

Delhi quadruples mask fines as virus cases soar

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Officials in India's capital on Thursday quadrupled the fines dished out for people not wearing face masks as coronavirus cases soar in the megacity, overwhelming hospitals and graveyards even as the government resists calls for another lockdown.

The penalty hike to 2,000 rupees (\$27) announced by New Delhi's chief minister came as India's total coronavirus caseload neared nine million, the second-highest in the world.

"At times when words alone don't do the trick, we have to get a bit tougher," chief minister Arvind Kejriwal told a news conference, also tweeting that the city of 20 million was on a "war footing".

India imposed one of the world's strictest lockdowns in March, but the restrictions dealt a severe blow to the economy and the government has since eased restrictions.

Few people wear masks—particularly outside [major cities](#)—and in recent weeks shoppers have thronged markets in preparations for a series of religious festivals.

In Delhi, almost 500,000 people have been fined since June for not wearing masks, 370,000 for ignoring social distancing rules and 3,500 for spitting.

This week the number of cases in the metropolis passed half a million, with a record rise in daily cases and deaths.

Over 90 percent of Delhi intensive care beds with ventilators were occupied as on Thursday, a government [mobile app](#) showed.

The problem has been exacerbated by choking haze and pollution which grips the city this time each year.

"My father's oxygen saturation level dipped... and we rushed to the nearby hospital but there were no beds available," Delhi resident Rajeev Nigam told AFP.

"We ran all night from one hospital to another but it was the same story everywhere," he said, attacking the "unprepared" city government which is working to increase the number of [hospital](#) beds.

Kejriwal this week announced that the number of guests at weddings would be cut to 50 and asked the central [government](#) for authority to close down markets if they become virus "hotspots".

"I only have space left for about 50-60 burials. Then what? I have no idea," Mohammed Shamim, a gravedigger at one of Delhi's biggest cemeteries, told AFP.

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