India sets global record for daily coronavirus deaths

May 19 2021, by Sheikh Saaliq and Biswajeet Banerjee

Jammu and Kashmir State Disaster Response Force soldiers carry empty coffins for transporting bodies of people who died of COVID-19 outside government medical hospital in Jammu, India, Wednesday, May 19, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Channi Anand

India on Wednesday reported more coronavirus deaths in a single day than any other country at any time during the pandemic, while infections

continued to spread through vast rural areas with weak health systems.

The Health Ministry reported a record 4,529 deaths in the past 24 hours, driving India's confirmed fatalities to 283,248. It also reported 267,334 new infections, as daily cases remained below 300,000 for the third consecutive day. The numbers are almost certainly undercounts.

The previous record for most daily deaths from the coronavirus was set on Jan. 12 in the United States, when 4,475 people died, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

With over 25 million cases since the pandemic began, India's confirmed infections are second only to the U.S.

Experts say new infections in India, which had been rising steeply, may finally be slowing. But deaths have continued to rise and hospitals are still crowded with patients. Over the last month, India's COVID-19 fatalities have jumped six-fold.

While megacities such as Mumbai and New Delhi have seen signs of improvement in recent days, there is concern that the virus is spreading through the vast countryside where a majority of the people live and where health care and testing are limited.

Jammu and Kashmir State Disaster Response Force soldiers carry empty coffins for transporting bodies of people who died of COVID-19 outside government medical hospital in Jammu, India, Wednesday, May 19, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Channi Anand

The situation is particularly alarming in Uttar Pradesh, India's most-populous state with 200 million people, where a court Monday said citizens have been left "at God's mercy." Even though new cases have been declining over the past week, the state has more than 136,000 confirmed active infections.

Government officials are racing to limit the spread of the virus in the state's villages. Teams have reached nearly 90,000 villages and the virus has been detected in about 21,000 of them, the Press Trust of India news

agency cited senior health official Amit Mohan Prasad as saying.

Health experts say the true extent of the virus is hard to gauge, in part because of weak data, and that the government response has come too late.

"The national story hid what was going on in rural India and it continues to be fairly invisible," said Murad Banaji, a mathematician modeling India's cases.

An Indian nurse prepares to administer a dose of Covishield, Serum Institute of India's version of the AstraZeneca vaccine to a woman as others wait their turn in Bengaluru, India, Wednesday, May 19, 2021. India has the second-highest coronavirus caseload after the U.S. with more than 25 million confirmed

infections. Credit: AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi

A COVID-19 patient receives oxygen outside a government run hospital in Jammu, India, Wednesday, May 19, 2021. India has the second-highest coronavirus caseload after the U.S. with more than 25 million confirmed infections.Credit: AP Photo/Channi Anand

An Indian police man walks past an awareness message painted on a road during a curfew to curb the spread of coronavirus in Jammu, India, Wednesday, May 19, 2021. India has the second-highest coronavirus caseload after the U.S. with more than 25 million confirmed infections.Credit: AP Photo/Channi Anand

In many parts of Uttar Pradesh, people are dying of fever and breathlessness even before getting tested for coronavirus. Crematoriums have run out of wood and hundreds of bodies are washing up on the banks of the Ganges River.

"The villagers often ignore fever and body ache. Before the relatives can understand what is happening, the patient dies," said Raja Bhaiya of the nonprofit group Vidya Dham Samiti, which works to raise awareness about the pandemic in the state's Banda district.

Bhaiya said the "only testimony of death in the village is the cries of women and children, and these cries are very frequent now."

India's vaccination drive is also faltering just at the time when it is needed the most. The number of daily administered doses has fallen by about half over the last six weeks, from a high of 4 million a day on April 2 to around 2 million or less this week.

Many states say they don't have enough vaccine to administer.

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