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# Covid crisis: Himalayan blunders mark India's corona virus response

One can't recall a crisis where the response of the Centre and the states was so grossly inadequate. Covid-19 in the country remains a war without a general



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**By Gajendra Haldea**

In my article in the Financial Express of this May 28, I had forecasted that India, then at tenth rank in the world for the number of Covid-19 cases, would find a place among the top-five by end June, and top-two by end August. India has done 'better', as it is, already among the top-four (possibly aided by easing of restrictions).

I am not an epidemiologist. But, I have spent a life time in public policy and governance. So, after a review of the trends across countries and some literature, I had made this forecast when virtually no one was willing to sign off on any projections. Instead of feeling vindicated, I feel sad at being proved right.

For dealing with any crisis, one needs to project alternative scenarios and then plan accordingly. Neither the central government nor the state governments have made any such projections, and have, therefore, failed to take the requisite preparatory actions. Even if they did, nothing has been shared with the people to inspire their confidence. Surely, the people of our country are entitled to know what strengthening of the health infrastructure was actually achieved during the lockdown (March 25 to May 31), which was said to be the 'pause' for buying time to buttress preparedness. This information should be made public by the Centre and the states without any further delay. Through several communications, over the past three months, addressed to people who matter in

the central government and the Delhi government, I suggested specific actions on various fronts. Possibly, they were swamped in their work and had no time to consider suggestions, except from those in power. In effect, communication with the government has been a one-way street, even for the well-meaning and experienced.

Like many others, I have been emphasising the need for ramping up testing, as it is the primary tool for diagnosis, treatment, contact tracing and containment. Precious little has been done in that direction. On the contrary, as the accompanying graphic shows, the number of daily tests in the national capital have declined even while the infection was spreading rapidly. This would ultimately cost a large number of lives.

ICMR, the top expert body, leaves one wondering about its functioning. Instead of facilitating testing, it has progressively tightened the eligibility criteria for testing individual cases. The procedure has also been made very cumbersome. Even though a large proportion of infected persons are admittedly asymptomatic, they cannot be tested by any laboratory. Several private labs have been hauled up by the Delhi government for deviating. A person willing to pay a private lab for conducting a Covid-19 test, on his doctor's advice, cannot get tested until he develops symptoms. It is indeed a paradox that a scientific organisation has assumed a dictatorial role!

In developed countries, governments are sharing a great deal of knowledge and information with their citizens. This is a priority I have been repeatedly stressing upon. For example, in the US, its Centre for Disease Control (CDC) communicates extensively. In contrast, the ICMR website only tells you the number of tests conducted. The health ministry website also suppresses more than it reveals. Some states like Delhi put out doctored data.

In the absence of full information, people do not know the reality and tend to get confused. What they get to hear are speeches where the narrative changes according to the prevailing political perceptions. For the present, unlocking occupies centre stage with some ritual-like advice on preventive measures. As a result, acceleration in the spread of infection seems inevitable.

I had made several suggestions on the migrant issue too, much before the crisis assumed gigantic proportions, but nothing changed until the events, including the apex court's directives, forced the governments' hands. Much human misery and loss of lives could have easily been avoided by timely action.

I wrote repeatedly about the need to urgently procure hospital beds, ICUs, oxygen support, isolation beds, etc, on a war footing, but nothing much happened. In the national capital, there are just about a meagre 9,000 beds for Covid-19 patients, causing much distress. Suddenly, it has dawned upon the Delhi government that a ten-fold increase would be necessary during the next 50 days, but what they will actually deliver remains to be seen.

I had also suggested a month ago that the central government should set up a dedicated war-room for the potential epicentres of Delhi and Mumbai, but the government remained unmoved. Last Friday, the severe indictment of the Delhi government by the apex court came as no surprise, as the steadfast refusal of the Delhi government to see reason, and its continued reliance on ad-hocism was pushing the national capital into an abyss. There has been a flurry of announcements by the Centre over the weekend, but this is too little too late. Much greater oversight and support from the Centre will be needed in the coming weeks if lives in Delhi are to be saved.

In my aforesaid article of May 28, I had strongly urged the Centre to set up a war-room under the NSA because the potential loss of lives and incomes would be enormous. A few days later, the prime minister did say that the situation was no less than a world war. Even the apex court has referred to the health staff as warriors. That is where the matter rests for the present; it continues to be a war without a general.

My pointed suggestions were not based on any rocket science or crystal gazing. Any experienced, objective and diligent policymaker would have come to similar conclusions. It is the apathy in our system that is responsible for our pitiful plight where the citizens have been left to fend for themselves.

In living memory, there has been no crisis of such gigantic proportions. Yet, one cannot recall a crisis where the response of the central and the state governments was so grossly inadequate. Each of the above blunders may, directly or indirectly, add very large numbers to the death toll, thus, qualifying to be Himalayan blunders. Divine intervention alone may save these lives that the government is so callously set to sacrifice. It is high time for the government to don the war gear, as even God only helps those who help themselves.