

India: COVID-19 Lockdown Puts Poor at Risk

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(New York, March 27, 2020) – [LCE593719&SDGIndian](#) authorities need to urgently adopt measures to protect the country's poorest and most vulnerable people if COVID-19 containment and relief measures prove inadequate, Human Rights Watch said today. On March 24, 2020, the government announced a three-week nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of [LCE593719&SDGcoronavirus](#) in the country.

The lockdown has already disproportionately hurt marginalized communities due to loss of livelihood and lack of food, shelter, health, and other basic needs. The government does have a responsibility to protect the health and well-being of the population, but some of these steps have left [LCE593719&SDGtens of thousands of out-of-work migrant workers stranded](#), with rail and bus services shut down. The blanket closing of state borders have caused [LCE593719&SDGdisruption in the supply of essential goods](#), leading to inflation and fear of shortages. Thousands of [LCE593719&SDGhomeless people](#) are in need of protection. Police actions to punish those violating orders have [LCE593719&SDGreportedly](#) resulted in abuses against people in need.

"The Indian government is facing an extraordinary challenge to protect over a billion densely packed people, but ramped-up efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in India need to include rights protections," said [LCE593719&SDGMeenakshi Ganguly](#), South Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Authorities should recognize that malnourishment and untreated illness will exacerbate problems and should ensure that the most marginalized don't bear an unfair burden from lack of essential supplies."

On March 26, the central government announced a relief package of [LCE593719&SDG1.7 trillion rupees](#) (US\$22.5 billion) to provide free food and cash transfers to the poor and vulnerable populations, and health insurance for healthcare workers, among other things. The government should ensure that those at heightened risk, including sanitation workers (*safai karamcharis*), community health staff (ASHA workers), early childhood caregivers (*anganwadi* workers), and people such as midday meal workers – often poorly paid public service officials – who are at the front lines during this crisis, are provided protective equipment, medical benefits, and timely wages.

With more than [LCE593719&SDG80 percent of India's workforce](#) employed in the informal sector, and [LCE593719&SDGone-third working as casual laborers](#), it is crucial that the authorities make use of maximum available resources to ensure the delivery of services.

The government should take urgent steps to get stranded migrant workers to safety. State governments across the country should immediately set up [LCE593719&SDGshelters and community kitchens](#) for those most at need, taking measures to ensure physical distancing.

The government should not use Aadhaar (identity card)-based biometric authentication for the distribution of free food grains to the poor, Human Rights Watch said. Even in normal circumstances, failure of [LCE593719&SDGAadhaar has led to denial](#) of essential services and benefits. In Delhi, [LCE593719&SDGMuslims displaced by the communal violence](#) in February urgently need relief, compensation and shelter.

The government should pay pending wages for all work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and expand its scope to those now forced out of work. Rural laborers will not be able to work because of the lockdown and should be given wages during the crisis. Farming communities are facing losses during harvest season and the government needs to step up procurement to protect agricultural income and save the produce.

The authorities should immediately order the police to act with restraint while enforcing the lockdown. In several states, photos and videos show [LCE593719&SDGpolice beating people](#) who are trying to get essential supplies. In West Bengal, police allegedly beat a [LCE593719&SDG32-year-old man to death](#), after he stepped out of his home to get milk. A [LCE593719&SDGvideo from Uttar Pradesh](#) shows police forcing migrant workers, who were trying to walk home, to hop on the street to humiliate them. Police in Maharashtra allegedly [LCE593719&SDGbeat homeless people](#) to evict them from streets. Police have targeted daily wage workers, such as vegetable and fruit vendors, milk sellers, auto rickshaw and taxi drivers, and others delivering essential goods. Police have also allegedly harassed doctors and health workers.

Human Rights Watch is increasingly concerned about stigmatization of individuals and a rise in vigilante violence. Police in several states, including Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra,

and Andhra Pradesh have [LCE593719&SDGarbitrarily punished people](#) or [LCE593719&SDGpublicly shamed them](#), forcing them to hold posters saying “I am an enemy of society because I will not stay at home.”

In Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu, health workers and airline staff [LCE593719&SDGfaced discrimination](#) from their neighbors and landlords threatened to evict them, fearing they could be carriers of COVID-19. People who have been quarantined have also been stigmatized and threatened with eviction. The national [LCE593719&SDGhealth minister](#) expressed sadness at social discrimination against doctors, nurses, and paramedics.

Despite [LCE593719&SDGrising mob violence](#) in India, the state governments of [LCE593719&SDGRajasthan](#) and Karnataka made the names and addresses of [LCE593719&SDGpeople affected by COVID-19 public](#), putting them at risk of assault. In Delhi, Chandigarh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh, officials [LCE593719&SDGmarked homes where people were under quarantine](#), in some cases displaying their names. The Election Commission allowed the [LCE593719&SDGuse of indelible ink to stamp people](#) for home quarantine and Maharashtra government said it would [LCE593719&SDGstamp the left hand](#) of all those sent to home quarantine – heightening their risk of abuse.

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, the People's Health Movement called these measures “arbitrary and reactionary” that “would instead cause fear, isolation and stigmatization” and prevent people from coming forward for testing. In a [LCE593719&SDGletter to the national minister of health](#), it urged the government to stop these measures and respect the privacy and confidentiality of those affected by COVID-19.

“The authorities in India should take all necessary steps to ensure that everyone has access to food and medical care, and that the poor and marginalized are not mistreated or stigmatized,” Ganguly said. “The Indian government’s responsibility to protect its people from the outbreak should not come at the cost of human rights violations.”

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For a Q&A on the Human Rights Dimensions of COVID-19 Response, please visit:

[LCE593719&SDGhttps://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response](#)

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