

## **Locked in cages beaten and shamed, coronavirus laws lead to abuses**

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When it comes to social distancing, some authorities are resorting to unprecedented tactics to try and slow the spread of Covid-19.

In India, baton-wielding police have beaten those who flout the curfew-like restrictions or fail to maintain physical distancing, while others have publicly shamed violators by forcing them do squats, push-ups, crawl or roll around on the streets.

A video of a police officer writing "I have violated lockdown restrictions, keep away from me" on a man's forehead, went viral in the South Asian nation. Action has been taken against the officer Vivek Raj Singh, said a senior police official in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

Police in South Africa also forced people to roll along the road, kicking others as they performed squats for extended periods of time. After enforcing a 21-day nationwide lockdown on Friday (March 27), officers in Johannesburg were seen indiscriminately using water cannons on civilians and firing rubber bullets in the city's poorest neighbourhoods. Heavily armed officers stormed apartment buildings to check that residents weren't violating a shutdown in which the sale of alcohol and cigarettes are prohibited.

In the Philippines, police and local officials have been accused by Human Rights Watch of arresting hundreds of people who broke curfew, social distancing and quarantine rules. In some cases, offenders were subject to public shaming and abuse as punishment for their crimes, including placing young people in dog cages and forcing others to sit in the scorching sun.

### **'NO EXCUSE'**

"The current state of public health emergency is no excuse for violating due process and the basic rights of the people," Edgar San Luis, the mayor of Laguna province's Santa Cruz municipality, wrote in a Facebook post on March 20 in response to the dog cage detentions.

While most cases of over-zealous policing have been condemned by local authorities, who in some instances have called for the investigation of the officers involved, there remains growing concern over the harsh punishment meted out to vulnerable populations unable to socially distance due to overcrowded living conditions.

"The authorities will tend to default to using whatever means they have previously routinely applied to maintain political and social order," said Tim Huxley, the executive director at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Asia. In these circumstances where mass compliance will be necessary for a protracted period, "it seems to me highly unlikely that coercive measures alone can work."

Covid-19 cases have now topped 861,000 cases globally, and killed more than 42,000 people, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

### **HEFTY FINES STILL**

While some countries have resorted to violence in an attempt to force social distancing, others are taking a different route.

In Mexico's southern state of Yucatan people diagnosed with the virus or showing symptoms may be forced to serve up to three years in prison if they don't quarantine themselves, local newspaper El Financiero reported.

The Peruvian government has announced fines of about US\$600 (S\$941) for those who prank call its coronavirus hotline after it found 74 per cent of calls were impertinent or malicious, according to the Lima-based newspaper Peru 21.

Battling a resurgence in imported coronavirus cases, Hong Kong on Tuesday warned residents to abide by home quarantine orders and social distancing regulations or face criminal prosecution and fines. The city has already caught more than 70 people violating some of the more than 50,000 home quarantine orders, sending them to government isolation centers.

Authorities would pursue criminal charges against them, Chief Executive Carrie Lam told reporters at a weekly briefing. "This is no time to let down our guard," Lam said, adding that her government has a "zero tolerance approach" to people breaking quarantine.

Violating quarantine orders can lead to fines of up to HK\$25,000 (S\$4,616) and jail terms of up to six months, while businesses refusing to comply face fines of up to HK\$50,000.

Singapore has also imposed severe penalties for flouting social distancing regulations. The government last week announced it is a criminal offence to have gatherings of more than 10 people outside of work or school. People must also exercise physical distancing of at least one meter in settings where interactions are non-transient, such as queuing or sitting. The maximum penalty for either offence is a fine of S\$10,000 and six months imprisonment.

## **CIVIC CONSCIOUSNESS**

"There's a real consciousness about issues of public health and safety, and over the years also a growing sense of civic consciousness - it didn't come about on its own," said Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore, citing the city state's stringent rules against public littering and spitting that could cost repeat offenders up to S\$10,000 in fines.

Police attempting to enforce social distancing restrictions in Australia have issued fines on a Victoria state massage parlour following a visit from the Sex Industry Coordination Unit, while in neighbouring New South Wales, state police have been patrolling Sydney's parks to ensure protocols are being enforced. Penalties can reach A\$11,000 in fines and six months in jail.

But it is in India, with its population of 1.3 billion people, where the most extreme examples are emerging. The country imposed a three-week long nationwide lockdown on March 24 in some of the most far-reaching social distancing measures undertaken by any government. Earlier this week, authorities were filmed spraying a group of migrant workers with a chemical solution containing bleach after they returned to Uttar Pradesh in northern India, in an effort to disinfect them. The incident is now under investigation by the district magistrate.

Niranjan Sahoo, a senior fellow at the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation, said drastic measures were needed in a country with such a massive population. Whether they will work is another matter.

"Enforcing social distancing in a country with huge rural society and urban poor would be next to impossible," Sahoo said.