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Confront the pandemic on a war footing

A public policy research institute has issued an urgent call for government to declare a national emergency and act on war footing to control the COVID 19 pandemic in Pakistan. The best time to take decisive action is before an emergency and not after, it said.

We are now on an explosive trajectory and without serious intervention, cases will double every few days and then faster. After discovery of the first two cases on 26 February, in Pakistan, it took 15 days to reach 20 cases and 12 days to reach 645 cases, i.e. the number of cases grew by over 32 times in 12 days.

It was a mistake to not take effective action at the border to identify and trace infected pilgrims returning from Iran. The country may pay a high price for this lapse. Also, social distancing, widely practiced in many countries, has not been enforced so far in Pakistan. In fact, the time has come for an effective lockdown accompanied by a largescale public awareness campaign.

We know that Pakistan’s health infrastructure is dismally inadequate and cannot cope with a virus that gets out of hand. Our health system cannot take the resulting pressure. We are already extremely short of doctors, hospital beds, ICUs, and ventilators. The human and economic cost of an out of control pandemic is incalculable.

The choice between ‘profit’ and lives is a false choice. Pressures on the health system by an escalating health emergency and fatalities will be catastrophic from which it will take years for the country to recover. If that happens, we will lose in both economic and human terms. The myth that summer will burn it away is a risky assumption.

Therefore, the followings steps need to be enforced immediately. First, impose a lock down allowing movement of essential people only: health workers, police, sanitary staff, food and medicine delivery. Call defence forces, if necessary. The only option is prevention through lockdown. The peak must never exceed the health system’s capacity.

Second, we must keep the borders sealed and improve our quarantine, identify and trace practices. We cannot rely on existing capacity. This has to be reinforced with special monitoring efforts. Third, government must offer relief to the weak segment of our population. There should be food distribution for the poor and the Ehsaas/BISP payments must be doubled.

Government must immediately import test kits, PCR machines, ventilators, thermometers, masks, sanitizers and protective gear for health workers. In times of crisis especially, the health workers are our heroes.

We must also seek help overseas. In the last two months, China has scaled up production of the above items to an extent where it has offered to send them to US and Europe in millions of units. Pakistan must tap into China’ s capacity. We must also ask China to assist with health workers and emergency systems management. Turkey too has produced test kits in large numbers, since onset of the crisis. Recently, it offered to send 500,000 test kits to USA. Pakistan must approach Turkey.

World practices since January prove that testing is key where governments have been late to respond. Testing should be in large numbers and free. Pakistan must also set up largescale isolation units and treatment centres with ICUs. Public buildings and spaces must be put to use for the purpose. The Institute recommends a special fund under the Prime Minister to be financed adequately from government budget. We must postpone and stall all expenditure save the most essential, and divert funds to manage the health crisis.

For all of this to happen, Government must make special institutional arrangements, while mostly using government organizational resources. A select health services group comprising public sector policy makers, but also other key stakeholders must create a plan and execution strategy to prevent further spread of COVID 19, identify suspect cases, test, and treat those found to be positive. An economic group will ensure funds for all activities, as well as keep essential industry functioning and supplies moving. It must plan for minimum economic disruption and for post-disruption recovery.

A welfare group comprising, in addition to policy makers, leading volunteer and charity organizations must be set up to manage food and medicine distribution and to help the distressed. They can also help government with other reach out functions, such as taking temperature in public places, and spreading awareness about social distancing, prevention, and testing. GoP may fund the group.