

Lockdown extension in India wouldn't affect Bhutan: PM

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India extending its total lockdown period until May 3 would not affect the supply of essential goods it has pledged to Bhutan, Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering assured.

The additional 18-day lockdown imposed to control the spread of the novel coronavirus in India, Lyonchhen said, would also benefit Bhutan.

"Extending the lockdown was to flatten the infection curve, which is mainly achieved by restricting movement of people," he said. He explained that when public gatherings and movements are restricted, the transmission rate is comparatively lowered over a period of time. "A country may detect over 100,000 positive cases but they would detect this over a period of five months rather than just in five weeks."

Lyonchhen said that when multiple positive cases are detected in a short period of time, the pressure on health services and infrastructures get overwhelmed.

"Even though this is a harsh decision to make, it is always good to break the chain," he said. "When India is able to fight the virus properly and effectively, it is a good thing for us."

Supplies to continue

Despite the lockdown in India, Lyonchhen said that the supply of essential goods, although with some delays, is continuing to arrive in the country. "We are grateful to the Indian government for keeping their words and irrespective of the condition in either of the countries, we'll continue to get this support."

Lyonchhen said that agriculture and economic affairs ministers are actively engaged to ensure the supply of food items and other essentials.

He said that while it is the responsibility of the government to ensure the supplies continue to come in, retailers and individuals could stock the supplies in their respective places so that the distribution flow is not affected.

He added that if individuals could buy what is enough for their family and pay the retailers, the retailers could make payments to the FCB distributors instantly, who would then pay the suppliers in India.

Internal arrangement

With the closure and restriction on movement of vehicles across the border with a few exceptions, Bhutan is in a semi-lockdown situation since March 23.

All schools across the country, entertainment centres and other public spaces that attract crowd have been closed until further notice.

Lyonchhen said that preempting the situation, all public gatherings were restricted as a component of social distancing. On Monday evening, the government also announced that all businesses would have to close by 7pm.

While travelling outside for any Bhutanese is strictly monitored, the government is facilitating all incoming Bhutanese with a condition of 21-day mandatory quarantine period upon their arrival in the country.

The Prime Minister said that it would be difficult to provide a specific date as to when things would return to normalcy. "We are on a very high preventive mode for now."

He, however, said that as long as the country manages to effectively control and maintain the current status, the government would consider reopening the schools region-wise if there is no local transmission of Covid-19 and if the global scenario subsides. "Should it be considered, reopening of schools would begin from the rural areas."

Lyonchhen said that should there be any case of local transmission within the country, activities would be further restricted to prevent the outspread of the disease.