

Under pressure from states, Centre considering extension of lockdown

Updated at April 8, 2020 02:42 IST

- **States fear lifting curbs will worsen Covid situation.**
- **The proposal of lifting the lockdown in a staggered manner, suggested by the health ministry earlier, is on the verge of being scrapped because it is too impractical to implement.**

The Centre indicated on Tuesday that it was in no hurry to lift the nationwide lockdown on April 15, after several state governments came out in favour of an extension. The Union government and states are expected to have a coordinated view on the matter, according to officials.

Many state governments have told the Centre they would not be able to handle more pressure on health facilities if “outsiders” transported Covid-19 into new areas. Responding to the requests made by many states and experts for an extension of the three-week lockdown, the Centre was thinking on those lines, a source said. This is despite the fact that economy and businesses have been hit hard by the lockdown.

Although no decision has been taken, the lockdown could be extended till the end of April. The government is assessing the situation and a decision would be based on the number of cases and the level of infection spread by Friday.

In what looked like a sign for things to come, Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC), the listed arm of the Indian Railways, cancelled two Tejas trains and Kashi Mahakal Express till April 30. Last year, the Indian Railways had handed over the running of the three services as corporate trains to ITCTC.

While the Tejas trains run on Lucknow-Delhi and Mumbai-Ahmedabad routes, Kashi Mahakal covers the Varanasi-Indore region. IRCTC said in a statement Tuesday evening that these trains were being cancelled in view of the Covid19 situation. Full ticket fare would be refunded, it said.

Top officials of the Indian Railways had a review meeting on Tuesday to discuss restarting the operations on April 15 once the three-week lockdown ends. Even as the operations of passenger trains were stopped from March 22, the national transporter later allowed bookings for train tickets starting April 15.

In yet another signal that the government may look at an extension of the lockdown, Vice President Venkaiah Naidu had said in a statement earlier in the day, “let’s live with the hardship a little longer for a better tomorrow”.

Making Corporate India Comply

However, health ministry joint secretary Lav Agarwal during a press briefing on Tuesday refused to give anything away on the lockdown issue. He only said social distancing worked like a "social vaccine" in managing Covid-19. "Whenever a decision is taken, it will be informed," he said.

A meeting of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with leaders of opposition parties is due on Wednesday. The PM is expected to discuss the idea of extending the lockdown beyond April 15 for a few more weeks.

The proposal of lifting the lockdown in a staggered manner, suggested by the health ministry earlier, is on the verge of being scrapped because it is too impractical to implement. A final decision on an extension or otherwise could be announced after April 10, when the PM holds another round of consultations with chief ministers.

The Centre signalled that while it was sympathetic to the pain of factories, information-technology installations, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and other entities that wanted the lockdown to end, it was state governments that were piling on the pressure to extend it.

The Uttar Pradesh government, which is led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for instance, let it be known that its health facilities were stretched to the seams. While the government had earlier identified 10,000 isolation beds in district hospitals for the treatment of Covid-19 patients, if that number doubled to 20,000, it had a contingency plan in place of hiring hotels, lodges and hostels in the vicinity of these government hospitals, it said. Private facilities would serve the asymptomatic patients, who might have tested positive but showed no symptoms, UP Medical, Health and Family Welfare Principal Secretary Amit Mohan Prasad said.