

Working to hold back the coronavirus in Pakistan

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As the world faces the catastrophic coronavirus and its rapid spread, Pakistan too is hit by this pandemic. As an opposition party with a social democratic ideology, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) has been closely monitoring the policies of the incumbent Government and urging for National unity to deal with Covid-19.

The first case of coronavirus in Pakistan was reported on the 26th of February, 2020. The initial cases that were reported in the country were those who had travelled from other countries into Pakistan. Later the virus was locally transmitted. As of today, confirmed cases are 19022 out of which deaths reported are 437 and those recovered are 4753. The Chairman of Pakistan Peoples Party, Mr. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, has been asking the federal government of Pakistan to follow international practices and learn from the decisions made by other countries, but at the centre, there was this denial to understand the gravity of the situation at hand.

Province of Sindh in the south of Pakistan, where the Pakistan Peoples Party has its Government, the Chief Executive (Chief Minister of Sindh) made decisions in light of the gravity of coronavirus and in line with WHO guidelines. The first step was to close down all educational institutions and then a lockdown was announced on the 22nd of March, 2020. Sindh was the first province to announce a lockdown since it wanted to contain and mitigate the effects of the virus. Apart from the challenge of facing Covid-19, the PPP-led Sindh Government faced many other challenges since its stance on dealing with the crisis was clear from the beginning, while the central government failed to announce a uniform lockdown.

Pakistan received a huge number of Pakistani pilgrims from the border of Iran situated in the province of Balochistan. Those pilgrims were sent to their home provinces. The ones received in Sindh were immediately quarantined in special facilities reserved for them. Positive patients were kept in isolation centres until they were cured.

In an interview given to AFP, Mr. Bilawal Bhutto comments on the role of federal government and says, "We have seen a desire to ignore science and facts and the examples of what has been happening around us internationally, which has hampered us taking the timely and necessary action."

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has been unable to evolve a uniform policy to deal with the crisis and delayed announcement of a lockdown. Even after he announced the lockdown, he spoke about opening facilities for economic activity. Chairman Bilawal, on the other hand, suggested a uniform lockdown of at least few weeks as an action to save lives. Given the capacity of health care system in Pakistan, Mr. Bhutto feared the burden on hospitals if the

spread of virus went out of hands. “We can bring the economy back to life, but we cannot bring people back to life”, he very rightly said.

Although Prime Minister Imran Khan and other 3 provinces where his party is in government, announced lockdown after PPP’s Government in Sindh announced it, mixed messages from Imran Khan did not allow it to be effective throughout the country.

Now the local transmission of coronavirus cases has increased countrywide. People are being asked to take all necessary precautionary measures, exercise social distancing, avoid leaving homes, wash hands, etc...

During a visit of the WHO’s country representative, Dr. Palitha Gunarathna Mahipala, to the province of Sindh, he appreciated the efforts taken by the Government and applauded them for following WHO guidelines for testing and other procedures while handling corona cases.

The Pakistan Peoples Party has time and again urged Prime Minister Imran Khan to provide an adequate relief package for daily wage earners who have suffered in different parts of the country. In Sindh, the PPP made some important announcements that included no laying off of workers during lockdown, 20% percent reduction in tuition fees by all schools in the province, relief in rents for tenants including exemption from some taxes.

Sindh also enforced restrictions on congregations at religious places including mosques, temples and churches. This was a challenge, given the reaction from some religious leaders but it was made possible after an extensive dialogue with religious scholars and on the advice of medical professionals who demanded a strict ban on congregations.

As social democrats, we believe in protection of all workers and in this situation we are most concerned about our workers on the first line of defence. Our doctors, paramedics, security personnel, cleaning staff and all others trying to protect us from this deadly virus are our heroes. Though it has been a challenge to provide protective gear to all, we have been pushing for it from day one. As a country, we need to strengthen our health care capacity and gear up for the next wave of Covid-19.

Covid-19 is a global reality and its spread is extremely dangerous, which is why as a political party, the PPP has emphasised national unity and solidarity to deal with the pandemic.

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