

## Update on COVID-19 situation in India

Dear friends in mission,

The spread of COVID-19 virus in India has brought deep impacting changes in the lives of the people of the Diocese of Amritsar. A total number of 38 cases in Punjab have been registered till date, and the situation in India is worsening by the day with a total of 834 COVID-19 positive cases and 19 related deaths in the country as of 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2020.

Both the central and state governments have taken steps to encourage social distancing amongst the people. Shortly after the state-wide lockdown on 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 and the People's Curfew on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2020, Prime Minister Modi announced a 21-day nation-wide lockdown.

Prior to this lockdown, the Diocese of Amritsar had already taken the following measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- The annual Palm Sunday gathering and procession was been called off.
- Large prayer meetings and church gatherings were been discouraged. The clergy continued to visit families, and provide pastoral care of the people.
- All church buildings were being fumigated and disinfected from time to time, and all visitors were required to clean their hands with either sanitiser or soap and water before entering the church.
- Many worship services were being conducted online to provide hope and reassurance to the communities.

Preventive measures were also taken in the project areas:

- The focus of all Community Health programmes were shifted towards spreading awareness on prevention and symptoms of the virus.
- All public meetings and planned activities in the villages were cancelled.
- Networking meetings were held with the Block Development Officer (BDO) and the Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM) of Ajnala who decided to work together with local organisations to spread awareness.
- Printed material shared by the BDO office on prevention methods of COVID-19 were distributed among the people.

### **Current situation and challenges:**

The current 21-day lockdown essentially restricts all movement except for essential services. Grocery and medical shops may be opened during designated hours only. Though the curfew is a necessary measure against the spread of COVID 19, it poses serious humanitarian as well as administrative challenges.

The poor in India have been the most hit due to this lockdown. In Delhi, thousands of migrant workers left without job or pay are journeying back to their hometowns (some even 1200 kms away) by foot in the absence of public means of transport. Racial discrimination against Indians from the North East, as well as against foreigners has led to incidences of verbal abuse and harassment and even stoning by locals. In Punjab, we are already receiving reports of riot-like situations in the villages.

***Some specific challenges being faced by the people of the Diocese of Amritsar are as follows:***

- Most people who work as daily wage labourers or domestic help live hand-to-mouth and are therefore unable to afford buying food and medical supplies in advance.
- Without access to food and immediate medical help and food shortages already becoming a reality, hunger and illness are the most crucial concerns among the people.
- Some of the construction workers registered under the Punjab Building and Other Construction Welfare Board in Ajnala area (Punjab) have received Rs. 3000/- as Covid-19 relief in their bank accounts.
- The unregistered and unorganised labour sections continue to suffer food shortages. The government is organising food pickup and delivery mechanisms, but so far, the situation is still very confusing.
- The wheat crop is ready but because of the lockdown, the workers are not allowed to go to the fields to harvest. With no income from agricultural work, the hardships for the people will increase.
- People in the low-income groups in urban areas are also struggling to buy food and medical supplies as a result of shortages resulting from panic buying and hoarding, and the spike in prices.

**Plan of action:**

- We have managed to secure three passes which will give us some mobility during the curfew.
- The Diocese is constituting a COVID-19 Relief Operation to reach out to the poor and needy.
- We have started acquiring relief material (rice, wheat flour, lentils, cooking oil, onions, potatoes, salt and spices) for distribution to the needy, especially in the rural areas.

We are exploring ways in which food and other resources can be provided to the people, especially those whose livelihood has been most impacted by the COVID 19 outbreak. As a church, we will continue to work on this issue and provide the necessary support and encouragement to the people.

With best regards,



The Most Rev. P. K. Samantaroy,  
Bishop,  
Diocese of Amritsar, CNI  
28<sup>th</sup> March, 2020