



10 HOT STORIES

26 APRIL Devastation on the streets of Delhi caption here

‘Delhi is like a war zone’

AS TOLD TO HELEN ROBERTS. PHOTOS: XXXXXX

India is in the grip of a brutal Covid-19 second wave, its population of 1.3 billion experiencing the worst outbreak the world has seen. Over 300,000 cases a day have been recorded and the country has reached the devastating milestone of 200,000 deaths, though the real number is thought to be much higher. Crematoriums work around the clock building makeshift funeral pyres in parks to keep up with the number of bodies. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government is under fire for failing to anticipate this devastating second wave, which has highlighted big gaps in India’s health infrastructure. The UK has sent oxygen and ventilators but, as yet, no vaccines. Here, Delhi journalist *Charnamrit Sachdeva*, 34, reveals the shocking scenes unfolding outside her door.



‘READING ANOTHER desperate Twitter post sends me over the edge. Social media is full of distraught families looking for a hospital bed, oxygen or anything to help their loves one suffering this devastating wave of Covid. So I’ve decided to suspend my social media accounts for now; my anxiety is through the roof.

Delhi is like a war zone, panic etched on everyone’s face. Everyone is too terrified to leave their homes. There’s so much panic. No one is escaping the clutches of this virus.

I don’t know any household without a victim right now. I genuinely fear that Delhi will be wiped out. My school friend tested positive and was recovering, she seemed to be doing OK, but suddenly her breathing became difficult and, within a few hours, she died, aged 34. Her husband died 24

hours later. I am absolutely terrified.

I live with my husband and his family. There are seven of us in the house, and right now my husband, brother-in-law, his wife and child are positive. My husband has had a fever for 13 days but is stable. We can only get phone or online consultations with a doctor; they tell us to stay home and, if it gets to that point, to try to find oxygen ourselves. But right now oxygen cylinders aren’t available, or they’re selling for 75,000 rupees (£740) on the black market, with a queue of around 10 hours to refill one.

I’ve not opened the door of my house for a month. I’ve not seen my parents – who live just a 25-minute drive away – for four months. My father is a high-risk asthmatic and my mother won’t even let him stand on the balcony. The last time I was outside was terrifying enough, now the Delhi streets are empty except where there’s a pharmacy or a hospital. There, bodies line the street. Pharmacies don’t even have cough syrup or a thermometer left. People are desperate and those on the black market know this.

My brother-in-law works in pharmaceuticals and he says doctors are at breaking point. Hospitals are even building shacks outside their entrances to try to accommodate the overflow of patients. Up until last month, I was volunteering in the slums – through my charity I was trying to educate and advise communities about wearing masks and sanitising. Remarkably, slums had not been touched at that point; uneducated families had no idea what I was talking about. But now, this virus has hit the slums and rural villages. It is everywhere and people are running from one corner to another, terrified.

People here took the threat of Covid too lightly. Middle-class people were still partying, nightclubs open until 5am, restaurants were full, weddings were in their hundreds and thousands and festivals were still going ahead. There could have been some warning, reminders, some precautions in place, but there was nothing from the government. People here were living like there was no Covid-19. And now we’re paying the price.’

To donate to India’s primary disaster-response service, Rapid Response, visit rapidresponse.org.in/coronavirusrelief