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REUTERS/ALASCAR PAL

Global spread

India is catching up with the US

The number of reported coronavirus cases in India is surging, and the true figure is likely to be even higher, reports **Nilanjana Bhowmick**

INDIA is on track to overtake the US as the country with the highest number of coronavirus cases worldwide. With more than 5.56 million recorded cases, India set a new record with 97,859 daily cases on 16 September. It took just 11 days for the total number of cases so far to rise from 4 to 5 million, and it is likely to be just a matter of weeks before the country passes the US, which has some 6.85 million cases.

Given India's population of about 1.38 billion, however, the number of cases is comparatively low. On 22 September, for instance, the seven-day average of daily confirmed cases in the US was 131 per million people, compared with 65 per million in India. Deaths, too, currently totalling about 89,000 in India, are much lower than in the US, which is nearing 200,000.

Cases have soared since India eased a strict national lockdown in May, and some are worried that the spread of the virus into rural areas will increase case counts and fatalities. Two-thirds of the population lives in rural regions, which have only about a third of the country's hospital beds.

"We will have to gear up our services to delay the spread of the virus to rural areas," says K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India. "That's going to be absolutely critical."

Even states like Kerala, which won global praise for its handling of the virus in the initial months of the pandemic, are now seeing a rise in case numbers.

Much of the surge is ascribed to

migrant workers returning to their home states since restrictions eased. "That's when it became difficult to control," says Reddy.

On 14 September, India's health minister Harsh Vardhan said that 1 million tests are being conducted daily. "You do need some testing, but it cannot be the only public health strategy," says Reddy. "We will also have to boost healthcare systems and improve connections with local communities."

There are fears that testing is inadequate and many cases are going undetected. Research published earlier this month by the Indian Council of Medical Research looked at the prevalence of antibodies in the population. It suggests that 0.73 per cent of

adults in India had been infected by early May, equating to 6.4 million people.

Despite the rising number of cases, it is unlikely that India will impose another lockdown. The economy contracted by 23.9 per cent in the April-June quarter, its worst decline since 1996.

On 21 September, the Taj Mahal opened its doors to tourists after six months of closure, just one of the measures the government has taken since June to revive the economy, along with opening up state borders, domestic flights, malls and gyms.

These measures are sending a wrong message that "the worst is over", says Reddy. "Only when the daily death rates are falling steadily for 10 days can we feel assured that the epidemic is coming down. Before that, if we start opening up, we are inviting trouble." ■

Daily coronavirus news round-up
 Online every weekday at 6pm BST
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