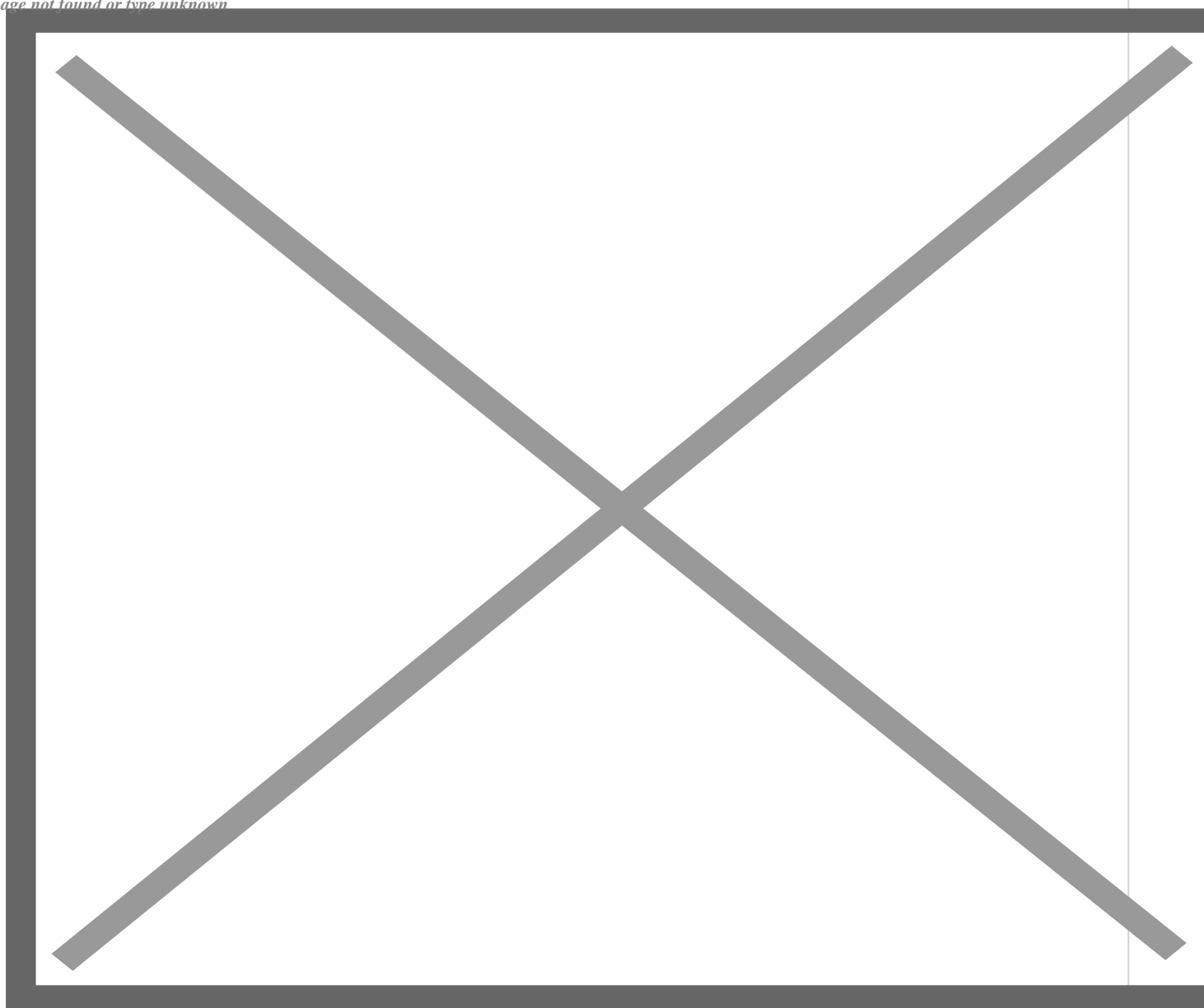


India's COVID cases hit 8-month high, experts say peak weeks away

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New Delhi, January 19 (RHC)-- India has reported new coronavirus infections at an eight-month high as a government scientist warns it will take weeks before data on hospitalisations and deaths will show how severe the latest wave driven by the Omicron variant will be.

The federal authorities say Omicron is causing fewer hospitalisations and deaths than the Delta variant, which killed hundreds of thousands last year. But Tarun Bhatnagar from the ICMR-National Institute of Epidemiology in Chennai said the effect of the current run-up in infections will show up with a lag.

"We have to worry about hospitalisation and deaths and that will come later," he told Reuters news agency in a phone interview. "There will always be a lag of two-three weeks."

India on Wednesday reported 282,970 new infections over 24 hours, the highest in eight months, bringing the total to 37.9 million, second-highest globally behind the United States. Deaths crept up to 441 fatalities, including 83 from a previous wave that the southern state of Kerala is recording only now, making the national tally one of the highest this year.

While infection rates have recently fallen in India's big cities, experts say cases nationally could peak by the middle of next month. About 70 percent of its 939 million adult population has received two primary vaccine doses and a booster campaign for health workers and at-risk population is under way.

But millions still await their first shot and Bhatnagar cited reports from some states that those unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated make up more than 90 percent of intensive care patients.

India also reported on Wednesday the first major rise in COVID-19 testing in a week after the health ministry warned states of the risks of missing the spread of the virus. States performed about 1.9 million tests on Tuesday, the highest since January 12 and near India's daily testing capacity of more than 2 million.

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