

India to stay locked down till May 3

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Hindustan Times, New Delhi | By HT Correspondent

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in an address to the nation on Monday that the ongoing 21-day national lockdown will now be extended for another 19 days until May 3, a move that experts said would flatten as well as delay the cycle of infections, although both the opposition and industry criticised his speech for its silence on a much-needed economic relief package.

Modi emphasised that while India had done better than most other countries in the battle against the coronavirus disease (Covid-19), it still needs citizens to make more sacrifices to win the fight against the pandemic.

Acknowledging that this entailed economic costs, the PM said the priority was to save lives of Indian citizens. He did offer some hope of a phased exit, at least in some areas. If states, districts, even local sub-regions down to the police station level, till April 20, were able to enforce the lockdown strictly, and prevent the emergence of new hot spots, based on a careful review, relaxations will be introduced to resume a set of “necessary activities” in these specific geographies, Modi said. Government officials have spoke of a plan to categorise India into zones depending on the intensity and the spread of infections, and opening up unaffected areas.

Addressing the nation — in his fifth speech on the coronavirus pandemic in less than a month — the PM underlined that India’s quick and strong response to the crisis helped it cope better and defended the lockdown, for the situation would otherwise have been “unimaginable”. He offered a review of India’s efforts so far and claimed that the health infrastructure was being ramped up and measures undertaken to minimise inconvenience to citizens; said that relief to the poor and daily wage workers was topmost in his list of priorities; and made seven specific appeals to citizens.

The Opposition, while broadly supportive of the extension of the lockdown, was critical of what it saw as the PM’s silence on economic relief to both industry and labour, and measures to address hunger and distress. Experts too underlined that while the lockdown will give India more time to deal with the disease, the government should have offered more specific measures to different sectors. And industry bodies expressed their disappointment at the lack of any specific relief measures for business, or even hints of those in the offing.

Ramanan Laxminarayan, director at the Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy, and a senior research scholar at Princeton University, said that the government had clearly prioritised health. “This additional lockdown will push the epidemic curve out quite far. Our options in terms of treatment options may be quite different then. Our understanding of the disease is improving each day and our ability to respond would be better if we have more time to prepare.”

But others were concerned about the absence of specifics in the PM’s speech. Yamini Aiyar, president and chief executive of the Centre for Policy Research, said that apart from mentioning that the guidelines (for possible relaxations after April 20) would be announced on Wednesday, the speech did not offer clarity on what the next 19 days will be used for — in terms of enhancing health service preparedness, testing strategy and crucially, hunger and starvation.

“For the next 19 days we need greater transparency on government action, including on testing, clear communication (especially for graded opening up), better centre-state coordination and crucially an economic package that instils confidence.”

“It is expected that close to 40 million jobs are at risk during the period April-September 2020. Hence, an urgent relief package is also critical,” Sangita Reddy, president of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci), said on Tuesday on the impact of the lockdown.

The PM began his speech by first hailing the discipline and restraint shown by citizens during the lockdown, despite facing problems — from food to mobility to being away from families. This, he said, was an example of the collective power of “we the people of India”, enshrined in the Constitution. He then outlined how the world, including resourceful, developed countries was struggling with the pandemic and while comparisons were not appropriate, many countries which were at the same level as India sometime back, have seen a spike of cases, with 25 to 30 times more than the cases in India.

“Long before we had even a single case of Corona, India started screening travellers coming in from corona-affected countries at airports. Before the number of patients reached 100, India made 14-day isolation mandatory for all those coming in from abroad. Malls, clubs and gyms were shut down in many places. When we had only 550 Corona cases, then itself, India had taken the big step of a 21-day complete lockdown,” the PM said.

India, he said, did not wait for the problem to aggravate but decided to tackle it early. If these decisions had not been taken, and lockdown and social distancing not been enforced, then, the PM said, he shuddered to think what the situation would have been. His remarks on India’s preparations and decisions come in the wake of criticism of the government that it responded late to the crisis.

The PM then spoke of the role of states and local self-government units — which had all been exercising utmost responsibility in this battle. He said he had been in continuous touch with the states; they had all recommended the extension of the lockdown; and some had already done so.

“Keeping all the suggestions in mind, it has been decided that the lockdown in India will have to be extended till May 3. During this time, we must continue to maintain discipline in the way we have been doing till now.”

Outlining the next challenge, the PM said it was crucial that the virus did not spread to new areas — and a single new case, or a single death, should be of highest concern. To do so, the PM said it was important to be vigilant about existing hot spots (a reference to zones which has seen as clusters of cases), ensure strict monitoring and lockdown in areas

which could potentially become hot spots, and prevent the emergence of any new hot spots. This would be done for a week, till April 20.

“Until April 20, every town, every police station, every district, every state will be evaluated on how much the lockdown is being followed. The extent to which the region has protected itself from coronavirus will be noted. Areas that will succeed in this litmus test, which will not be in the hot spot category, and are likely not to turn into a hot spot may be allowed to open up select necessary activities.”

But this relaxation, the PM emphasised, was strictly conditional. The rules to go out would remain strict; permission would be withdrawn immediately if lockdown rules were violated or cases spread. A detailed guideline on these possible relaxations, in these specific areas, after April 20, will be put out by the government on Wednesday.

The PM underlined these exemptions were being prepared with an eye on the poor and daily wage workers, who had suffered through major difficulties. He also acknowledged the concerns of farmers and said that with the rabi harvest around the corner, the Centre and states were working together to minimise the inconvenience for them. He assured citizens that there were adequate supplies of essentials — in perhaps an effort to ensure that there was no panic buying.

While the government has faced criticism for the failure to ramp up the health infrastructure, the PM underlined that this had indeed been done — and offered statistics. From one lab to test Covid-19 patients in January, the country now had 220 testing labs; while global experience showed that for every 10,000 patients, about 1,500-1,600 beds were required, India already had 100,000 beds; there are also 600 hospitals dedicated to Covid-19 patients.

Towards the end of the speech, the PM turned back to citizens with seven specific appeals.

This included first, taking care of the elderly, especially those with co-morbidities; second, adhering to the lockdown and wearing home-made masks; third, enhancing immunity by following guidelines put forth by the Ayush ministry; fourth, downloading the Aarogya Setu app (which helps track health details of individuals and their possible contact with positive cases); fifth, taking care of poor families; sixth, remaining compassionate towards those who worked in one’s industry and not terminating their services in these times (at a time when companies have been reported to laying off staff), and finally, respecting frontline workers.

The Opposition’s response was mixed.

Senior Congress leader and former finance minister P Chidambaram said the party understood the compulsions of extending the lockdown and supported it.

“But beyond the lockdown, what was ‘new’ in PM’s new year message? It is obvious that livelihood for the poor — their survival — is not among the priorities of the government. CMs’ demand for money elicited no response. Not a rupee has been added to the miserly package of March 25, 2020.” He claimed that the poor had been left to fend for themselves for 21+19 days, including practically soliciting food. “There is money, there is food, but the government will not release either money or food.”

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati said the party supports the extension of the lockdown “but the government must keep in mind the interests of the poor, labourers, farmers and other working class, and provide aid to them during the lockdown period.”