Recently, India has been recording the highest number of novel coronavirus cases per day in the world. The crisis in the country with a population of approximately 1.36 billion people has reached catastrophic heights - from 250,000 to 270,000 COVID-19 infections a day. This article will focus on the second wave of the pandemic that has overwhelmed India, the reasons for its magnitude, its consequences and outlook with respect to the nation's disease management and prevention sphere.

A year ago when the pandemic began, there were glowing reports about the situation in India, which must have given everyone hope. While more developed nations saw a rapid rise in the number of coronavirus cases, India appeared to be an outlier with some of the lowest rates of infection in the world. However, the apparent “miracle” was not a lasting one. At the beginning of 2021, there was a sudden increase in the number of individuals who tested positive for COVID-19, and nowadays, the nation is an undisputed “leader” in the category of novel coronavirus cases per day.

It is viewed that during 2020, there was one fairly long-lasting COVID-19 wave in India. Once it ended, local health and medical professionals appeared certain that the country had managed the crisis fairly well as the rate of infections was comparatively low at the time. Some experts believed that India was not severely affected by the pandemic because of decisive and effective measures taken by the nation’s leadership. All businesses and institutions deemed as non-essential (including schools and universities) closed their doors to the public and numerous events were cancelled. Citizens who violated quarantine restrictions and lockdown measures (i.e. by loitering in the streets) could be arrested and/ or fined in some states. Some policemen in India used force to ensure compliance with all the pandemic-related rues. For instance, they beat people who were not wearing personal
protective equipment with batons. There were also other incidents involving physical punishment of individuals who gathered in large numbers or failed to maintain a distance of 1.5 meters.

It is quite understandable why such stringent measures were taken. India has a high population density, insufficient health care facilities (the country has a comparatively low number of hospital beds per 1,000 people) and under-developed water supply and sewage systems. Hence, a sudden increase in cases in any given place can have catastrophic consequences.

The start of India’s second wave at the beginning of 2021 coincided with an increase in the number of pilgrims and tourists travelling within the nation, which is typical of February and the months of spring. In March, some officials started talking about relaxing many of the restrictions. The number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals was declining and a nationwide mass vaccination was underway. Having decided that the danger had passed, thousands of people from all over the country and even abroad travelled to celebrate Gaura Purnima. In some states, restrictions on large gatherings were lifted and people began attending wedding ceremonies in large numbers; some stopped wearing masks while in public, and events related to local elections in certain states attracted sizable crowds.

Unfortunately, it seems that many state officials relaxed the measures too early. Starting in March 2021, the number of new COVID-19 cases began to rise relentlessly with each passing day. The total number of people who tested positive for the novel coronavirus in India since the start of the pandemic recently exceeded 15 million. The only other country with higher combined cases is the United States. If we take into account the rapid rise in new infections and the underreporting of active cases, there is a chance that in the nearest future, India will overtake the USA in the aforementioned ranking.

Some health experts believe that new variants of the coronavirus, which are deadlier and more contagious, have been spreading throughout the country of late.

Some hospitals in New Delhi have run out of room for new patients. Officially, New Delhi’s population is just under 22 million, but as of April 11, 2021, only 307 (out of 1,153) ventilator beds and 511 (of 1,852) ICU beds were available for COVID-19 patients. People in need of medical assistance have been queuing outside the city’s health facilities while ambulances transporting bodies of those who died have been waiting near crematoriums to have them removed. For instance, on April 18, New Delhi recorded more than 25,000 new coronavirus cases while the death toll increased by 161 people. At present, it is one of the most severely impacted cities in India.

In response, Delhi’s government imposed a complete lockdown starting from April 19 to April 26. Medical workers throughout the city have been talking about a lack of medications too. According to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, the latest measures were introduced to prevent collapse of the city’s health system, which “had been stretched to its limits”.

In some of the states, cremation grounds have been working 24 hours a day, and cemeteries in big cities are running out of space. For instance, in Lucknow, the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh, there is an acute shortage of beds, medical staff and oxygen, and a lack of testing facilities too. On April 19, 2021, it was reported that nearly 30% of hospital staff, including doctors, nurses, technicians, ward boys and administrative officials at Lucknow’s major hospitals were themselves fighting infection.

In March 2021, India’s vaccination drive was proceeding smoothly according to the nation’s Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. As of mid-April, over 117 million people have been fully vaccinated and their number is expected to increase. Over the previous week, 2.7 million doses of vaccine were administered throughout the country. At present, three COVID-19 vaccines are approved for emergency use in India: Covishield from Oxford-AstraZeneca, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India; locally designed and made Covaxin, and Russia’s Sputnik V. First deliveries of the latter are expected at the end of April and its production will start in India as early as May of this year.

Hence, despite the current COVID-19 crisis in the country, one should not assume the worst about the future. First of all, new restrictions (some of which are stricter than before) are in place throughout the country, and these should stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. Secondly, the number of vaccinated people in India is growing every day. On April 11, 2021, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal urged relevant authorities to lift the vaccination age limit since 65% of COVID-19 patients in the city were below the age of 45. Thirdly, the production of Sputnik V is supposed to begin in India as early as next month. And the Russian vaccine has proven to be an effective means of fighting the spread of coronavirus.
Hence, we sincerely hope that the second COVID-19 wave in India will be its last.

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