New Delhi plans mass screening effort as virus cases surge

June 25 2020, by Aniruddha Ghosal

In this Wednesday, June 24, 2020, photo, a health worker takes a swab sample of a woman for a COVID-19 test in New Delhi, India. Indian authorities said Wednesday that they would carry out a massive survey for targeting the entire population of 29 million in New Delhi and test everyone with symptoms by July 6. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

Indian authorities are launching a massive coronavirus survey taking down health details from New Delhi's entire population of 29 million, and testing everyone with symptoms by July 6.

The new plan was announced Wednesday after the sprawling capital became the worst-hit city by the pandemic in India with 70,390 cases, exceeding the financial capital of Mumbai.

In the past 24 hours, 3,788 new cases were confirmed in Delhi, compared to 1,118 in Mumbai. India on Thursday registered another record high of 16,922 cases, taking the total to 473,105.

So far, the strategy in Delhi—the territory that encompasses the capital city—had revolved around identifying containment zones, or areas with large clusters of cases. But officials said that less than a fifth of all cases came from the zones, and broader surveillance was needed.

Nearly half of the cases in Delhi were part of viral clusters, and the search for them through "vigorous contact tracing of COVID positive patients will be undertaken to analyze the reasons for clustering," the city government said.

Officials said teams will go to each household to identify and test anyone with symptoms using an antigen test, a cheaper and more efficient though less accurate blood test that looks for antibodies—proteins made by the body days or weeks after fighting an infection.

In this April 20, 2020 photo, health workers survey a locality in New Delhi, India. Indian authorities said Wednesday that they would carry out a massive survey for targeting the entire population of 29 million in New Delhi and test everyone with symptoms by July 6. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

The test diagnoses active infections by detecting the earliest toxic traces of the virus. While acknowledging that antigen tests aren't as accurate as the gold standard RT-PCR tests, officials said that "highly suspicious cases" who test negative on the antigen test will be administered an RT-PCR test to rule out a false result.

Meanwhile, the new plan also envisions a redrawing of the city's 266 containment zones. On June 18, the Delhi government began administering antigen tests in containment zones but only to the sick.

Now everyone in these areas would be tested, officials said, adding that they weren't clear as to how many tests that would entail.

Police will be deployed to enforce physical distancing and prevent the mixing of the population in containment zones. Drones would be used to ensure strict perimeter control and "absolute restriction of outward and inward movement of the population," the city government said. Those found breaking physical distancing norms will be fined.

In this April 20, 2020 photo, health workers survey a locality in New Delhi, India. Indian authorities said Wednesday that they would carry out a massive survey for targeting the entire population of 29 million in New Delhi and test everyone with symptoms by July 6. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

In this Wednesday, June 24, 2020 photo, volunteers prepare a facility that can accommodate more than ten thousand COVID-19 patients at the Radha Soami Satsang Beas complex, one of the biggest in India, at the Chattarpur area of New Delhi, India. Indian authorities said Wednesday that they would carry out a massive survey for targeting the entire population of 29 million in New Delhi and test everyone with symptoms by July 6. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

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If officials find anyone confirmed to have been infected, or a cluster of patients living in a densely populated area where physical distancing isn't possible, then the plan says that they would be moved to a COVID-19 government care center.

The plan also flags the need for additional staff for the massive exercise, and says that civil society groups and non-government organizations could be included to assist in monitoring those patients who are isolated in their homes and for early diagnosis of their contacts.

Separately, authorities are also planning to randomly test people from across age groups, including children, to look for antibodies for the [coronavirus](#) in their blood in order to better understand how the virus is spreading. This survey is planned by July 10, and officials said that they were hoping to collect 20,000 samples.

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