India tops 200,000 dead as virus surge breaks health system

April 28 2021, by Sheikh Saaliq

In this April 24, 2021, file photo, multiple funeral pyres of those who died of COVID-19 burn at a ground that has been converted into a crematorium for the mass cremation of coronavirus victims, in New Delhi, India. India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday, April 28, 2021 of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri, File)

India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse.

The health ministry reported a single-day record 3,293 COVID-19 deaths in the last 24 hours, bringing India's total fatalities to 201,187, as the world's second most populous country endures its darkest chapter of the pandemic yet.

The country also reported 362,757 new infections, a new global record, which raised the overall total past 17.9 million. The previous high of 350,000 on Monday had capped a five-day streak of recording the largest single-day increases in any country throughout the pandemic.

India, a country of nearly 1.4 billion people, is the fourth to cross 200,000 deaths, behind the United States, Brazil and Mexico. And as in many nations, experts believe the coronavirus infections and fatalities in India are severe undercounts.

The first known COVID-19 death in India happened on March 12, 2020, in southern Karnataka state. It took five months to reach the first 50,000 dead. The toll hit 100,000 deaths in the next two months in October 2020 and 150,000 three months later in January this year. Deaths slowed until mid-March, only to sharply rise again.

In this April 21, 2021, file photo, multiple funeral pyres of victims of COVID-19 burn in a ground that has been converted into a crematorium for mass cremation, in New Delhi, India. India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday, April 28, 2021 of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse. (AP Photo, File)

For the past week, more than 2,000 Indians have died every day.

India thought it had weathered the worst of the pandemic last year, but the virus is now racing through its population and systems are beginning to collapse.

Hospitalizations and deaths have reached record highs, overwhelming health care workers. Patients are suffocating because hospitals' oxygen supplies have run out. Desperate family members are sending SOS messages on social media, hoping someone would help them find oxygen cylinders, empty hospital beds and critical drugs for their loved ones. Crematoriums have spilled over into parking lots, lighting up night skies in some cities.

With its health care system sinking fast, India is now looking at other nations to pull it out of the record surge that is barreling through one state and then another.

In this April 25, 2021, file photo, a man in protective suit digs earth to bury the body of a person who died of COVID-19 in Gauhati, India. India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday, April 28, 2021 of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus

as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse. (AP Photo/Anupam Nath, File)

Many countries have offered assistance, including the U.S., which has promised to help with personal protective equipment, tests and oxygen supplies. The U.S. will also send raw materials for vaccine production, strengthening India's capacity to manufacture more AstraZeneca doses.

Health experts say huge gatherings during Hindu festivals and mammoth election rallies in some states have accelerated the unprecedented surge India is seeing now.

They also say the government's mixed messaging and its premature declarations of victory over the virus encouraged people to relax when they should have continued strict adherence to physical distancing, wearing masks and avoiding large crowds.

The national capital New Delhi is in lockdown, as are the southern states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Some other states, too, have enforced restrictions in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus.

In this April 26, 2021, file photo, health workers and relatives carry the body of a COVID-19 victim for cremation in Jammu, India. India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday, April 28, 2021 of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse. (AP Photo/Channi Anand, File)

India has also called on its armed forces to help fight the devastating crisis. India's chief of Defense Staff, General Bipin Rawat, said late Monday that oxygen supplies would be released from armed forces reserves and its retired medical personnel would join health facilities to ease the pressure on doctors.

Meanwhile, India's vaccination program appears to be struggling. So far nearly 10% of the country's population have received one jab, but just

over 1.5% have received both vaccines.

Indians 18 and older will be eligible for a vaccine from Saturday.

Meanwhile, the loss of lives is accelerating.

Radha Gobindo Pramanik is among the countless Indians who lost a family member to the virus. His daughter, Navanita Paramanik Rajput, died on April 18.

At first, Rajput complained of colds and fever. But when the 37-year-old's oxygen levels started to drop, her father and husband decided to take her to a government hospital.

In this April 20, 2021, file photo, notices informing about the shortage of

COVID-19 vaccine is displayed on the gate of a vaccination centre in Mumbai, India. India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday, April 28, 2021 of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool, File)

In this April 24, 2021, file photo, a COVID-19 patient sits inside a car and breathes with the help of oxygen provided by a Gurdwara, a Sikh house of worship, in New Delhi, India. India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday, April 28, 2021 of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri, File)

In this April 19, 2021, file photo, health workers prepare to take out from an ambulance bodies of six people who died of COVID-19 for cremation, in New Delhi, India. India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday, April 28, 2021 of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup, File)

In this April 25, 2021, file photo, municipal workers prepare to bury the body of a person who died of COVID-19 in Gauhati, India. India crossed a grim milestone Wednesday, April 28, 2021 of 200,000 people lost to the coronavirus as a devastating surge of new infections tears through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelms health care systems on the brink of collapse. (AP Photo/Anupam Nath, File)

Pramanik said she came out of the ambulance smiling but by the time her husband finished filling the hospital registration form, her daughter was gasping for breath.

"Before I could understand anything, she collapsed in the arms of her husband," Pramanik said, sobbing.