

Pakistan Preparedness and Response in Alleviating Covid Catastrophe



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Abstract

The global pandemic of COVID 19, is being recognized as the sixth public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization (WHO). The virus was initially identified by the China Health Authority in Wuhan City in Hubei Province in central China. The havoc wrecked by the lethality of this ever-mutating virus had brought one of the leading and mightiest economies on its knees in a sheerly astounding manner. It challenged the global health system, devastated human lives, and grappled the entire human race in agony and crises in a very short period. The experts have declared this virus deadliest than the 1918 flu pandemic. People from every walk of their lives be it individuals, daily wagers, students, or accomplished professionals were all severely affected by the wrath that was inflicted by the Covid 19. The United States of America, India, Italy, and the United Kingdom were the countries that severely faced the turmoil of this virus. Globally, more than half of million people had lost their lives and hundreds of thousands fell prey to the devastation of this pandemic. However, several analysis and reports reveal a few flabbergasting findings which suggest that the threatening consequences of the virus have not been as appalling as it has been to other parts of the world. In this context, the example of Pakistan is the case in point, which has fared well in the jeopardy during the times of Coronavirus. However, it remains to be seen that how the country despite having poor economic indicators, meager resources, and a crippling health system emerged resilient as compared to its other neighboring countries. The saga of Pakistan's journey of flattening the curve is out-standing yet revealing. In this context, the sole ambition of writing down the following opinion is to highlight Pakistan's robust response and success factors in mitigating the pandemic predicament and averting its crises, having said that, Pakistan's age demographics, government's rigorous approach to preventing the plight of covid will also be discussed. Hence, all things considered, the success which is embedded in collective factors will also be talked through.

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Introduction

The first case of Corona Virus was reported in Pakistan on February 20, 2020, in Karachi (1). The Ministry of Health, Government of Pakistan' confirmed the identification of the first-ever case that was identified in the country, the affectee had a travel history of Iran (2). In response to it, the government of Pakistan had immediately responded, and robust measures were taken about the active screening of passengers at Taftan Border (3). Further, the pivotal role of the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the pragmatic strategies formed through it had also proved to be decisive on many fronts in the containment of the Covid menace (4). The foundation of the Emergency operation Centre also became possible due to the collective endeavors taken by the National Institute of Health (5). The establishment of Rapid response teams, issuance of national guidelines, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were the initial steps that helped mitigate the possible predicament of the virus. Furthermore, the top brass management of the country had taken some radical and rigorous measures to face the challenges that could prevail due to the emerging threat of the pandemic. The closure of the schools, public places, cancellation of the celebration of Pakistan day, and deployment of the troops in ensuring the restriction on lock-down was a few of the inceptive steps that were

taken with prudent approach and effective planning. The principal weapons of smart lockdowns had also worked effectively. It ensured that a larger segment of the population was not affected by lockdowns which ultimately provided people with liberty to manage their financial burden with reasonable ease and comfort.

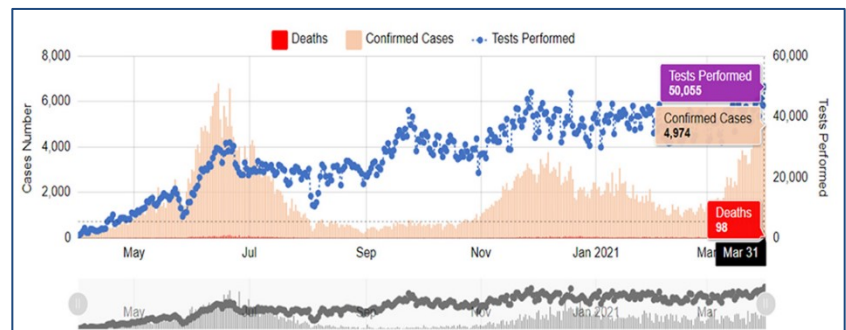


Figure 1: COVID-19 Status in Pakistan (<https://covid.gov.pk/>)

On the top of it, the graph also indicates that affliction caused by Covid 19 in Pakistan is relatively low. As it also highlights the minimum ratio of deaths that occurred during pandemic times. To add further, the significant number of tests performed has also been noticed in the country. Although the charts specify that a ratio of positive cases is higher in numbers, however, the harm has not been seen to any damaging extent.

How Pakistan fared well amid Covid 19 crises as compared to its neighbor country

However, on the other hand, in our neighboring country India, the situation went in an entirely different way. The imposition of strict lockdowns caused immense trouble to the citizens of the other side of the border. The workers who worked in big urban centers had to migrate back to wards their villages. Such massive and sudden mass influx from urban to rural territories caused the massive spread of the virus among inhabitants (6). However, in comparison the sound strategy of smart lockdown in Pakistan proved to have produced some incredible outcomes. The wide-spread of the virus was contained and could not prevail in the rural areas of the country. On the contrary, the deadly variant B.1.1.7 (Alpha variant) which caused huge harm in the United Kingdom was also identified in the Indian state of Punjab(7). This same variant is known as one of the contagious variants which have the potency to affect 40 to 70% more quickly than another variant. In the same manner, the variant B.1.617 (Delta plus variant), which is also referred to as the 'double mutant' was also found in Maharashtra (7) Moreover, the Indian ministry of health and family welfare had also reported having found Brazil and South African variants as well (8). Although, in Pakistan, such lethal forms of the virus were not identified due to the timely measures of the government.

Factors that impeded the predicament of virus lethality in-country

Pakistan's age demographics also had an utmost role behind the reasons for a smaller number of covid cases and casualties. It is being reported that 64% of the Pakistan population is below 30 years of age. (9). Hence, due to such a ratio of population, the deadly consequences of the virus could not affect in the same manner as it had on the other segment of the population in the neighboring country, where the mortality rate remained high. Similarly, Pakistan's case mortality rate – the percentage of patients who died after testing positive for coronavirus – is 2.16 percent, whereas it remained significantly high, 12.7 percent in the United Kingdom, 13.7 percent in Italy and 11.1 percent in France (10). Apart from it, never in the history of Pakistan, the places of worship were put to be closed. However, the government of Pakistan gathered all the stakeholders and brought them to one page in making the mutual consent for avoiding going to mosques. It is pertinent to mention that people from every domain including religious leaders joined hands with the ruling elite in curtailing the Covid 19 crises.

The crucial role of media in highlighting the sensitivity of the issue was also one of the major factors to aware the masses of the possible consequences of pandemics. Television advertisements, video messages through various social media platforms, and the sheer interest by the fraternity of doctors in providing free video counseling to the general populace have been remarkable steps in fighting the calamity caused by viruses. Further, in beginning Pakistan lacked the essential diagnostic facilities to test the covid samples. However, with strong resolve, the country launched its own PCR testing capacity and Covid 19 test centers all over the provinces of the country (11). In this way, a rapid testing system was made assured, and cases

were identified on regular basis. This also enabled the management of several tiers of the country to remain proactive and implement the necessary precautions.

The country which already had undergone several economic constraints, the plight of a pandemic would have troubled the sizeable portion of masses in a darn hard manner. However, sound policymaking on the government's part and the role of NGOs on the community level had remained significant in uplifting the penurious section of the society. In this very context, the government launched the Ehsaas emergency cash program to tackle the rapidly growing poverty amidst the pandemic adversity (12). The report released by an international organization based in Brazil has found that the social protection program of Ehsaas emergency cash had remarkably helped to avert an economic upheaval. The stipends of 12,000 PKR were delivered to 15 million house-holds in the year 2020, which suggests that 100 million people or nearly half the country's population was facilitated through this program. The report released by World Bank on 'Global social protection responses to COVID 19' also declared Ehsaas Emergency Cash among the top four social protection interventions globally in terms of the number of people covered. The EEC pro-gram had also represented the largest and most extensive social protection intervention ever in the history of Pakistan. (13)

Moreover, for a developing country, Pakistan's rapid and aggressive testing system and vaccination roll-out program have been exceptional. The deployment of mobile vaccination teams helped the senior citizens, marginalized populations, and the people living with disabilities in providing them easy vaccination facilities. Even the strides attained through Pakistan's Covid response management were also recognized by the WHO director-general Dr. Tedros Adhanom, who also noted that Pakistan's effectively utilized the well-established community health workers, infra-structure for surveillance, contact tracing, and care (14).

Pakistan managed to mitigate the covid 19 crises due to various factors. Firstly, timely response on the government's part and the role of front-line health workers had a significant role in alleviating the crises. Further, Pakistan also contributes more than 1% of GDP to charity (15). The people from various walks of their lives took a keen part in uplifting the most deprived segment of the country. Since the imposition of lockdowns bereft people of their jobs and income. However, the practice of charity to the needy and destitute section of the society remained continued with great vigor and determination. It helped people to cope up with the crises and manage their bread and butter without risking their life and limb amid the severity of the virus. Further, it also ensured that people continued to self-isolate themselves and unlike India they did not have to migrate to their native towns. Moreover, Pakistan's social protection program of Ehsaas emergency cash transfer was also globally applauded and remarkably recognized as the fourth largest intervention of the world in terms of people facilitated through the program (16). It provided considerable support to the masses and lessen their

financial burden to a significant extent. Apart from it, Pakistan's age demographics, smart lockdowns facility, rapid testing, and vaccination process have also been the undeniable factors that contained the county from the severe affliction of the virus.

Emerging threat of newly detected variant Omicron

Furthermore, now once again the world is witnessing the spike in the cases of a newly detected mutant of COVID 19 i.e., omicron. The first case of this novel SARS-CoV-2 lineage B.A.A.529 was reported by South Africa and Botswana. It was firstly detected in one of the HIV patients on 9th November in South Africa (17). This very variant was later recognized and classified as a Variant of Concern VOC on 26th November 2021. The variant has now been reported in more than 34 countries and Pakistan is also no exception in this regard. The country recorded its first-ever case of the omicron variant on 8th December 2021 (18). However, the severity of this variant has not been noticed yet. But the emerging plethora of cases can pose a massive threat to the already frail health system of the country. Although a reasonably apt mechanism of testing and vaccination is being followed in the country since the inception of the Covid. But still, the steep rise in the cases can put a country in an alarming health crisis. Therefore, social distancing, robust media campaigns coupled with smart lockdown strategies can mitigate the potential threat of this emerging variant to a reasonable extent.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, initially, the country with a population of 220 million, with a ramshackle health care infrastructure and densely packed urban neighborhoods, Pakistan was evaluated by many to be a prime candidate to see the worst of the coronavirus widespread. However, now, no ambiguity in the fact that Pakistan appears to have successfully mitigated the COVID-19 crisis (19). However, the possibilities of up-ticking in infections cannot be neglected. Further, the pandemic does not discriminate about language, caste, creed, and any gender. Therefore, relevant authorities will have to carry on the proactive approach and take robust measures every now and then in the containment of the virus. It is also imperative to notice, that data indicates that vaccination rates among women in Pakistan are much lower in comparison to men. A similar scenario of predicament has been observed amongst the refugee population in Pakistan. Such findings can prove to be highly worrisome in the time to come. Since the Covid 19 crisis has challenged one of the resilient health systems in the world. Therefore, there will always be a dire need to adopt a prudent approach to reducing the potential threat of the virus. Although Pakistan's economy performed well amid the Covid-19 outbreak resulting in a 3.94 percent economic growth rate during the fiscal year (20) But to keep such indicators persistent would remain an uphill task. Hence, it is inevitable that the policymakers and top brass management of the country should keep a comprehensive plan to avoid any further burden on the already frail health system of the country (21). Further, as no country can be insulated by the virus, therefore the world may need to come up with a global strategy to combat the pandemic and the

threats posed by it. Indeed, now the citizens of the country appeared to have limped back to life from the devastating consequences of the virus and its myriad of strains. However, its possible threats yet cannot be fully ruled out. Furthermore, it is also high time that the developed world must come forward, wake up to the danger and abolish the practice of the unequal distribution of vaccines as it remains the major cause for the persistent nature of the pandemic.

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