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Modi Orders 3-Week Total Lockdown for All 1.3 Billion Indians

With four hours' notice, India's prime minister announced that no one could leave home for 21 days — the most severe step taken anywhere in the war against the coronavirus.



By Jeffrey Gettleman and Kai Schultz

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7 MIN READ

NEW DELHI — India's prime minister ordered all 1.3 billion people in the country to stay inside their homes for three weeks starting Wednesday — the biggest and most severe action undertaken anywhere to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

“There will be a total ban of coming out of your homes,” the prime minister, Narendra Modi, announced on television Tuesday night, giving Indians less than four hours' notice before the order took effect at 12:01 a.m.

“Every state, every district, every lane, every village will be under lockdown,” Mr. Modi said.

The breadth and depth of such a challenge is staggering in a country where hundreds of millions of citizens are destitute and countless millions live in packed urban areas with poor sanitation and weak public health care.

[Update: India, day 1: World's largest lockdown begins.]

Though India's number of reported coronavirus infections remains relatively low — around 500 — the fear is that, should the virus hit as it has in the United States, Europe or China, the consequences would lead to a disaster far bigger than anywhere else.



People buying vegetables at a crowded market on Tuesday in Secunderabad, India. Noah Seelam/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The nationwide lockdown followed a series of decrees that had been steadily growing more stringent, and some people had been expecting Mr. Modi to announce something even more severe, like a nationwide state of emergency and declaration of martial law.

Hours before Mr. Modi's televised address, the long straight boulevards of New Delhi, the capital, resembled deserted racetracks. All the stores in the center of town were shut, but in the poorer neighborhoods just outside of the city, it was a different story.

People were still out, jostling with each other in narrow lanes and still crowding into bus shelters, sleeping eight to a room in shabby tenements, and showing the impossibility of maintaining social distance.

Long lines of migrant workers streamed out of recently closed railway stations, with thousands of men, almost none wearing masks, marching close together to far-off villages, potentially spreading the virus deep into the countryside.

As midnight approached in New Delhi, lone figures walked down the edges of the main roads, carrying bulging plastic sacks of food — the last of the shopping before the decree took effect.

In the densely populated quarters that ring all sides of the capital, the economy is powered by manual laborers and informal workers. Even in the urban areas, many cannot work from home or purchase essential items online. When they step out to get food for their families, they enter viselike canyons between cement buildings built so close it is difficult to see even a slice of sky.

“How can we practice social distancing here?” asked Amit Kumar, a shopkeeper.



A street market on Monday in New Delhi. Yawar Nazir/Getty Images

He glanced around the lanes littered with garbage. Nearby, one man cleared his throat and spat an oyster of phlegm onto the sidewalk.

Coronavirus, Mr. Kumar said, is creating “a mountain of problems.”

In his televised address, Mr. Modi basically said there was no choice.

“If you can’t handle these 21 days, this country and your family will go back 21 years,” Mr. Modi said. “The only option is social distancing, to remain away from each other. There is no way out to escape from coronavirus besides this.”

Without being specific, Mr. Modi said “all the steps to ensure essential commodities will be maintained.”

But Mr. Modi did not make clear how people would get food, water and other necessities during the lockdown, or how they would maintain a safe distance from one another in the cramped spaces where many now live.

The Home Ministry issued a statement after Mr. Modi spoke saying that food shops, banks, gas stations and some other essential services would be exempt from the lockdown. But the ministry warned that anyone who refused to follow the restrictions faced up to a year in jail.

Mr. Modi acknowledged that his decree would create “a very difficult time for poor people.”

Even before he spoke, confusion about India’s restrictions was widespread. Police officers have aggressively shut down some food stores, despite government directives to keep them open. Officers have also beaten journalists, accusing them of violating lockdown rules even though government directives explicitly allow journalists to work.

Westerners have been evicted from hotels across the country, and some European embassies have reported that a few of their citizens have been assaulted; many Indians believe that Westerners carry the virus.

That belief is not entirely unfounded. So far, most of India’s cases have come from foreign travelers or Indians returning from overseas. Community transmission has remained low or nonexistent, Indian officials have said.

Before India shut down international flights over the weekend, Indians landing back at home described utter chaos. Huge crowds were pushing and shoving and passengers were squeezed together in jammed arrival halls. People stood for hours with little food or water.

Aaliyah Khan, a researcher at a military research organization, arrived at New Delhi’s international airport on Saturday afternoon and was shuffled around by health and immigration authorities for more than 30 hours before being admitted to a government quarantine center 50 miles away.

“They had no idea where to take me and they started treating me like an untouchable,” she said, invoking the term used in the past for India’s lowest social strata. “The person in charge was shouting at me all the time: ‘Stand there! Do this! Do that!’”

Still, many experts agree that putting India on lockdown, however harshly, is the country’s only hope to contain the virus.

“There is no option but to go for a complete lockdown,” said Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda, a former senior army commander. “With India’s population density and the state of public health infrastructure, we may not be able to handle a large-scale outbreak.”

The lockdown includes schools, offices, factories, parks, temples, railways, even the airspace. Borders are being sealed between the states.

Economists said a prolonged lockdown could devastate India, where slowing growth rates have already wounded the economy.

In a recent column for *The Hindu*, Jean Drèze, a prominent Belgian-Indian economist, said almost everybody in India’s informal economy — a huge share of the country’s work force — has been hit by an “economic tsunami.”

As news of the lockdown spread, migrant workers stuck in cities rushed to book train tickets to their villages — or risk being trapped indefinitely. With severe supply chain disruptions, farmers worried that the coming wheat harvest would fail to reach millions of Indians who depend on their crops for survival.

“This situation is worse than war,” said Arun Kumar, an economics professor at the Institute of Social Sciences in New Delhi. “If we are not able to provide essentials to the bottom 50 percent of the population, then there will be social revolt.”

Shehnaz Khatun, a mother of three living in a cramped tenement in New Delhi, panicked after hearing Mr. Modi’s decree on Tuesday night.

“The police beat us if we try to step out,” she said. “We dare not step out even to buy vegetables whose prices have skyrocketed.”

“The future looks very dark,” she added. “If coronavirus does not kill us, hunger will.”

And yet, India has won praise from international public health experts for its swift movement, and it has some built-in advantages as well.



A civil worker sanitizing a residential area in Mumbai on Tuesday. Rajanish Kakade/Associated Press

Young people have a better chance of coping with the virus. And the population in India is considerably younger — the median age is around 28 — compared to a country like Italy, where the median age is around 45. Lockdown measures and travel restrictions were put into place comparatively earlier than other nations. And the authorities in many states have already started making plans for cash and food handouts.

In Punjab state, the government is bracing for the virus to spread after thousands of Punjabis living in Europe recently returned. India has performed limited testing and some experts fear that the 500 or so reported cases is a small fraction of the true number.

Dr. Jayaprakash Muliyil, one of India’s leading epidemiologists, said Mr. Modi’s government needed to move even faster to reach millions of Indians in isolated communities where formal education is lacking and information about the virus is still sparse.

“The bulk of the population hasn’t understood what the hell is going on,” he said. “If we do nothing, we’ll have millions of cases and millions of deaths in the next three months. India’s health care system is absolutely unprepared.”

India’s public health sector is underfunded and overstretched even in the best of times. India has around 0.5 hospital beds for every 1,000 people, according to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. By comparison, Italy has 3.2 and China has 4.3.

Density is another challenge. India has some of Asia's biggest slums, and experts fear what would happen if the coronavirus spreads in a city like Mumbai, home to 20 million people, where space is at a premium and many families squeeze six or even eight to a room.



The nearly deserted Western Express highway in Mumbai, India. Divyakant Solanki/EPA, via Shutterstock

Dr. S.D. Gupta, a public health expert and the chairman of the Indian Institute of Health Management Research, said India's social structure, in which several generations of a family often live together, complicated social distancing guidelines and put the older people who suffer substantially higher mortality rates at risk.

Still, he said India's extraordinary ability to mobilize in times of uncertainty — from blunting the force of cyclones to eradicating smallpox — suggested that the country could get ahead of the coronavirus if strict measures were kept in place and the populace obeyed them.

So far, Dr. Gupta said, many have.

“This country has great resilience and people come together in an emergency,” he said. “We can beat this.”

In northeastern Delhi, people are not so sure. The area is the single most densely populated district in all of India, with 36,155 people per square kilometer.

On Tuesday, people had been bracing for more restrictions. And in a place full of daily laborers and casual workers, it was the restrictions, more than the virus, that scared them.

“All I'm thinking about right now is how to put food in my children's stomachs,” said Majid Khan, a house painter. He had not worked in days, he had 3,000 rupees (less than \$50) in his pocket and zero in his bank account, and his rent was overdue.

“These are my problems,” he said.

Reporting was contributed by Shalini Venugopal, Hari Kumar and Suhasini Raj from New Delhi, and Vindu Goel from Mumbai.