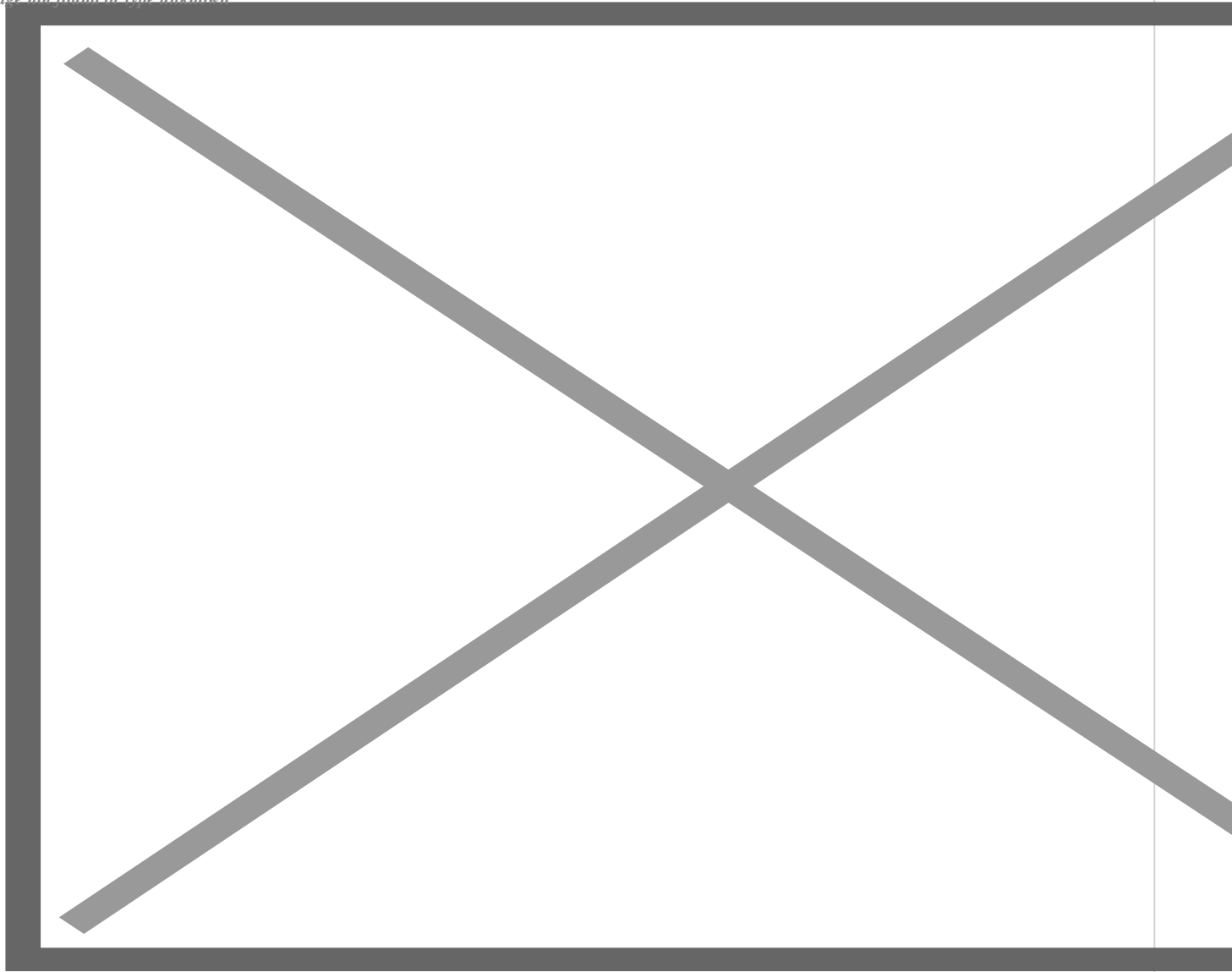


Many dead in fire at COVID hospital in India's Mumbai

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People carry a woman on a stretcher to safety after a fire broke out at a Mumbai hospital.
(Photo: Reuters)

Mumbai, March 27 (RHC)-- A fire has killed at least 10 people in a shopping mall that housed a private hospital treating coronavirus patients in India's financial capital of Mumbai, officials said. The fire broke out late on Thursday night inside the mall's Sunrise Hospital in Mumbai's Bhandup area, a municipal spokesman said.

Uddhav Thackeray, chief minister of Maharashtra state where Mumbai is situated, said 68 patients had been evacuated and shifted to other hospitals. Some missing people appear to have gone home and were being tracked, Thackeray said.

It was not immediately clear how many of the dead were COVID-19 patients, as the bodies were being identified by relatives. An investigation has been opened into the cause of the fire, which started on the ground floor of the building as smoke filled the hospital on an upper floor, local media reported.

The fire comes amid an upsurge in coronavirus cases in Mumbai, which reported 5,504 new infections on Thursday, its highest number since the outbreak began, according to Reuters news agency. India's new coronavirus infections rose 59,118 overnight, the highest daily rise since October 18, health ministry data showed on Friday.

The country's overall caseload stood at 11.85 million, the world's third largest after the United States and Brazil. India reported 257 new deaths from coronavirus, taking the overall tally to 160,949, the data showed.

India plans to widen its coronavirus vaccination campaign soon to include more younger people, the health minister said on Friday. The world's biggest vaccine-making nation has held back large exports of the AstraZeneca shot to meet growing domestic demand. But there is no outright ban, a government source said, and vaccine supply will be staggered.

All people above the age of 45 are eligible for vaccination from April 1, the government said, and it is now working to meet a demand by many states for the inclusion of all adults, after new infections nearly quadrupled this month.

"The government is already planning to widen the umbrella of COVID-19 vaccine beneficiaries in the near future to cover other sections of our population," Health Minister Harsh Vardhan told a virtual summit organised by the Economic Times newspaper.

India has injected 55 million doses, the third-highest figure after the US and Brazil, although much lower as a proportion of its population of 1.35 billion, the website Our World in Data showed.

After criticism mounted over its vaccine exports, India is diverting more supplies from vaccine maker the Serum Institute of India to inoculations at home. Its other vaccine maker, Bharat Biotech, is struggling to boost output.

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