

Maharashtra state suffers surge in COVID-19 cases



A health worker in personal protective equipment (PPE) collects a swab sample from a woman during a rapid antigen testing campaign for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), at a railway station platform in Mumbai.

By Rajendra Jadhav
and Rama Venkat

MUMBAI - New coronavirus infections in India rose by the most in more than three months as a second wave of the epidemic gathered momentum, with Maharashtra, the country's richest state, accounting for two-thirds of the latest daily tally.

Home to India's commercial capital Mumbai, the western state reported 23,179 of the country's 35,871 new cases in

the past 24 hours, and the fast spreading contagion in major industrial areas raised risks of companies' production being disrupted.

India's total cases stood at 11.47 million, the highest after the United States and Brazil. Deaths rose by 172 to 159,216, according to health ministry data released on Thursday.

The country's first wave peaked in September at nearly 100,000 cases a day, with daily infections hitting a low of just

over 9,000 early last month.

Cases have been rising in Maharashtra since the reopening of most economic activities in February. Mumbai's suburban trains, which carry millions of people daily, also resumed services.

The state, of 112 million people, ordered a fresh lockdown in some districts and put curbs on cinemas, hotels and restaurants until the end of the month after infections rose to a multi-month high earlier this week.

New cases have more than doubled in the past two weeks in Maharashtra's industrial towns such as Pune, Aurangabad, Nashik and Nagpur, known for their

automobile, pharmaceutical and textile factories.

"We have asked industries there to operate with minimum manpower as much possible," said a senior Maharashtra government official, declining to be named as he was not authorised to talk to the media. "Most of the IT companies have allowed their employees to work from home."

Hospital beds and special COVID-19 facilities were filling up fast, especially in Mumbai, Nagpur and Pune, said another state official.

Earlier this month, more than 80% of oxygen and intensive-care beds in Maharashtra were

unoccupied.

Half a dozen other states, such as Punjab and Madhya Pradesh, have also seen a rise in cases this month. The government has blamed crowding and a reluctance to wear masks for the rise.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday asked state leaders to quickly increase testing and expand vaccination to "stop the emerging second peak of corona".

India has administered more than 36.5 million vaccine doses since starting its immunisation drive in the middle of January.

Pandemic pushes 32 million Indians out of middle class, says Pew Research

By Manoj Kumar

NEW DELHI - Financial woes brought by last year's coronavirus pandemic have pushed about 32 million Indians out of the middle class, undoing years of economic gains, a report showed on Thursday, while job losses pushed millions into poverty.

The number of Indians in the middle class, or those earn-

ing between \$10 and \$20 a day, shrunk by about 32 million, compared with the number that could have been reached in the absence of a pandemic, the U.S.-based Pew Research Centre said.

A year into the pandemic, the numbers of those in the middle class has shrunk to 66 million, down a third from a pre-pandemic estimate of 99 million, it added.

"India is estimated to have seen a greater decrease in the middle class and a much sharper rise in poverty than China in the COVID-19 downturn," the Pew Research Centre said, citing the World Bank's forecasts of economic growth.

Nearly 57 million people had joined the middle income group between 2011 and 2019, it added.

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