

Empowered groups on COVID-19 for gradual lifting of lockdown

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- **A final decision hinges on the data by ICMR and National Disaster Management Authority.**

NEW DELHI: All the 11 empowered committees constituted to suggest ways to tackle different aspects of the Covid-19 crisis have favoured a gradual lifting of the lockdown even as Indian Council of Medical Research expressed 'concerns', people familiar with the matter said.

A meeting headed by home secretary Ajay Bhalla on Monday checked out at least three presentations on the issue even as everybody agreed that international travel should continue to be suspended even as the gradual exit begins, they said.

A final decision on the date from which the lockdown will begin to be lifted and the manner in which it would be done now hinges on the data to be provided by ICMR and National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) – likely in three days - on the spread and likely progression of Covid-19 cases in the country, the sources said. "ICMR will collect district-wise data based on half a dozen parameters such as number of fresh cases on a daily basis, number of people under observation, areas likely to be contaminated with Covid-19, and so on," a person aware of the meeting told ET.

Another person said all the 11 groups submitted their recommendations "and about three presentations were made, outlining what the exit scenario could look like".

One of the proposals was to divide the country into three zones – green, yellow and red – depending upon exposure risk to the disease. Green zone, the safest, could be opened up to most of the core economic activity; in yellow zone, production could start at a small scale; and red zone, or areas significantly impacted by Covid-19, should continue to be in lockdown for some more time.

Another proposal discussed was to transport migrant labour back to cities in trains by ensuring social distancing and after checking passengers thoroughly for symptoms. Similarly, local air travel could begin with certain standard operating procedures.

On retail side, one proposal was to keep retail shops open on a rotation basis on different days, sources said. "A counter view was that instead, certain number of shops in a locality should be allowed to remain open for a few hours at a time and

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the hours should be 24/7, implying that retail is available round the clock as this would avoid crowding out in the markets,” a person familiar with the development said.

Another proposal discussed was also to have industry-specific standard operating procedures and that each industry needed to come up with their own set, the people said.