Chandigarh, March 27:

Even as the Punjab government stepped up testing and setting up of isolation facilities for COVID-19, Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh on Friday expanded the relief operations amid the curfew restrictions by authorising Sarpanches to use Panchayat funds to provide emergency relief to the poor and needy.

The Sarpanches have been authorised to spend Rs. 5,000 per day, subject to a maximum of Rs. 50,000, out of their Panchayat Funds, and have also been given powers to issue passes/letters for medical emergencies in their respective villages from 7 pm to 6 am every day, to allow people to visit doctors or hospitals for treatment and medicines.

An official spokesperson said the initiatives were part of the government exercise to reach out to the maximum number of people across the states, down to every village, in order to minimise the inconvenience caused to them as a result of the curfew/lockdown imposed in the light of COVID-19 crisis.

The Chief Minister, who is personally monitoring the situation in the state, has also ordered intensification of testing for COVID-19, and in the last two days alone, as many as 233 samples have been tested, of which 7 have tested positive. With this, the total number of samples tested so far has gone up to 789, of which 38 have tested positive, 480 are negative and results of 271 tests are still awaited.
Till date, there has been one death out of 38 positive cases and one case is cured. All the confirmed cases are doing well with no complications so far, said the spokesperson.

According to the spokesperson, Captain Amarinder is also closely monitoring the position with regard to the supply of logistics, to ensure that frontline staff, including doctors, paramedics, police personnel, etc, have adequate supplies of PPE kits, N-95 masks, triple layer masks, sanitizers and gloves etc. He has directed strict adherence to the Protocol of Health Department regarding use of protective gear, said the spokesperson, adding that instructions had been issued by the Health department regarding use of masks and PPE kits during patient care, sample collection and transportation, disinfection etc.

All steps are being taken to strengthen the infrastructure needed to deal with any eventuality, said the spokesperson, adding that the Department of Health & Family welfare had identified 20 isolation facilities with a cumulative bed strength of 2,708 beds for isolation and treatment of COVID-19 positive persons. The Chief Minister has directed the department to further scale up the bed strength to 5,000 by adding more facilities.

The Chief Minister lauded the work being done by the medical and paramedical staff of Health department, and also appreciated the cooperation and assistance offered by the private sector, as many private health facilities had volunteered ICU beds and ventilators. Mapping of such facilities has been done by the Department of Health and Family Welfare. A total of 889 ICU beds and 387 ventilators are available in Government and private facilities for care of critical patients if the need arises, said the spokesperson.

The Chief Minister meanwhile today held video chats with some police personnel and doctors on duty in the battle against the Coronavirus in the state. He inquired about the situation on the ground, and advised them to reach out to the maximum number of people, urging the police personnel to remain polite and humane in their dealings at all time.

Captain Amarinder asked these doctors and police personnel to take full precautions, including wearing of masks, in the implementation of their duty. He also asked them about any problems faced in the execution of the government’s orders, and offered full support from the state government to meet any contingency. The Chief Minister
conveyed to them, and their families, his best wishes, said the spokesperson.

Captain Amarinder later tweeted: “Spoke to Doctors & Punjab Police jawans on duty. I salute all heroes who are working day & night to ensure we defeat #Covid19. Let’s all comply by the rules because that’s how we can help them in this difficult time.”

The Chief Minister has assured the people that the state is fully geared to contain the spread of COVID-19. Pointing out that control rooms have been set up at State and district level to provide any kind of assistance pertaining to this situation, the spokesperson further said the 104 medical helpline was available 24X7 to address queries of general public.

Meanwhile, as part of the government’s efforts to track down each of the 90,000 persons who had returned from abroad and visited Punjab villages after February 15, 2020, the Chief Minister has directed the Rural Development Department to compile the information relating to all such persons. He appealed to all the Sarpanches to provide this information to the Department within the next two days, said the spokesperson, adding that while the exercise to compile this list was almost complete, the Department had been asked to reach out to the Sarpanches as a matter of abundant caution.

Further, in a bid to mitigate the hardships faced by the poor amid COVID-19 crisis, the Chief Minister Captain has also urged the Centre to extend the distribution of additional allocation of foodgrain from the earlier announced three to six months. This was imperative to ensure that the underprivileged and daily wagers, who had lost their daily employment as a result of the pandemic, do not suffer from a nutritional crisis.