Coronavirus adds to misery of war ravaged Afghanistan

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As the deadly Covid-19 pandemic gripped the world, Afghanistan too found itself reeling under the unbridled spread of the Coronavirus. As per official reports, Afghanistan recorded its first coronavirus case in Herat on February 24, 2020. The infected patient had visited Qom (Iran), the epicenter of Covid-19 outbreak in Iran. By March 31, Afghanistan had 145 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in 17 provinces – Hirat, Samangan, Balkh, Nimroz, Daikundi, Farah, Paktia, Kapisa, Badghis, Logar, Nangarhar, Kunduz, Faryab, Zabul, Kandahar, Ghazni and Kabul – out of a total of 1150 tested. These numbers are believed to be on the lower side because of the small scale of tests for the infection that have been done in Afghanistan and the delayed results of the tests. There had been four deaths due to Corona Virus in Afghanistan (by March 21). The first person to die from Corona had no international travel history, which implies that local transmission had started in the country.

Most of the infected Afghan patients, however, had a travel history especially to neighbouring Iran, which is hosting more than 3.5 million Afghan refugees. Many Afghans travel across Afghan-Iran border on a daily basis.

Outbreak of Coronavirus in Iran has led to return of large number of refugees from there. It is estimated that nearly 9000 Afghans are returning from Iran every day and according to International Organization of Migration's figures 115,410 undocumented Afghans returned from Iran from March 8 – 21, which was a record number of returnees for a fortnight. These returnees are coming via Islam Qala border crossing in western Herat province of Afghanistan. It is the chief reason why Herat emerged as the epicenter of the infection in Afghanistan and now has the most of infected cases. By March 31, Herat had 106 of the 145 confirmed cases.

The flood of Afghan returnees poses a grave threat to Afghanistan's fragile health system that appears ill-equipped to cope with the rising cases of Coronavirus in the country. Afghan government belatedly imposed day-time curfew from March 25, 2020 in three provinces bordering Iran in a bid to curb the spread of the coronavirus. These provinces included Herat, Farah and Nimroz. However, in most of the other parts only a partial closure of activities was observed with no serious effort to restrict the movement of the people.

The worsening situation in Afghanistan also puts Pakistan at great risk since it shares a porous border with its western neighbour. Pakistan had closed its border crossings with Afghanistan on March 12, 2020, but later on March 20 movement of trucks through the Chaman-Spin Boldak border was allowed to ensure continued supplies of goods in Afghanistan. The restriction on cargo traffic was further relaxed from April 10, 2020 when trucks were allowed to travel to Afgahnistan through both Chaman and Torkham borders on three specified days.

Afghanistan's other neighbours – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – too closed their borders for passenger movement and suspended flights to and from Afghanistan. However, commercial traffic with some of these countries continued, though at a much lower scale.

As witnessed with most of the other countries, Kabul's response to the epidemic was slow at the start. Afghan government's response was constrained by its capacity (especially with regards to screening of people coming into the country and inadequate health infrastructure), peace and security situation, ungoverned spaces and the availability of financial resources.

The government initially committed $15 million for its response, but subsequently raised that allocation to $25 million. Other partners including the UN system, European Union, China, US and other countries too pledged contributions to assist in checking the spread of Coronavirus pandemic in the country. Much of that assistance is being channeled through international organizations. Afghanistan has also been included in the $2 billion Global Humanitarian Response Plan to fight Covid-19 launched by the United Nations for some of the world's most vulnerable countries.

It is important to remember that Afghanistan, after decades of strife, has a barely functioning health system. Therefore, it lacked adequate capacity to carry out Coronavirus tests. Moreover, it suffers from an acute shortage of medicines and hospital supplies, including personal protective equipment, for handling the Coronavirus patients.

Abysmally low literacy rate in Afghanistan, particularly among women, has made it difficult to promote awareness against the disease, for instance social distancing could not be promoted as the best safeguard against the spread of the disease and few were practicing it.

Afghan government on March 14, 2020 ordered closure of schools initially till April 18, 2020. Moreover, public gatherings too were banned as of March 18, 2020. The government, in the meantime, temporarily introduced alternate work modalities for it older employees and women. Other employees were given half working days.

Nowruz festival in Mazar-i-Sharif was cancelled and all sporting events that were to take place after March 14, 2020 including the popular Buzkashi League in Kabul were called off.

The government's Covid-19 surveillance network comprises the following six committees: Points of Entry Committee; Population Surveillance Committee; Data Management Committee; National COVID-19 Contact Tracing Committee; the Lab Surveillance Committee and Public Relations.

International organizations helped the government in setting up a 100 bed national isolation centre and subnational isolation centres with a total capacity of 991 beds. Traveller screening facilities have been augmented at the airports and border crossing and about 360 health-care workers have been trained on case management and infection prevention and control. A nation-wide surveillance and contact tracing campaign was planned to be launched using the polio vaccination teams.

Testing capacity for Covid-19 has also been increased through donation of kits by UAE and China and testing facilities are now available both in Kabul and Herat. Additional diagnostic facilities were planned for Jalalabad and Mazar-e-sharif. Alongside, laboratory technicians have been trained for testing Covid-19 samples. Nearly 300 protective gears have been provided for health personnel at isolation facilities.

It is feared that Covid-19 would add to the miseries of Afghans, who have been grappling with continued conflict, poverty and repeated natural disasters for decades.

(Update: A sharp spike in the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases was witnessed in April as their number jumped to 555 by April 11 and the number of dead also went up to 18. Herat continued to be the most affected area with 273 cases followed by Kabul 116 and Kandahar 36.)