

INDIA OBJECTS TO METHODOLOGY USED IN WHO ASSESSMENT OF COVID DEATH TOLL

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The model threw up two different sets of excess mortality estimates for data from Tier I and Tier II countries. File Photo/ADNAN ABIDI

India has been in regular and in-depth technical exchange with the World Health Organization (WHO) on the issue of collecting and making public the COVID-19 death toll in the country, the Health Ministry said on Saturday late evening in a release while responding to an April 16 *New York Times* article headlined "India is stalling the WHO's efforts to make global COVID death toll public".

The Ministry said that the analysis, while employing mortality figures directly obtained from Tier 1 countries, uses a mathematical modelling process for Tier 2 countries, which includes India. "India's basic objection has not been with the result but rather the methodology adopted for the same," the Ministry said.

It elaborated that India has shared its concerns with the methodology along with other member states through a series of formal communications including six letters issued to the WHO and virtual meetings and the SEARO Regional Webinar held on February 10.

During these exchanges, specific queries have been raised by India along with other member states such as China, Iran, Bangladesh, Syria, Ethiopia and Egypt regarding the methodology and use of unofficial sets of data. The concern specifically includes how the statistical model projects estimates for a country of the geographical size and population of India fits in with other countries which have smaller population.

"WHO is yet to share the confidence interval for the present statistical model across various countries," the Ministry noted. It added that the model gives two highly different sets of excess mortality estimates when using the data from Tier I countries and when using unverified data from 18 Indian States.

India has asserted that if the model is accurate and reliable, it should be authenticated by running it for all Tier I countries and the result of such exercise may be shared with all member states. While India has remained open to collaborate with the WHO, the country believes that in-depth clarity on methodology and clear proof of its validity are crucial for policymakers to feel confident about any use of such data.

The Ministry added that it's surprising that while *The New York Times* purportedly could obtain the alleged figures of excess COVID-19 mortality with respect to India, it was "unable to learn the estimates for other countries".

Meanwhile, *The Hindu* in an email had asked WHO about the methodology used and listing India in Tier 2. It responded saying: "We are currently finalising these estimates and will publish them shortly ... WHO has developed the estimates with support from a Technical Advisory Group of international experts who have helped develop a robust methodology and the best estimates based on all available data."

The Health Ministry has also said that the model used assumes an inverse relationship between

monthly temperature and monthly average deaths, which does not have any scientific backing to establish such peculiar empirical relationship. "India is a country of continental proportions. Climatic and seasonal conditions vary vastly across different States and even within a State and therefore, all States have widely varied seasonal patterns. Thus, estimating national level mortality based on these 18 States data is statistically unproven," it said in the release.

It added that the Global Health Estimates (GHE) 2019 on which the modeling for Tier II countries is based, is itself an estimate. "During interactions with WHO, it has also been highlighted that some fluctuations in official reporting of COVID-19 data from some of the Tier I countries including the U.S., Germany, France etc. defied knowledge of disease epidemiology."

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