

India on lockdown

Impossible sums

DELHI

The fight against covid-19 brings dizzying costs and unexpected benefits

REPORTERS IN INDIA'S capital recently discovered hundreds of stranded migrants, their jobs lost in the coronavirus lockdown, living under a bridge on the banks of the Yamuna river. Even though the scene was tragic, the surroundings were much more pleasant than usual. In the current dry season the river is normally a fetid, inky sewer. At the moment, however, it is miraculously clean. The closure of industries upstream, says the city's water board, means that for the first time in years the Yamuna has enough oxygen to sustain life.

With more than 20,000 confirmed cases and close to 700 dead, India is not yet one of the worst-hit countries. That distinction may still come, but the strict lockdown imposed since March 25th has slowed the spread of the virus markedly. Without it, some half a million Indians would now have the disease, reckons Jayaprakash Muliyil, an epidemiologist. By mid-June, he surmises, covid-19 could have killed 2.5m people, about as many as would normally die from all causes over the period. From doubling every three days, the number of active cases is now doubling every eight. V.K. Paul, a government health expert, says that by May that rate should drop to every ten days. "We have bought time," says a weary doctor in Mumbai, India's hardest-hit city, describing efforts to build up medical capacity. "We started with a broken bicycle, but we've got a wobbly motorbike going now, and might even bang together a workable auto-rickshaw."

It is not just to the potential victims of covid-19 that the lockdown has brought a reprieve. In ordinary times, air pollution kills at least 1.2m Indians a year. That is more than it kills in China, where research by Marshall Burke, an environmental scientist at Stanford University, suggests that cleaner air during its own covid-19 lockdown may have saved 17 times more lives than the (official) number lost to the virus. Another study in China, measuring the effect on health of Beijing's curbs on pollution during the 2008 Olympics, reckons that every 10% fall in pollution led to an 8% drop in deaths from all causes. The plunge in air pollution in India has been no less dramatic. At one monitoring station in central Delhi, levels of nitrogen dioxide are 85% lower than in recent years. NASA, America's space agency, says that across India levels of suspended aerosols are lower than at any time since it started measuring

them twenty years ago.

Then again, the lockdown has had a crippling effect on many Indians' livelihoods. Unemployment has shot up shockingly, from 8% at the beginning of March to 26% in mid-April, according to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, a research group. Nomura, an investment bank, has reduced its expectations for GDP growth from a limp 4.5% to a painful -0.5%. One estimate suggests an extra 100m people could fall below the World Bank's poverty line of \$3.20 a day.

Such are the contradictions of India's battle with the epidemic. While there may well be a plunge in the 20,000 Indians who die every month in car accidents, there may also be a jump in the 30,000 who perish from tuberculosis, since the lockdown has made it much harder to get treatment. Crime has fallen dramatically; reported rapes in Delhi are down by 83%.

Indians themselves seem to think the lockdown is sensible. A poll conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research, a think-tank, found that 55% of respondents in Delhi had seen their incomes shrink sharply since it began, and another 30% somewhat. Yet a resounding 87% also said they still supported the government when it recently extended the controls by three weeks.

Indeed, the government may be the one unquestionable beneficiary of the policy. Before covid-19 it faced mounting discontent over the weak economy, as well as protests over policies that were seen as an assault on secularism. But then the epidemic forced protesters off the streets, and saved the government's face when it suspended a controversial tally of citizens that might have prompted further unrest. And now, of course, all India's economic troubles, including those resulting from bad government policies, can be blamed on a deadly virus from China. ■



The Yamuna, pre- and post-lockdown

Ignoring covid-19 in Central Asia

What pandemic?

ALMATY

It's business as usual in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan

IT TAKES MORE than a global pandemic to faze the sports-mad, world-record-obsessed president of Turkmenistan. Last year, at his instigation, the gas-rich desert country marked World Bicycle Day by setting a record for the longest cycling parade. This month, to celebrate World Health Day on April 7th, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, who is known to Turkmenistan's 6m citizens as *Arkadag*, or "the Protector", wheeled out 7,000 cyclists for what may yet qualify as the most reckless celebration of public health ever undertaken. Even as he sent his own people to pedal in huge packs, however, the Protector was protective of his own health, whizzing around a deserted track in Ashgabat, his marble-clad capital, first in splendid isolation and then in the company of a few select officials.

Turkmenistan is one of only a handful of countries in the world that claims to have no cases of covid-19. Also present on that exclusive list is Tajikistan, another Central Asian state ruled by a narcissistic president who likes to present his country as a trouble-free paradise. In March Emomali Rahmon cocked a snook at social-distancing norms by herding thousands of his countrymen together for an all-singing, all-dancing spectacle to celebrate Nowruz, a holiday marking the spring equinox. Similar festivities had been cancelled all across the region—apart from Turkmenistan, of course. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are also allowing football matches to continue. In Tajikistan they take place without spectators, but in Turkmenistan hundreds of fans crowded into a stadium in Ashgabat when the season resumed last weekend after a brief covid-related hiatus.

Turkmenistan is not in complete denial: it has closed its borders to foreigners (they were never that open in the first place) and quarantined returning travellers, in some cases in tents in the desert. Tajikistan has also isolated travellers and conducted thousands of tests, all of which have officially returned negative results. It admits there has been a spike in respiratory ailments, but says that the cause is bad weather, not the coronavirus. One particular death that had been the subject of rumours was the result of swine flu and pneumonia, it insists.

Mr Rahmon has suggested that Tajiks' high standards of hygiene will stand them in good stead in the battle against the coronavirus, should it ever arrive in their ►►