

Pakistan's struggle to contain Covid-19 pandemic

Faisal Ahmed

Pakistan was among the first few countries where public policy discourse on how to respond to Covid-19 started in early January 2020. Initial discussion focused on whether or not to evacuate Pakistani students from Wuhan, the then epicenter of coronavirus outbreak in China. Over 20000 Pakistani students are studying in higher education institutes in China. The government, on that occasion, decided against evacuating the students from Wuhan for the fear of local spread and being cognizant of the limitations of public health system to deal with such an emergency.

Moreover, Chinese nationals have a sizeable presence in Pakistan. When China announced nation-wide lockdown in late January, many Chinese citizens, based in Pakistan, had travelled to China for annual Chinese New Year holidays. Most of them still remain in China.

The situation took a turn when positive cases of novel Coronavirus emerged in Iran, Pakistan's south-western neighbor, in mid-February. Thousands of Pakistani citizens visit Iran every month for pilgrimage. Islamabad was found wanting in its response when these pilgrims returned home. Pakistan initially decided to close down border with Iran and commenced preliminary screening of passengers coming from Gulf and Europe. A temporary quarantine center with inadequate facilities was established in the border town of Taftan (Balochistan) to house over 1400 returnees from Iran. First positive case of Covid-19 in Pakistan was, meanwhile, reported on February 26, 2020 in Karachi where a pilgrim, who had returned from Iran, tested positive for the disease.

As Pakistan began to grapple with the problem, structural challenges arose. Pakistan's constitutional system empowers provinces to provide healthcare facilities and develop necessary infrastructure. This led to provincial governments responding to cases in their territories with varying strategies. Sindh for instance was proactive, as most of the cases, in the initial phase, emerged there. Baluchistan and Punjab were, meanwhile, slow in their responses. In the absence of a robust nationwide response by the federal government, cases multiplied in matter of weeks and by March 31, 2020, there were 2007 confirmed cases of Covid-19 infection and 26 death because of the disease. The response strategy was further complicated by the on-going economic recession and austerity driven fiscal policy.

Federal government finally moved in mid-March when political pressure to respond grew. The first sign of concrete national response emerged on March 13, 2020 with the convening of an emergency meeting of National Security Committee (NSC), the country's top security body. One of the key decisions taken at the meeting was the setting up of a National Coordination Committee (NCC) for driving the strategy for containing the disease and managing the associated matters.

NSC further decided to seal the borders with Afghanistan and Iran, and banned large public and social gatherings across the country. (The closure of borders with Afghanistan was later relaxed to ensure continued supply of food and other essential items to landlocked Afghanistan).

The government, moreover, encouraged social distancing and took a number of decisions in this regard. The government and corporate sector thereafter partially moved to a 'work-from-home' routine, while educational institutions were closed and examinations were postponed. Courts

adjourned hearings in cases, whereas proceedings in criminal cases were shifted to inside the jails. The federal government looked hesitant in imposing restriction on religious congregations and left the matter to a committee led by the religious minister Noorul Haq Qadri. Sindh government was, however, firm in its approach on this issue and banned Friday congregations, even though its implementation remained problematic.

Provincial governments, in the meantime, established quarantine facilities to house confirmed patients, whereas the federal government reached out to China for provision of emergency medical supplies to equip hospitals and healthcare personnel.

A de facto lockdown was imposed across the country, albeit with varying degree of intensity, and the armed forces were deployed under Article 245 of the Constitution for enforcement of the restrictions on public gathering and movement. Sindh imposed the most comprehensive lockdown, with strict prohibition of night time movement (from 8pm to 8am). Punjab, the most populated province, also put in place a virtual shutdown, but movements within the cities continued. Similar situation persisted in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Meanwhile, Azad Kashmir imposed a complete lockdown for three weeks.

Inter-city rail, road and air passenger transport was suspended from March 26, 2020. Similarly, regular international operations of commercial airlines too remained closed till April 4, 2020. Repatriation flights for Pakistanis stranded overseas were flown from April 6, 2020.

A national debate, in the meantime, raged about the extent of the lockdown. Prime Minister Khan remained skeptical about the need for shutting down economy for a prolonged period for fear of adverse impact of such a move on the lower-income segments of the society. On March 24, 2020 the government announced nearly Rs. 1.25 trillion stimulus package for economy, including the social protection program for the most vulnerable section of the society under which 12 million families would receive Rs 12000/ each in cash assistance – cumulatively amounting to Rs144 billion.

State Bank also unveiled initiatives for businesses during the Covid-19 to keep them afloat and prevent massive unemployment.

The restrictions for containing Covid-19 were, in the in meantime, extended till April 14, 2020.

The prime minister announced formation of 'Corona Relief Tiger Force' comprising youth for distribution of food among the poor. The Force was also supposed to act as source of information about the communities. By the end of the first week of April, over 0.7 million youth from across the country had registered to be part of the Force. One could argue about the need for setting up of such a large Force by the government in the presence of an elaborate network of preventive public healthcare programs, and existence of a considerably large trained healthcare workforce, which could have been made part of relief effort and could have potentially delivered better in containing the disease. For instance, at present there are more than 100,000 lady health workers providing services across the country. These workers are trained in provision of healthcare services and could have been additionally tasked with provision of rations in low-income neighborhoods while observing personal hygiene and safety requirements. Pakistan's Polio Eradication Program, which has 260,000 trained vaccinators on its strength and boasts "the largest (disease) surveillance network in the world" could have also been tapped. One should not

either miss out that the troops deployed for anti-Covid-19 campaign, whose actual numbers have not been disclosed publicly, have also been directed by Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa to “to reach out to every citizen for protecting them from the disease and providing relief”.

Resources that will be spent on establishing and training of the new Force, thus could have been saved by activating and relying on existing resources. Benazir Income Support Program could have been, meanwhile, used for disbursement of the cash assistance to the vulnerable population.

Separately, duplication of efforts could also be seen in the decision making process. On April 1, 2020, formation of a National Command and Operation Center (NCOC) was announced through military’s public affairs wing – Inter-Services Public Relations - for ‘evidence-based’ and data driven decision-making and implementation of the decisions of the National Coordination Committee. As per official statement, NCOC is to work as one window operation collating, analysing and processing information based on digital input and human intelligence from across the country. Recommendations developed by NCOC on the basis of available information/ data are then forwarded to NCC for real time projections and timely interventions by the NCC.

Prime Minister Khan, while chairing a meeting of NCC on April 3, 2020, however, called for setting up of yet another multi-disciplinary committee to collect data for examining the impact of coronavirus disease and charting the likely trajectory of the disease in the country over the coming days and weeks.

Such actions no matter how well intentioned were seen in the public as motivated by political considerations. This impression in a highly politically polarized society is problematic to say the least especially after an intensely divisive debate, bordering on sectarian profiling and hatred, about the source of Covid-19 disease in the country. Authorities in Balochistan province took sect and ethnicity specific measures like sending employees belonging to Shia Hazara community on forced leave from work.

Gen Bajwa had in view of the political and sectarian tensions over the spread of the disease and containment measures called for national unity. “We must rise — and rise together — irrespective of caste, colour, creed and religion fighting as one nation. The task at hand is daunting ... we have overcome difficult situations before. This time the challenge is entirely different,” he had said.

It appears that Pakistan’s response to Covid-19 has run into systemic shortcomings often experienced in Pakistan. At a time when provincial and federal governments differed over the preferred strategies for preventing the spread of the disease, Prime Minister Khan appeared on a different tangent than the rest of the stakeholders. Varying types of lockdowns/shutdowns are problematic to begin with. A uniform policy for the whole country, agreed by all provincial governments, military and the federal government is required. In the absence of a single approach, result of on-going mitigation strategies will not be optimum.

Major challenges for Pakistan government in its anti-Covid-19 operations are two fold – managing the already fragile economic situation and ensuring the continuity of supply chain for critical items including food, medical supplies, and POL.

Pakistan's struggling economy has come under immense pressure because of the pandemic. Large-scale manufacturing, exports, agriculture, and services sectors are witnessing a major contraction. Similarly, a significant decline in remittances from overseas is being witnessed. Furthermore, there are initial indications that large number of Pakistani overseas workers, projected to be in tens of thousands, would be returning to the country particularly from the Middle Eastern states because of decline in their economies caused by the pandemic. This would cumulatively have a major impact on the country's economy.

Pakistan government had in view of emerging situation proposed debt relief and restructuring and has been actively pushing for it. International Monetary Fund (IMF) is also considering a Pakistani request for Rapid Financing Instrument worth \$1.4 billion for meeting immediate balance of payment needs and supporting most affected sectors. The government has further submitted a financing requirement of \$366 million to the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

Update: Pakistan, which has a population of 200 million, had conducted nearly 52,000 tests for Covid-19 till April 12, 2020. 5131 people had tested positive, while 88 had died. The number of tests are on lower side - almost 250 tests per million of its population. It's, however, so far the best ratio in South Asia, but still not adequate when compared with other countries grappling with the problem. India had the second best figures for the region with 129 tests per million. Meanwhile, the testing ratio in neighbouring Iran is 2,755 tests per million. The lower number of tests in Pakistan was partly because of insufficient capacity for testing the disease in the country, which is being gradually built. It is projected that the capacity would grow to 25,000 tests a day by the end of March.

In an indication of the worsening Covid-19 situation in the country, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah disclosed on April 11, 2020 that 20% of the tests conducted in his province over past 24 hours had turned out to be positive for the infection. Government's focal person on Covid-19 Asad Umar, told media on April 11, 2020 that there were so far fewer patients on ventilators, but that too was changing and numbers had begun to climb.

A mathematical projection of the disease spread shared by the government with the Supreme Court has suggested that there could be up to 50,000 Coronavirus patients in the country, nearly 2,400 of whom could require intensive care, and another 7,024 could be seriously ill.