

Editorial

PAKISTAN COMBATING CORONA PANDEMIC: ARE GOVERNMENT POLICIES ENOUGH?

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Coronavirus is known to cause epidemics globally. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-COV) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-COV) are well-known epidemics caused by the coronavirus family.¹ The most recent variety is Novel Coronavirus known as COVID-19. COVID-19 began as an epidemic in Wuhan, China in Dec. 2019 and has by now infected more than 200 countries.² Initially, it was reported as a public health crisis of international concern, and with an alarming increase in involvement of a large number of countries, World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on Mar. 11 2020.³ The patient presents with pneumonia like symptoms beginning with mild cough, dyspnea, fatigue, low-grade fever and causes mortality specifically in people with any underlying comorbidity like diabetes asthma or kidney disorders.⁴

According to the World Health Organization, by Jun. 12, 2020, there were over 7,355,981 confirmed cases worldwide and over 416,891 deaths on record.⁵ This virus advanced rapidly from China to Thailand, South Korea, and the United States within the very month of Jan.⁶ Because of the geographical relation to Iran and China, Pakistan was most vulnerable to the spread of this disease. The first case in Pakistan emerged on Feb. 26, 2020, in Karachi, Sindh.⁷ And by Jun. 12, 2020, total confirmed cases in Pakistan were 125,933, and total deaths were 2463.

The province with the greatest number of cases in Sindh, with confirmed cases 46,828 and deaths 776. Then comes Punjab with confirmed cases 47,382 and deaths 890. Islamabad has 6699 confirmed cases and 65 deaths according to data provided by the government of Pakistan.⁸

Pakistan shares a border with Iran, and the first case which led to the outbreak was a result of contact with pilgrims returning from Iran without proper precautions.⁹ The government took timely steps to contain the Pandemic. They set quarantine centers near the Taftan border (Pak-Iran border) for the pilgrims to be kept in isolation for 14 days.¹⁰ As the disease unfurled and more cases were reported Sindh, and Balochistan government announced a lockdown on Mar. 23 till Apr. 7 while Punjab government-imposed lockdown on Mar. 24 till Apr. 6.¹¹

Under this partial lockdown termed as "smart lockdown," all educational institutions were closed down.¹⁰ All ongoing and upcoming exams were delayed until further notice. Some public and private sector offices were closed down as well. Shopping malls and areas of public gatherings like cinemas, banquet halls, restaurants were shut down. Travelling and trade were halted temporarily. Even mosques and congregations have stopped some people, yet despite the government's strict orders went to pray and attend religious gatherings.¹² Only pharmacies, hospitals, and grocery stores remained open. Since the majority of the Pakistani population is a daily wageer, this whole situation was a great blow to them, so in regard to their necessities, the government announced a relief package of Rs.12000/- on a monthly basis. This period was somewhat

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better as the number of patients did not spike up as estimated. The mortality rate was low, too.¹² The major setback occurred as soon as the government declared "ease" in the lockdown near Eid-ul-Fitr. Small markets or shops were opened with Standard Operating Procedure (SOPs) issued by the government like wearing masks, using sanitizers, using thermal scanners for the customers, which was not followed by the majority. The government set a specific time for the opening of shops from 9 am to 5 pm. Offices were reopened.¹² Public transport, as well as special national and international flights, were operable again. This led to the incoming of thousands of overseas Pakistani and with them a brisk increase in the number of patients.¹³

The government policies seemingly failed after Eid as the total number of people infected from Feb. 26 to May 23 were 52,437 and total deaths 1,101, while after Eid within two weeks, i.e., from May 23 to Jun. 6 the total number of cases increased swiftly and reached 93,983 and total deaths 1935.¹⁴ As Pakistan is a developing country with much fewer resources including safety kits, ventilators and hospital beds to accommodate such a large population.¹⁵ This makes health care workers more vulnerable to developing the infection. Even life-saving drugs have become scarce. All these prove to be major causes of the rapidity of the infected cases. Apart from this, one significant factor is the lack of awareness regarding viruses in public, which leads to ignorance of the safety measures. Despite the comparatively moderate mortality rates of COVID patients in Pakistan, the number of those getting infected on a daily basis is increasing swiftly.

Globally speaking New Zealand is the first country to have eliminated COVID-19. No new cases have emerged almost after a month since its strict lockdown began on Mar. 23, 2020.¹⁶ The first case in New Zealand was recorded on Feb. 28.¹⁷ Their immediate and timely action was an absolute ban on travel

which wasn't alleviated despite the pressure from other countries. Their period of "strict lockdown" included different alert levels. Level 1 attributed to setting up border policies. Level 2 included more strict implementation of these measures as well as prohibiting any public or private gatherings. Level 3 included shutting down businesses that could be carried out from home and closing of schools and universities.⁶ Level 4 included the concept of "bubble" living. This type of living encompassed single household but was expanded later. If any person in the bubble was symptomatic the whole bubble was quarantined.¹⁸ Such strong strategies lead to elimination of COVID-19 from New Zealand.

WHO has recommended the Pakistani government to implement a lockdown for two weeks to contain the rampant growth of infected cases. Besides precautionary measures like a complete ban on travel, more strict policies are to be made for the border areas. The government should ensure the public is well versed with the safety measures that are necessary, like social distancing, coughing protocol, and benefits of wearing masks. The government should provide safety kits to Health care professionals. Hospitals should ensure the thermal scanning of patients, as well as attendants, proper sanitization of hospital premises, and tools, should be considered. Strict implementation of the law is needed and not just some smart lockdown to ensure the number doesn't increase with as much rapidity as of now. It is the need of the hour to save human lives rather than the economy as even before this Pandemic Pakistan was experiencing an economic slowdown¹⁹ and experts say millions of people will be rendered unemployed during this pandemic.²⁰

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