

THE STRAITS TIMES

Coronavirus: Covid-19 hot spots

Virus-stricken Bihar state takes cue from S'pore, S. Korea to prepare for elections



A patient being taken home on an auto-rickshaw after treatment at the Jawahar Lal Nehru Medical College and Hospital in Bhagalpur, Bihar. PHOTO: REUTERS

⌚ PUBLISHED AUG 31, 2020, 5:00 AM SGT

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In Bihar, India's third most populous state, preparations have started for holding state assembly elections in which Covid-19 patients will also be able to vote.

The eastern state has more than 8.7 million voters, which poses a considerable challenge to holding safe and fair elections while coronavirus infections continue to climb in the country. India has more than 3.54 million cases, of which Bihar has around 130,000.

The election commission, which is understood to have factored in how countries such as Singapore and South Korea had held elections, has come up with guidelines ranging from allowing only five people, including the candidate, to go door-to-door campaigning, to providing gloves to voters as well as facilities for washing hands and hand sanitisers at every polling booth.

The Supreme Court last Friday said the coronavirus crisis "cannot be a ground" for stopping elections. The court declined to take up a petition seeking to stop them.

Each polling station will have a maximum of 1,000 voters, instead of 1,500, and voters will have to briefly remove their masks for identification.

Covid-19 patients who are quarantined will be allowed to cast their vote in the last hour of the polling day under the supervision of the health authorities, following preventive measures strictly, according to the guidelines.

Officials said the first stage of preparations includes checking the electronic voting machines and providing training for its staff for the elections, which will be held either in October or November, to pick all 243 seats in the state assembly.

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An election commission official who did not want to be named said: "The recovery rate is 80 per cent (compared to the national average of 76 per cent). If this rate keeps going up, it will be good. Returning officers are getting training in how to conduct themselves during this pandemic."

The state saw cases start to climb when hundreds of thousands of migrant workers returned from different parts of the country after a stringent lockdown was lifted in May. It is also currently facing flooding in the state, an annual event brought on by monsoon rains which has affected more than 500,000 people.

Bihar, with a population of 99 million, is one of India's poorest states. Its Chief Minister, Mr Nitish Kumar, is the leader of the Janata Dal (United) or JDU, which is in a ruling alliance with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The main opposition parties, including the Congress and regional party Rahstriya Janata Dal (RJD), are opposed to elections being held so soon, raising concerns that social distancing would be hard to enforce and that their candidates could be unfairly hit with multiple poll code violations.