

23rd April

To

The Chief Secretary

Government of Telangana

Sir,

We, the COVID 19 Advocacy Lockdown Collective, would like to bring to your notice some issues being faced by people quarantined as suspect cases of COVID-19. These have been brought to our attention by the individuals undergoing quarantine in and outside the isolation wards of public hospitals and those who maintain them, in our conversations with them from 17th April to today, 22nd April. They tell us that the current scenario of quarantining suspects is causing immense fear, confusion and crisis in the lives of these people and their families. Lack of clear and regular communication from the government to the general public, the different communities and those under quarantine and isolation wards is emerging as the primary factor for the panic and fear. As a result, people are unable to understand why they are being tested without symptoms, why their quarantine period is getting extended every few days, why they cannot go home. This scenario has been compounded by the singling out, and the discriminatory media profiling, of Tablighi Jamaat members returning from the Markaz event in Nizamuddin, Delhi. We would like to urge you to urgently put together quarantine protocols, give them wide publicity in all the languages via different television and social media and consider taking the following steps.

1.The government must release updated public notices informing the public about the latest quarantine and isolation protocols being followed for COVID-19. This should include the list of quarantine facilities, the provisions for food and other basic amenities, number of quarantine days.

2.The government health workers (doctors, nurses) must communicate clearly with the suspect cases and the COVID positive patients about the proposed process and duration of their quarantine or isolation during and after admission, whenever possible. Patients and suspect cases must be clearly separated and provided clear and detailed admission and discharge slips, and an official test report upon discharge.

3. As the health-care workers are currently overloaded, the government and health authorities must urgently raise a support structure of volunteer force, to maintain constant communication with suspect cases, allaying their fears, addressing the mental distress of these thousands of people who are kept in quarantine centres away from their homes and families. Institutions like TISS could be roped in for setting up such a dedicated helpline.

4. Adequate fund allocation must be made for proper provisioning of food, medication and other needs for those under quarantine. While basic rations or cooked food is being provided, special-needs populations such as milk for babies, infants, fruits for pregnant women and medicines for older people need to be provided for, urgently.

5. Transport should be provided to people leaving quarantine facilities. Suspect cases are being picked up from homes with speed, alacrity and publicity, but not provided transport to reach home upon discharge. There is currently no public transport available. Also, being dropped at home by the health authorities will remove the suspicion and stigma attached to their removal from their locality.

6. Community participation seems to be extremely important in implementing quarantine. In several instances, mosque committees have intervened, managed and coordinated food and other basic amenities, and also provided moral support. It should be acknowledged publicly. At the same time, adequate material and moral support and inputs from the government should be provided to these quarantine facilities so that it does not become the responsibility of the community to bear the entire burden of care-giving.

7. Government should immediately restrain the media and local authorities from communalizing and thereby exacerbating the current public health crisis. The Markaz event is being cited as the source of COVID 19 in Telangana and all Telangana Muslims are being portrayed as potential virus carriers. This is counterproductive and should stop.

8. Rather than saying that the returnees of the Markaz event are 'hiding' and 'uncooperative', the authorities should have more positive messaging. Their apprehension about quarantine facilities and confusion about asymptomatic carriers should be addressed directly. Those who have recovered from COVID-19 should be projected as saviours of the community as they can donate their blood and plasma for treatment of others battling this disease. After the mandated quarantine period (as per the latest guidelines) these individuals could also help serve as volunteers to help those who have been infected.

COVID-19 is a massive health care crisis and should not be converted into a law and order crisis. Patient care angle should remain primary. It is not only patients and families who are fighting panic, fear and stigma, but the public at large is also in a state of panic and confusion. The government would be better placed to alleviate public anxiety if they change their language, improve communication about the infection and its causes, and put a stop to the propaganda and stigmatization in order to reduce panic and fear among the people.

On behalf of Covid-19 Advocacy Lockdown Collective

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Appendix

Part I : Quarantine experience of those returning from Markaz event in Delhi

Part II : Quarantine experience of those unrelated to Markaz event

Part I : Quarantine experience of those returning from Markaz event in Delhi

Case 1: Mr. T from Idar-e-Millia Masjid

Status: Under quarantine (at time of interview)

Age: 40+

Being on the train from Delhi to Hyderabad, after having attended the Markaz meeting, he arrived

on 28th March to Hyderabad and was immediately taken to the Gandhi hospital for testing. He stayed there till the test results came out on 1st April, after which he was advised home quarantine.

However, he was taken to the Idara-e-Millia Masjid in Malakpet, along with 27 others.

This is a huge mosque with three floors. There were already another set of people who had arrived from the Unani hospital after testing negative. There was also one more batch already there, having arrived on 26th March, after testing negative for COVID-19, among whom were some Indonesian preachers who had come to Telangana slightly ahead. There are reports from All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM) sources that some of these people, on the way from the hospital, tried to escape but were persuaded to stay. We spoke to Mr. T on 17th and 18th April and these are the issues that he flagged.

One -- that there are 88 people in that mosque on the whole and they have been left to their own devices and to fend for themselves. They were not allowed to meet their family members nor get any change of clothes. AIMIM sources said that they had distributed new sets of clothes to all the people in the mosque. Two -- no doctor nor any health workers have spoken to them about how long they would be required to stay in this quarantine facility. They get an SMS once in a while saying that they would be 'released' in two or three days. The latest one said that they could go home on 22nd April. AIMIM sources told us that they would be released in two or three days but they are not sure of it. Three -- Mr. B, a local activist, later told us that it is Mr. T who has made arrangements for the food for people in this mosque as he is quite rich. Dry rations are brought and the food is being cooked by the inmates of the quarantine in batches. Four -- he said that the condition of the inmates in the isolation ward of the hospital was pretty bad and that we should speak to them. He sounded anxious about the reactions of people from surrounding towns, especially with the lack of any travel arrangements for these inmates to get back to their homes.

Today, on 22nd, he told us that the officials were coming in to talk to them in the morning and he was anxious to know what they would say.

Case 2: Mr. M

Status: Discharged from Gandhi Hospital Isolation Ward (at time of interview)

Age: 24

Mr. M was also on the train from Delhi and went to Gandhi hospital along with everyone. While all those who tested negative were sent to the home/ mosque quarantine facility, and those who tested positive were sent to the COVID ward, Mr. M remained in the isolation ward from April 1st to 17th night. He was tested four times -- on 2nd, 5th, 10th and 13th. He was told that he had a compromised immune system which he found it difficult to believe as he is a 24 year old man with no previous serious illness history.

After the second test came out negative, he expected to be shifted to the home quarantine facility but was not. He had other inmates of similar age, who were shifted on 7th April, after their second test was negative too. After his third and fourth tests came negative, he grew increasingly desperate to get out of the ward. It was a junction for the incoming suspected patients who would be shifted to the COVID ward after they tested positive. He feared he would contract the infection as he had to use the same washroom with so many patients.

By 15th April he was suicidal. Mr.T and others had to constantly talk to him and calm him down on the phone. On 17th April, around midnight, he was 'discharged' from the Gandhi hospital. His discharge slip did not contain the results of the first two tests. He suspects they might have been mixed up or lost. He kept repeating that no duty doctor met him at all during these 17 days. Nurses were not responsive to his queries about the longevity of the stay. Nor was he allowed to get another pair of clothes. He repeatedly said that he would have understood if any doctor explained/ told him that he was required to stay for 15 days in the isolation ward. He sounded extremely relieved when we spoke to him.

Case 3: Mr. F from Markaz Masjid in Mallepally

Status: Under quarantine (at time of interview)

Age: 38 years

Mr. F, a resident of Malakpet, went to Delhi in March on business along with a few friends and went to attend the Markaz meeting at Nizamuddin for a day. He did not stay there in the Markaz. He stayed in a lodge in Delhi, he emphasised. He returned to Hyderabad on 17th March and said he went voluntarily to 'surrender' himself on 31st March to the Gandhi Hospital for testing. On 5th April evening, after he tested negative twice, he was told to do home quarantine but was sent to the big Markaz Masjid in Mallepally. His two friends were sent to Idara-e-Millia Masjid in Malakpet. On 18th April he called up the Gandhi Hospital doctor who had tested him to find out about the duration of the quarantine. The doctor in turn asked him why he was in the mosque rather than at home as he was supposed to be.

This Mallepally mosque housed many people who were also brought in either before him or along with him. All of them have completed their quarantine but do not know what to do. No doctor or health care worker has come to visit or explain to them about the situation, nor any other government official. Again, it is the Masjid committee which has been organising food for the inmates of this mosque-quarantine facility. There is a small team of police outside the mosque but not a single person among these 85 people stepped out of the mosque in the last fifteen days, he said. They were, on 18th, awaiting the 'orders' to leave.

Today, when we called, he said they were all let off and he was on his way home. He sounded

relieved.

Report 4: Mr. M from Masjid-e-Alamgir

Status: Member, Masjid Committee, Shanti Nagar, Masab Tank.

Mr. M provided an account of the scenario at Masjid-e-Alamgir. It housed 56 people who either travelled on the train from Delhi or attended the Markaz meeting there. All tested negative after being tested 3 times in the ESI hospital -- and this was after voluntarily reaching the hospital in response to the call of the Telangana government. They stayed for a few days in Unani hospital and were taken to this mosque where they stayed for 14 to 15 days. The Masjid Committee arranged for cooking facilities. Of the 56 people 48 have been allowed to go on 18th April, but 8 to 10 were not allowed to go as they were told that "they had small houses in which social distancing is not possible". They are distressed, not knowing how long they need to stay back.

Mr. M gave the number of Dr. A and said that he has been guiding them.

Report 5: Dr. A

Status: PhD in Electronics; Educationist; Social activist with experience in hospital management and improvement.

Dr. A emphasised that he got involved in supporting quarantined members under the instructions/ guidance of the MP of Hyderabad, Asaduddin Owaisi, and the local MLA, both of whom belong to AIMIM. He is a PhD in Electronics, runs a group of professional colleges, and a devout Muslim, he said. It is due to his work in the health care sector (he has attached himself to Nampally government hospital for the past four years and runs a shelter in Niloufer Hospital) that he was given this responsibility by the MP and the MLA. He gave the following account and suggestions.

He offered to convert-use the mosque as a quarantine facility of Mallepally Markaz after learning of the terrible state of the government's quarantine facility at Fever Hospital. That the 'suspects' were not being talked to and were not being treated well. Nor were they being fed properly. Around 56 people were brought in, all after having been certified COVID negative. Within three or four days, police came and said that there were four positive cases and shifted them to the Gandhi Hospital. He inquired with the doctors but could not get a clear answer as to why if some of them were infected, the others were being kept in mosque quarantine rather than in the Isolation Ward. Food, clothing and everything else including baby food was arranged by him and others to the inmates. The inmates included not only Muslims but non-Muslims too. For fourteen days they provided everything. At the end of which the police came in to say that there is one positive case in the area and declared the entire Nampally-Mallepally area into a red zone. He is puzzled and said that there does not seem to be any method in what the government is doing.

He said there is a deeper structural problem to this whole thing: under-funding of the public hospitals. Nampally government hospital is under-served in terms of doctors and auxiliary staff. It was not made into a quarantine or isolation facility for this simple reason. He said that the numbers of ventilators, PPE sets, etc., that are being circulated are farcical as there is no staff to operate them in most hospitals. This understaffing would defeat any efforts to fight the pandemic.

Part II : Quarantine experience of those unrelated to Markaz event

Case 6: Ms. S in Sarojini Devi Eye Hospital

Status: Discharged after quarantine (at time of interview)

She, her brother, her two children, and her sister's three children were taken to the quarantine facility on the 19th morning at 11 AM. Her sister (probably in her early 30s), who worked in a private hospital as a cleaner had developed symptoms a few days after a patient whose room she cleaned died of COVID-19. She was in the isolation ward.

The entire family from Malakpet was taken to the hospital in Mehedipatnam for testing. For a whole day they remained without food except a few biscuits and some dry snacks (mixture). When we spoke to them at 9:15 p.m on the 19th evening, they were being served dinner. On 21st their test results came negative and they were asked to leave. But they were not provided any transport to return home. Finally their brother had to hire an Innova and take them home. The local AIMIM corporator, on being informed, swung into action and mobilised a van but they had left by then. The upshot of all this is that the corporator decided to work with the hospital to arrange for transport to all the patients being told to go home.

We have heard other such accounts from the Unani hospital in Charminar too. One was: on 18th, an entire family of 9, women and children were 'released' without any transport. One among them was a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy. The local corporator arranged for transport after they started walking.

At the other hospitals converted into quarantine facilities, the doctors in charge we hear are struggling to cope with the provision of food for women and infants with scant resources. The Department for Women and Child Development (WCD) had granted Rs. 15 lakhs for one hospital but since it is found to be insufficient, some NGOs have stepped in. They are supplying milk, fruits, pickles, etc., in consultation with the doctors in charge of food provisioning. But hospitals need a lot more support in terms of funds, resources and people.