

Some traffic returns to roads as India eases virus lockdown

May 18 2020, by Sheikh Saaliq and Emily Schmall



A cyclist wearing a mask pedals past other vehicles during extended lockdown in Kochi, southern Kerala state, India, Monday, May 18, 2020. India on Monday saw a slow trickle of people returning outdoors and thin traffic on its roads in some states, a day after the federal government extended the nationwide coronavirus lockdown to May 31 but eased many restrictions to restore economic activity. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)

People trickled outdoors and thin traffic returned to roads in some Indian states on Monday, a day after the federal government extended the nationwide coronavirus lockdown to May 31 but eased many restrictions to restore economic activity.

Small shops and other businesses were reopened in several states, including the capital, New Delhi, where the movement of private transport led to some traffic snarls. E-commerce companies started to deliver goods, including those considered nonessential, to places outside containment zones.

Metro service, flights, schools, shopping malls, colleges, hotels and restaurants, however, remain shuttered nationwide.

The ease in restrictions comes as the federal government gives states more control in deciding the nature of the lockdown and the power to classify areas as certain types of COVID-19 zones based on the spread and severity of cases.

In New Delhi, cyclists and private cars whizzed through thoroughfares that had been almost entirely deserted a day earlier. Late Monday, authorities in the capital announced they will allow auto rickshaws, cabs and buses with no more than 20 passengers. The capital's top elected leader, Arvind Kejriwal, said private offices can also open fully, but "should try that most of the staff works from home."



People wearing masks line up to update their details for Aadhar, a government identity card during extended lockdown in Kochi, southern Kerala state, India, Monday, May 18, 2020. India on Monday saw a slow trickle of people returning outdoors and thin traffic on its roads in some states, a day after the federal government extended the nationwide coronavirus lockdown to May 31 but eased many restrictions to restore economic activity. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)

In Khan Market, one of New Delhi's poshest marketplaces, produce shops, hardware stores, booksellers and stationers were open, but cafes, boutiques and salons remained closed under the government guidelines.

Instead, two long, single-file lines of mainly men stood waiting for food donations.

Rajni Malhotra, an owner of the Bahri Sons bookstore in Khan Market,

said travel magazines and books were particularly popular among buyers since booksellers were allowed to reopen in the previous phase of the easing of India's lockdown.

"They need the escape," Rajni said.

The easing of the lockdown, however, has had a downside.

The air quality in New Delhi remained in the "moderate" category on Monday, with the Air Quality Index hovering a touch above the 170s, considered unhealthy, according to the government's air quality monitoring system.



People wearing masks ride on an auto-rickshaw during extended lockdown in

Kochi, southern Kerala state, India, Monday, May 18, 2020. India on Monday saw a slow trickle of people returning outdoors and thin traffic on its roads in some states, a day after the federal government extended the nationwide coronavirus lockdown to May 31 but eased many restrictions to restore economic activity. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)

New Delhi, known along with other Indian cities for its poor air quality, had enjoyed clean air after India announced the lockdown in late March. But the reopening of factories in the capital's outskirts has led to a deterioration of air quality in one of the world's most polluted cities.

India recorded its biggest single-day coronavirus surge on Monday with 5,242 new cases along with 157 deaths. India has confirmed a total of more than 96,000 cases, the most in Asia, including 3,029 deaths.

Most of the cases have been in major cities, with Mumbai, India's financial hub and home to Bollywood, registering almost 20% of the total infections.

But rural villages across India are also seeing an increase in cases as migrant workers continue to swell the numbers in eastern states such as Bihar and Odisha.



A driver wearing a mask parks his bus after a special trip for government employees during extended lockdown in Kochi, southern Kerala state, India, Monday, May 18, 2020. India on Monday saw a slow trickle of people returning outdoors and thin traffic on its roads in some states, a day after the federal government extended the nationwide coronavirus lockdown to May 31 but eased many restrictions to restore economic activity. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)



A private tour operator cleans his bus before taking migrant workers to the eastern state of Orissa in Kochi, southern Kerala state, India, Monday, May 18, 2020. Thousands of migrant laborers have been returning to their villages after losing jobs because of a countrywide lockdown imposed in late March to contain the spread of the coronavirus. India on Monday saw a slow trickle of people returning outdoors and thin traffic on its roads in some states, a day after the federal government extended the nationwide coronavirus lockdown to May 31 but eased many restrictions to restore economic activity. (AP Photo/R S Iyer)



A family of migrant worker checks the train timings outside a railway station during extended lockdown in New Delhi, India, Monday, May 18, 2020. India has recorded its biggest single-day surge in new cases of coronavirus. The surge in infections comes a day after the federal government extended a nationwide lockdown to May 31 but eased some restrictions to restore economic activity and gave states more control in deciding the nature of the lockdown. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)



A shopkeeper selling mobile accessories waits for customers during extended lockdown in New Delhi, India, Monday, May 18, 2020. India has recorded its biggest single-day surge in new cases of coronavirus. The surge in infections comes a day after the federal government extended a nationwide lockdown to May 31 but eased some restrictions to restore economic activity and gave states more control in deciding the nature of the lockdown. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)



Indians stand outside a local snack shop during extended lockdown in New Delhi, India, Monday, May 18, 2020. India has recorded its biggest single-day surge in new cases of coronavirus. The surge in infections comes a day after the federal government extended a nationwide lockdown to May 31 but eased some restrictions to restore economic activity and gave states more control in deciding the nature of the lockdown. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

Authorities are largely attributing the surge in infections in these states to the return of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who left cities and towns where they were abandoned by their employers after having toiled for years building homes and roads.

India's lockdown was imposed on March 25 and has been extended several times. On May 4, India eased lockdown rules and allowed

migrant workers to travel back to their homes, a decision that has resulted in millions of people being on the move for the last two weeks.

Caught off guard by the large-scale displacement, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government recently ordered special trains to take migrant workers, students and others stranded by the lockdown to their home states after mounting pressure from the opposition.

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