Review 35% cap on state disaster management fund, CMs tell Modi

PM says all is not lost; 72-hour deadline for Covid test crucial to check the rate of infection

ADDI PHADINIS
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Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Tuesday that if state governments managed to institute systems that tested, diagnosed and isolated those testing positive for Covid-19 within 72 hours, India could defeat the disease and bring down the death rate below 1 per cent.

The chief ministers for their part, asked for a cap on state disaster relief funds to be lifted, considering the severity of the financial crisis they faced.

Addressing chief ministers of 10 states that contributed 80 per cent of infections and 82 per cent of deaths, Modi said all was not lost, though India had 600,000 cases — the recovery rate is improving, death rate is going down and so is the rate of those testing positive.

However, much more attention was needed and the 72-hour deadline for testing was crucial if the rate of infection was to be checked.

Chief ministers of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal attended the meeting. Karnataka was represented by a deputy chief minister.

Team work has helped a lot and the pool of experience in managing the disease would help identifying best practices, Modi said. He cited the example of Delhi, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. “There was a time when the infection was spreading uncontrollably in this region and we were afraid,” he confessed. “But because of a common strategy we were able to reverse the situation to some extent,” he said.

“If we work systematically, we can seize control of the situation in seven to ten days and reverse the trend of infection,” he added.

This involves strict and extensive testing especially of those at high risk like domestic helps,rickshaw drivers, and those living in labour colonies. Once detected, containment zones, even micro-containment zones need to be designated, so tracing is easier. “There has to be 100 per cent testing in vulnerable areas,” he said. “People have now understood the importance of social distancing, masks, sanitization and hygiene. We can further build on this via the Aarogya Setu app, which helps us trace locations where the disease is clustered. If we can follow containment, contact tracing and surveillance, we can check the infection.” Modi said.

While the PM’s pep talk was lauded — it had zero political content or blame — almost all of the 10 chief ministers who attended, demanded more money to fight the disease.

The 35 per cent cap on state disaster relief funds to fight Covid-19, was no longer enough, states said, asking for the cap to be lifted. The cap was introduced in July through an order of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

Chief ministers of Tamil Nadu and Punjab flagged the danger to their economies as a livelihood crisis.

“We’ve received ₹192.64 crore from Centre in two tranches under Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness package out of ₹312.64 crore. To meet this package may be stepped up to ₹3,000 crore as per my earlier request,” Tamil Nadu CM Edappadi K Palaniswami said.

“As we have already fully exhausted State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF), I also request an ad-hoc grant of ₹1,000 crore from NDRF immediately to fight pandemic,” he added.

Tamil Nadu asked for ₹9,000 crore as a special grant. “The GST compensation for April-June 2020 may be released early,” Palaniswami told the PM.

Punjab CM Captain Amarinder Singh sought from Modi a liberal financial package for states to fill the collection gap caused by the pandemic, and also flexibility on Covid-related terms of expenditure in SDRF. Singh said the current allocation of SDRF funds was not sufficient to meet requirements. Punjab has seen a 50 per cent decline in revenues in the first quarter of the financial year.

Explaining the magnitude of the health crisis faced by Punjab, Singh said though the state is conducting 23,000 tests per million, and planned to increase RT-PCR (reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction) tests from 12,000 to 20,000 in the next 15 days, it needed to scale up further. He repeated an earlier request to Modi: To direct central government institutions in Chandigarh and Punjab to increase testing capacity.

Expressing concern over the state’s mortality rate of 2.4 per cent, Singh said although it is lower than the national average 91 per cent of fatalities were of people with comorbidities.

These 10 states have a high population density and the idea is to bring down the caseload. This was Modi’s first meeting with chief ministers during Unlock 3.0.

Defence minister Rajnath Singh was also present at the review meeting.