr. Patrice Harris, who leads the AMA's opioid task force, in a statement.

The prescribing requirements date back to legislation in 2000 meant to prevent too-easy access to a medicine with its own potential for misuse. But only a small number of doctors went through the steps and, in many parts of the country, patients couldn't find a prescriber. Ironically, doctors could prescribe buprenorphine for pain without the extra training.

US drug overdose deaths have climbed during the coronavirus pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 90,000 drug overdose deaths in the 12 months ending in September, the highest number ever recorded in a one-year period. There is not yet data for all of 2020, and the figures are preliminary.

The change "will increase the number of prescribers and the number of patients who receive prescriptions," said Assistant Health Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine.

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"The biggest thing that it helps us is our mental health," said Tim Stephens, a 52-year-old software salesman in Birmingham, Alabama, who suffered a bout of COVID-19 and has since gotten vaccinated. "To be able to feel like we're turning the corner and can confidently go out and experience life and do a lot of the things that we did before COVID became an acronym in our world. It's one more step in the process of moving beyond this."

In Oxford, Nebraska, population 800, hardly anyone wears a mask, and the school district dropped its mask mandate last month. Superintendent Bryce Jorgensen said maybe 10 of the 370 students are still covering their faces.

"What goes on in other states is what goes on in other states," Jorgensen said. "You just can't compare Chicago to Oxford, Nebraska. Things are just different."

## Because of a constitutional suspicion and five other reasons

## Lawyer Fawaz Alkhateeb calls for the abolition of Law No. (44/1968) which prohibits eating in public places during fasting in Ramadan



Lawyer Fawaz Alkhateeb

**Dr Fawaz Alkhateeb from Taher Group Law Firm called for reconsideration of the Kuwaiti law, regarding fast-breaking in public during Ramadan, considering it a non-human, non-logical law in addition to the constitutional suspicion surrounding it.**

Al-Khateeb stated that Law No. 44 of 1968 regarding breaking the fast in public during Ramadan punishes by imprisonment for a period of up to a month. "This punishment is applicable whether the person is a Muslim, non-Muslim, or with no religion at all," he said, clarifying that the Explanatory memorandum of the Law brought justifications based on that the state's religion is Islam and that public order must be observed by all Kuwaiti residents, and that the Law came to preserve the feelings of the people of Kuwait and adhere to the religion and Islamic values, and that breaking the fast in public places hurts Muslims feelings, adding that the Law is applicable even if this is for someone who has an excuse and illness!

Al-Khateeb indicated that this law is repeatedly applied on non-Muslim foreigners, recalling what happened years ago to a non-Muslim foreign doctor "who came in Ramadan to the State of Kuwait for the first time to work, and after leaving the airport, she was eating in the taxi, so a policeman stopped the taxi and referred her for investigation because of breaking the fast and she was imprisoned in view of the case. After her release, she decided immediately to leave Kuwait as she was surprised with the measures that were taken against her and because of her ignorance of Islam as a religion and the lack of awareness of such a law. He said that this case and many other similar cases make us as jurists call for the

**• The law violates many articles in the Kuwaiti Constitution and contradicts the Civil State concept and the diversity of our society.**

abolition of this legislation," indicating that there are five reasons why this law must be reconsidered.

The first reason is that "This law violates the Constitution in Articles 7, 30, 35, 36 and 175, as this legislation contradicts the principles established by the constitution which stress on the importance of guaranteeing personal freedom, and that the purpose of the constitution is to achieve justice, and guaranteeing freedom of absolute belief to religions and even if the person does not believe in any religion, stressing that the constitution is indivisible and the principles of freedom and equality are applied to all persons of different religions and that there is no amendment except for more guarantees and freedoms," Alkhateeb said pointing out that the central argument in this law is flawed when the aim of the rule of law is to impose religious beliefs on a non-Muslim, which constitutes a kind of exaggeration in imposing doctrine using the law.

Regarding the second reason, Alkhateeb stated that the Law contradicts with the concept of the civil state and the nature of the diverse society, indicating that Kuwait is a civil state, meaning that it protects and preserves all members of society equally regardless of their different religious and intellectual affiliations, and it urges their unity and cohesion, as it is a constitutional state of institutions that accommodate the foreign element and does not exclude it, pointing to the existence of traditional (usurious banks) as well as insurance companies in Kuwait, and that the state contracts with a non-Muslim foreign army to impose protection along with other aspects that confirm the openness of the state and its acceptance of global diversity.

Alkhateeb added that the third reason revolves around the law's violation of common sense, as it is unacceptable to impose religious obligations on non-Muslims and forcing them to refrain from behaviours that are not related to their beliefs, explaining that "our feelings as Muslims will not be harmed if a non-Muslim eats food in front of us. As Kuwaiti people travel to foreign countries, fast and perform their acts of worship, and I believe that imposing Islam on a non-Muslim is in fact contrary to the concept of religious and moral peace and the valuable Islamic messages and values that we describe as having the universal validity for the human being, and assumed calling and preaching without the use of coercive means in imposing belief as we are members of a civil state," he said.

Alkhateeb also dealt with the subject of religious excuses of not fasting such as travel, sickness, and other excuses, pointing out that Kuwait does not impose the pillars of religion, such as prayer on time, and does not prevent usury, wondering how "we force Non-Muslims to perform Islamic duties because of feelings that will not be affected in any way because of fasting, adding that the aim of fasting is to feel how the poor feels and be patient". Al-Khateeb also indicated that there is a difference between the doctrines of the Islamic religion in the state such as the difference in the date of the start of Ramadan among the followers of the Jaafari (shia) school and the followers of the Sunni school, and the time of fasting and breaking the fast may also differ between the schools.

Fourthly, Alkhateeb asserted that the law violates the economic and developmental goals, especially since the state calls and encourages direct investment from foreign companies. "In Kuwait, we have up to three millions expatriates, many of them are non-Muslims and from various countries, and therefore a suitable work environment must be created especially in light of the Kuwaiti financial deficit to pay salaries and the high risk of not diversifying sources of income and the scarcity of foreign expertise in the specialized labor market," he said, indicating that many non-Muslim expatriates work in public places under the sun and at high temperatures during the day of Ramadan for long hours, and it is illogical to prevent them from drinking and eating even though they are non-Muslims, especially those who work in building bridges, contracting and cleaning, indicating that the authority's issuance of decisions regarding the closure of restaurants and the prevention of delivery during the day in Ramadan is unjustified; wondering "So do such laws and decisions provide an appropriate and encouraging environment for companies, investors and non-Muslim foreigners in the State of Kuwait? Rather, it is a work environment that repels skilled foreign workers and investors.

Concerning the fifth justification to reconsider the Law, Alkhateeb stated that many comparative laws in the Islamic countries do not criminalize this act or at the least is less burdensome in criminalizing it, citing countries such as Oman as according to its Penal Law No. 7/74 in Article (312), the maximum penalty is imprisonment (10 days) or the fine and the law only applies on Muslims that do not have a legal excuse. Also in Morocco, the law punishes everyone who is known to embrace Islam and break the fast publicly during the day in Ramadan without an excuse. Furthermore, in Bahrain, according to Decree-Law No. 15 of 1976, Article (309) the punishment is applicable only

**• Punishing those breaking the fast contradicts the states' plans on promoting the diversification of Kuwait's economy and its aims of attracting foreign companies through the direct investment laws as such law creates a negative work environment.**

to Muslims. Alkhateeb added that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia mitigated the role of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and followed a policy of economic openness and promoting tourism and entertainment in general.

Al-Khateeb added, that all human beings are morally equal and enjoy independence. The duty from which the duty of obedience is derived can be a general moral duty that promotes justice and impartiality. It is clearly unfair to punish a non-Muslim for eating in a public place because of what is called hurting the feelings. The imposition of religious laws is one aspect of compulsion that causes the emergence of hypocrisy in society. It is a compulsion in showing a religious practice other than what the person believes or other than what he chooses which leads to a state of hypocrisy and stubbornness. Acts of worship should not be regulated by laws, as the rule of law is not forcing beliefs. Rather, the only right could be to apply social criticism to Muslims who break the fast without an excuse.

Alkhateeb also pointed out that the justifications for obeying the law and coercing it and using force are based on applying the principle of fairness, justice, freedom and support for national institutions and interests in the context of the broader value, and limiting the potential negative consequences of disobedience to the political system, considering that all of the above "are absent in this moody, fruitless law," accordingly, a shift must be made from the ideological centrality of religious belief to the pluralism rooted in social and cultural manifestations and the tremendous societal diversity.

Alkhateeb concluded that this opinion remains within the limits of dialogue and constitution that guaranteed every human being's right of expression, "and we believe that the current law does not concern itself with the larger view of the issue, still, it is an obligation of involuntary compliance and respect and is binding on all unless it is amended or repealed."

**• It is unacceptable to impose religious duties on non-Muslims and force them to refrain from behaviours not related to their beliefs.**