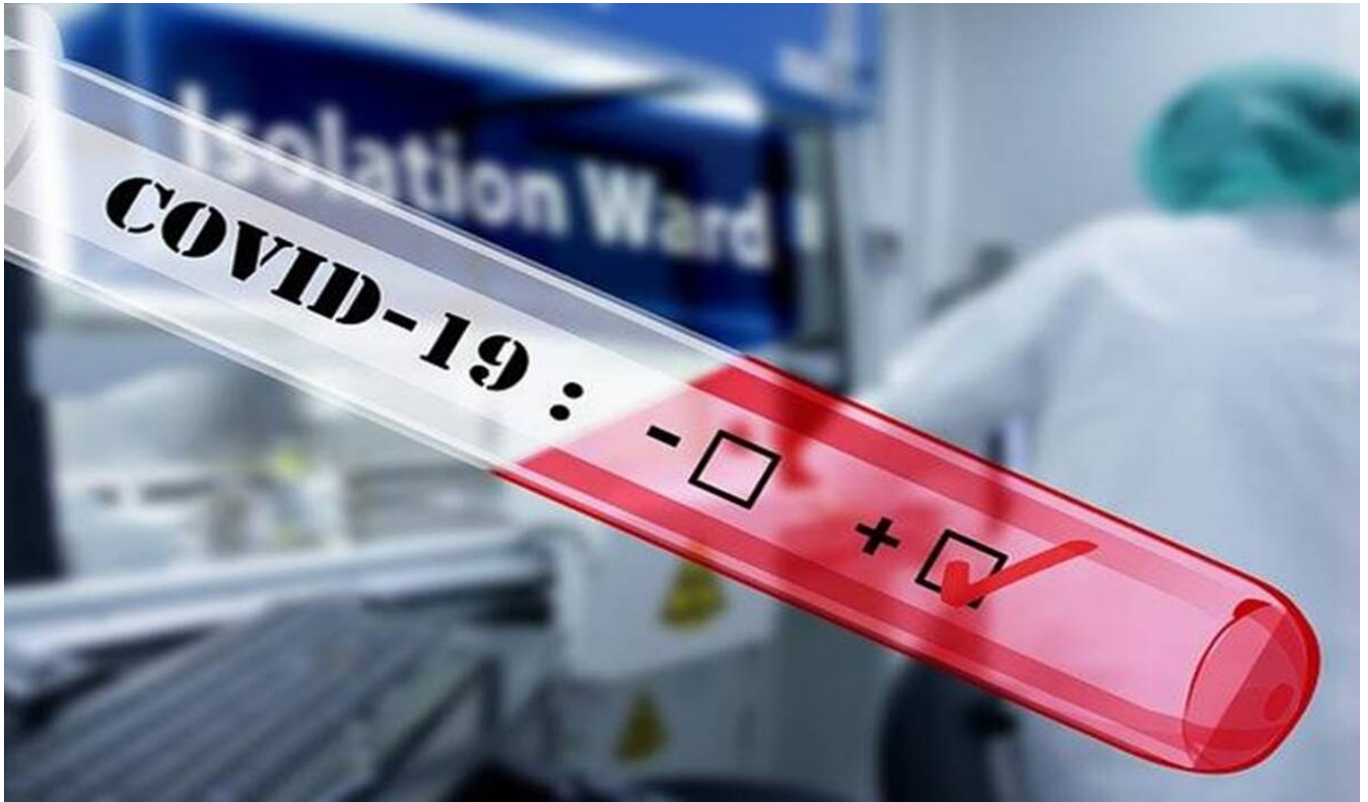


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Combating Covid: With no vaccine yet, preventive measures are the only recourse

The only hope for “unlocking” to succeed lies in effective containment of the virus. With no vaccine/cure as yet, preventive measures are the only recourse



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By Gajendra Haldea

When a total lockdown was imposed across the country on March 25, the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases was only 536. The key words then were “lock, lock, lock”. Three months later, when the number of cases has increased by over a thousand times, the new keywords are “unlock, unlock, unlock”.

For an ordinary citizen, this change is not easy to comprehend. But, if the lockdown was imposed for containing the transmission of infection and for upgrading the health infrastructure, the latter did not seem visible. Predictably, the lockdown only brought about a pause in transmission, which was followed by a rapid spread of the pandemic. This gave rise to troubling issues such as the rationale of various policies and the accountability thereof.

The policy of unlocking was adopted mainly due to the need for restoring economic activity. However, it had so happened that no other country “unlocked” when infections were on the rise. A matter of great concern in the Indian situation is that while pursuing the unlocking policy, measures for containment of the

pandemic have suffered. As a result, the rising infections may jeopardise the economic activity itself. In fact, the only hope for “unlocking” to succeed lies in the effective containment of the virus, which can only happen with a great deal of concerted action by the government and the people. A cavalier approach would be catastrophic.

Since there is neither a vaccine nor a cure for Covid-19 as yet, preventive measures offer the most effective recourse. Mask wearing, social distancing and hand hygiene are the mainstay of such preventive measures. None of these cost much, but they involve a change in the ingrained personal habits that is hard to achieve. For people to adopt these there will have to be a massive awareness campaign coupled with enforcement and levy of fines by the government. Leaders will have to lead by example. They should never be seen to be violating these norms in public. Besides mask wearing at public places, the government should also implement social distancing in aircrafts, trains and buses as well as in various kinds of queues or gatherings. Any violation must be penalised and widely publicised.

The central government should either notify the new rules under the Disaster Management Act or promulgate an ordinance to make mask-wearing and social distancing mandatory in all urban areas and in notified rural pockets. Being at high risk, the elderly (above 65 years) and children (below 10 years) should be confined to their homes, except for medical emergencies. Responsibility for implementing these measures would have to rest with the respective state governments, but some financial support from the Centre would help.

Graded fines (eg. Motor Vehicles Act) should be imposed and collected on the spot by mobile magistrates, to be selected and employed from among eligible citizens, and assisted by five home-guards each. Forces of volunteers must be created in each ward and incentivised to persuade people to adhere to the preventive measures. At least ten crore washable masks should be distributed among the economically weaker sections in urban areas, preferably through ration shops. Shopkeepers, bus owners and operators of other establishments should be required to close their services whenever their customers violate the said norms. They should be liable to stiff penalties for any violations on their part. The prime minister and the chief ministers should regularly lead awareness campaigns and set examples. A massive media campaign should also be undertaken.

A quarter of the front page of every newspaper must, by force of law, carry campaign messages. Sufficient time during prime time TV shows must also be reserved for this purpose. Radio, electronic media, hoardings, handbills, etc, should be the other means of an effective communication strategy. A government that demonstrated the requisite political will for imposing a two-month-long curfew across the country can well impose and enforce these preventive measures, which are all in the public interest.

Testing will continue to remain critical for identification, treatment, contact tracing and containment of the disease. Early diagnosis will help in timely treatment and consequent reduction in the death toll, which is the ultimate measure of the damage caused by the pandemic. Failure to create the requisite testing capacity in the past must now be addressed by making an all-out effort to ramp it up without any delay. It goes without saying that the health infrastructure will also need constant upgradation till the pandemic is controlled. For unlocking to be successful, and for economic activity to be restored and sustained, the pandemic will have to be contained. Failure to do so would re-invite partial or complete lockdowns, as already being witnessed in some parts of the country.

As experience in several other countries has shown, containing the virus is an extremely challenging task. For example, relentless unlocking in the US is already throwing up about 45,000 fresh cases a day. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that preventive measures are effective in containing the spread of the pandemic.

This virus is totally unpredictable and its fury is beyond the power of any government to control. The US and Brazil are notable examples. Back home, a chief minister had recently proclaimed that he was four

steps ahead of the virus, only to face the worst deterioration in his state within a fortnight. Clearly, there is just no room for politics or one-upmanship. It is time for firm action with a humanitarian approach, and the earlier the Centre and the states begin to concentrate on containing the pandemic, the greater will be the hope for our survival and revival. Or else, the half a million cases at present would soon multiply beyond control.

Author was Principal Adviser in the erstwhile Planning Commission. Views are personal