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Cities with over 10pc positivity placed under strict curbs

- Highest rates observed in Karachi, Lahore, Hyderabad, Islamabad
- Indoor weddings banned, 300 allowed for outdoor gatherings
- Indoor dining banned in restaurants
- Education activities to continue at 50pc capacity for students under 12
- 50pc capacity limit on gyms, cinemas, shrines, parks

ISLAMABAD: As the country reported more than 5,000 cases of Covid-19 for the second consecutive day and the number of critical patients surpassed 900 on Wednesday, the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) announced a new set of restrictions for middle schools, public gatherings, wedding halls, restaurants and other sectors in cities having a positivity rate of over 10 per cent.

In a session chaired by Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives Asad Umar and co-chaired by National Coordinator Major General Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, the NCOC reviewed the Covid-19 situation and non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) in the country.

After deliberation and consultation with federating units, the forum agreed to implement the new NPIs, differentiating between cities with a Covid-19 positivity rate of up to 10pc and those above it.

It was informed that the three-day rolling average of the Covid-19 positivity rate was 36.58pc in Karachi, 13.69pc in Lahore, 12.88pc in Hyderabad and 10.47pc in Islamabad. Moreover, the review of cities will now be carried out twice a week.

As for the educational institutions, the NCOC decided that in cities having more than 10pc positivity, the students aged below 12 years would attend schools with 50 per cent attendance on a staggered basis, whereas those aged above 12 years would be allowed 100pc attendance but have to be fully vaccinated.

However, in cities with less than a 10pc positivity rate, the schools will continue to function as per the previous routine.

It was also decided that at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccination will be mandatory for students aged above 12 years with effect from Feb 1. No exception other than medical reasons will be entertained.

Aggressive sentinel testing will be carried out for targeted closures in educational institutes with high disease prevalence. Federating and administrative units in consultation with health authorities will set a number or percentage limit for the institutes' closure.

The NCOC also decided to ban indoor gatherings and weddings in cities having more than a 10pc positivity rate while a maximum of 300 fully vaccinated people will be allowed to attend outdoor gatherings.

However, in cities having less than a 10pc positivity rate, up to 300 fully vaccinated people will be allowed to attend indoor gatherings while the limit would be 500 people for outdoor gatherings.

Similarly, indoor dining has been banned at restaurants and only outdoor dining has been allowed in cities having over 10pc positivity rate. In contrast, both indoor and outdoor dining will be allowed for cities with a positivity rate of less than 10pc.

As for gyms, cinemas, shrines and amusement parks in cities with more than 10pc positivity, indoor activities will be allowed at 50pc capacity with fully vaccinated people.

However, contact sports like karate, boxing, martial arts, rugby, water polo, kabaddi and wrestling have been banned in cities having over a 10pc positivity rate. In other cities, only fully vaccinated people will be allowed to take part in these sports.

The NCOC decided that markets and business activities would continue without any restrictions and normal working hours with full employee attendance will be followed, provided that they are fully vaccinated. However, it did add that work from home is encouraged.

Passenger occupancy was set at 70pc in public transport from Jan 20 and 80pc in railways from Jan 24, with continuous mask-wearing throughout journeys. The ban on serving meals was also maintained for public transport and domestic air travel.

Besides, strict adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs) in mosques and other places of worship will be ensured by all units and targeted lockdown will be enforced if necessary.

All these NCOC decisions will remain in effect from Jan 20 to 31 and a review will be held on Jan 27 to assess the situation. However, NPIs for weddings will remain effective until Feb 15.

Data released by the NCOC on Wednesday showed that 5,472 people were infected and eight succumbed to the Covid-19 disease in the past 24 hours. The national positivity was 9.48pc and 908 patients were on critical care.

Restaurants reject decisions

Pakistan Medical Association General Secretary Dr Qaiser Sajjad told Dawn the association appreciated the NCOC's decisions but feared that they might not be implemented. "The government needs to ensure the implementation and take strict action in case of violations," he said.

However, All Rawalpindi Restaurants Association President Chaudhry Mohammad Farooq rejected the ban on indoor dining and said that the government had only targeted restaurants and marriage halls.

He said the restaurant industry had taken all the precautionary measures and ensured maximum employee vaccination. He also criticised the decision to restrict the entry to vaccinated customers only.

Mr Farooq said restaurant owners had already been burdened because of a ban in place since 2019 and they were under numerous financial constraints concerning workers' salaries, utility bills and debt repayment.

The restaurant industry would not tolerate further restrictions, he said, but added that restaurant owners were ready to cooperate with the government to cope with the fifth Covid-19 wave and were even willing to establish counters within their premises for administering the booster dose of the vaccine.

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