

## Coronavirus

## Pleas for vaccines

## Afghanistan battles brutal 'virus surge'

KABUL, Afghanistan, June 7, (AP): Afghanistan is battling a brutal surge in COVID-19 infections as health officials plead for vaccines, only to be told by the World Health Organization that the 3 million doses the country expected to receive by April won't be delivered until August.

"We are in the middle of a crisis," Health Ministry spokesman Ghulam Dastgir Nazari said this week, expressing deep frustration at the global vaccine distribution that has left poor countries scrambling to find supplies for their people.

Nazari has knocked on the door of several embassies, and so far, "I've gotten diplomatic answers" but no vaccine doses, he said.

Over the past month, the escalating pace of new cases has threatened to overwhelm Afghanistan's health system, already struggling under the weight of relentless conflict. In part, the increase has been blamed on uninterrupted travel with India, bringing the highly contagious Delta variant, first identified in India.

Also, most Afghans still question the reality of the virus or believe their faith will protect them and rarely wear masks or social distance, often mocking those who do. Until just a week ago, the government was allowing unrestricted mass gatherings.

The Delta variant has helped send Afghanistan's infection rate soaring, hitting 16 provinces and the capital

Kabul the hardest. This week, the rate of registered new cases reached as high as 1,500 a day, compared to 178 a day on May 1.

Hospital beds are full, and it is feared rapidly dwindling oxygen supplies will run out. Afghan ambassadors have been ordered to seek out emergency oxygen supplies in nearby countries, Foreign Minister **Haneef Atmar** said in a tweet Friday.

By official figures, Afghanistan has seen a total 78,000 cases and 3,007 deaths from the pandemic. But those figures are likely a massive undercount, registering only deaths in hospitals, not the far greater numbers who die at home.

Testing is woefully inadequate. In only the past month, the percentage of positive COVID tests has jumped from about 8% to 60% in some parts of the country. By WHO recommendations, anything higher than 5% shows officials aren't testing widely enough, allowing the virus to spread unchecked.

## Capabilities

At most only 3,000 tests a day are carried out, as Afghans resist testing, even after the country dramatically ramped up its capabilities to 25,000 a day.

Only recently, the government tried to take steps to clamp down to contain the surge. It closed schools, universities and colleges for two weeks. It also shut down wedding halls, which had been operating unhindered throughout the pandemic.

But it is rare to see anyone wearing a mask in the streets, and even where masks are mandatory, like in government offices, it's rarely enforced. As many as 10 flights arrive daily from India, packed with Afghans, particularly students and people who had gone to India for medical treatment.

Nazari said banning flights was not an option since many Afghans cannot afford to be stranded in India and the government cannot prevent citizens from re-entering their own country.

For vaccines, Afghanistan so far has relied on a donation of AstraZeneca doses from India and then purchases of Sinopharm from China. About 600,000 people have had at least one dose, about 1.6% of the population of 36 million. But the number who have gotten a second dose is minute - "so few I couldn't even say any percentage," Nazari said.

Last month, the ministry received a letter from WHO saying the expected shipment of 3 million vaccine doses will not arrive until August due to supply problems, Nazari said. With just 35,000 vaccine doses remaining in the country, the authorities were forced to stop giving first jabs to use remaining supplies to give second jabs, he said.

Poor countries around the world have been pleading for vaccines even as developed nations have been able to inoculate significant portions of their populations. COVAX, set up with U.N. help to try to prevent vaccine inequities, has struggled to fill the gap. It faced a major setback when its biggest supplier, the Serum Institute of India, announced last month that it would not export any vaccines until the end of the year because of the surge in that country.

"Honestly speaking, I lost my faith in COVAX," Nazari said.

"Unfortunately, there are countries who vaccinated more than their 50% or 60% percent of the population ... and there are countries who did not receive vaccines to even vaccinate 1% of their population."

At the Afghan-Japan Communicable Disease Hospital, Kabul's only hospital dedicated solely to COVID treatment, all 174 beds are full. The Health Ministry opened roughly 350 more beds for coronavirus patients in another three hospitals, but they too quickly filled up. This week, people were being turned away.

Each day three or four people die of COVID at the Afghan-Japan Hospital, said hospital administrator Dr. Zalmi Rishteen.

Doctors struggle with the public's refusal to take precautions and follow safety protocols. "Our people believe it is fake, especially in the countryside," Rishteen said. "Or they are religious and believe God will save them."

In the hospital's intensive care unit, Dr. Rahman Mohtazir said that only makes it more dangerous for him as he does his job. "I am afraid I will catch it, but I am here to help," he said. "I listen to people and they say it's fake. Then they come here."

The Health Ministry has recruited clerics, prominent religious figures and local elders to encourage vaccination and anti-coronavirus precautions.

The worsening COVID situation prompted the US Embassy on Thursday to issue a health alert warning of shortages of supplies, oxygen and beds at hospitals and urging American citizens to "to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible."

## Also:

**COLOMBO, Sri Lanka:** Sri Lanka has received one million doses of China's Sinopharm vaccines amid the island nation's recent surge in infections and COVID-19 vaccine shortage.

Sunday's is the largest consignment of vaccines to be received by Sri Lanka on a single occasion.

State Minister of Pharmaceutical Production, Supply and Regulation **Channa Jayasumana** said the latest consignment was purchased by the State Pharmaceutical Corporation and that will be mainly used to provide second doses.

Sri Lanka began administering first doses on May 8. Authorities plan to start giving the second dose June 8.

Sri Lanka's vaccine shortage comes after the producer in neighboring India failed to provide the promised Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine stocks.

Last month, Sri Lanka decided to buy 14 million doses of Sinopharm in a bid to resolve the vaccine crisis. Sri Lanka had previously received a total of 1.1 million doses of Sinopharm vaccine, donated by China in two batches in March and May.

The current vaccination program is focused on Sri Lanka's Western province, which includes the capital of Colombo and its suburbs from where the majority of the country's coronavirus cases have been detected.

Sri Lanka has seen a sharp increase of positive cases and deaths since April because of celebrations during the traditional new year festival.

Sri Lanka's total number of positive cases have reached 202,357 with 1,696 fatalities.



Radha Gobindo Pramanik holds photographs of his daughter who died of COVID-19 in Lucknow, India, Thursday, June 3. Two months ago Pramanik and his wife threw a party to celebrate their daughter's pregnancy and the upcoming birth of their long-awaited grandchild. Within days, his wife, his daughter and his unborn grandchild were all dead, among the tens of thousands killed as the coronavirus ravaged India in April and May. (AP)

## Coronavirus

## As India's surge wanes, families deal with devastation

## 'I am left alone in this world now'

LUCKNOW, India, June 7, (AP): Two months ago Radha Gobindo Pramanik and his wife threw a party to celebrate their daughter's pregnancy and the upcoming birth of their long-awaited grandchild. They were so happy that they paid little attention to his wife's cough.

It's an oversight that may forever haunt him. Within days, his wife, his daughter and his unborn grandchild were all dead, among the tens of thousands killed as the coronavirus ravaged India in April and May.

"Everyone whom I loved the most has left me," the 71-year-old said on a recent night as a Hindu priest chanted mantras and performed a ritual for the dead in his home in the northern city of Lucknow. "I am left alone in this world now."

As India emerges from its darkest days of the pandemic, families across the country are grieving all that they've lost and are left wondering if more could have been done to avoid this tragedy.

There are also signs that the virus is not done devastating India's families because even as new infections are down, thousands are still dying each day and the illness is believed to be spreading undetected in areas without access to testing.

Ruby Srivastava lost her family in a single week in April. First her mother and father to the virus. Then her brother to a motorcycle accident. And finally her grandmother to shock.

Now the 21-year-old is left dealing with the insurmountable pain and the questions she asks herself.

She wonders if things might have been different if her father, a government worker in Lucknow, hadn't been called away to help hold local elections in their state of more than 200 million people.

Health experts had warned against holding the polls. Fearing the virus, many of the hundreds of thousands of government workers ordered to help out had begged not to go. But the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's government in Uttar Pradesh state insisted the vote would go ahead as planned.

For four days, more than 1.3 million candidates fought for nearly 800,000 seats. Tens of millions voted as the virus spread unchecked.

In the days that followed, scores of government employees who worked the polls would die. One teachers union said 1,600 educators alone were killed, many of them complaining of fever and breathlessness.

Srivastava wonders what would have happened if her father's superiors believed him and hadn't denied his requests for sick leave until finally he fainted in his office and was sent home.

She wonders if her father could have been saved had he gotten better treatment at the government-run hospital they took him to before deciding they would take care of him themselves at home.

At the height of the surge, Indian hospitals were overwhelmed and life-saving drugs and oxygen were in short supply. People were dying on their way to health centers, gasping for breath. Families were panicking.

Once back home, Srivastava's family paid an exorbitant price for an oxygen cylinder for her father. They were

## India cautiously starts to open up as new coronavirus cases decline

NEW DELHI, June 7, (AP): Businesses in two of India's largest cities were reopening Monday as part of a phased easing of lockdown measures in several states now that the number of new coronavirus infections in the country is on a steady decline.

India's capital allowed businesses and shops to reopen with limited hours and the Delhi Metro, which serves New Delhi and adjoining areas, also resumed operations at 50% capacity. Last week, authorities in the capital allowed some manufacturing and construction activity to resume.

"Now the corona situation is under control. The economy must be brought back on track," New Delhi's chief minister, Arvind Kejriwal, told reporters on Sunday.

The strict lockdown measures had been in place since April at the start of a devastating surge in infections that lasted well into May and overwhelmed health care facilities in many parts of the country.

Some health experts fear the restrictions are being eased too soon and there are concerns that the virus is still spreading unchecked through India's villages where testing and medical care are limited.

Kejriwal warned that any new surge in infections could be more severe and said the administration will build new oxygen-production facilities and expand the capacity

of intensive-care units.

In the coastal state of Maharashtra, home to the financial hub of Mumbai, and one of the worse hit states, malls, movie theaters, restaurants and offices reopened in districts where the positivity rate has fallen below 5%. The state's huge rail network will, however, remain closed for the public.

Other Indian cities also started to gradually lift the lockdown rules.

After registering a peak of more than 400,000 new cases a day in May, new infections and deaths have declined and the government hopes the reopening could resuscitate an economy that grew at only a 1.6% annual rate in the January-March quarter.

On Monday, new infections fell to their lowest point in two months.

The 100,636 cases added in the past 24 hours pushed India's total to nearly 29 million, second only behind the United States. The Health Ministry said 2,427 more people died in the past 24 hours, driving the overall toll to 349,186. Both figures are believed to be vast undercounts.

Meanwhile, pressure is mounting on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to speed up vaccinations. India has administered just over 222 million jabs so far and less than 5% of the country has been fully vaccinated.

so relieved they almost didn't notice that her mother was also coughing.

"Our full attention was on our father," Srivastava said. "So we did not realize that she was also facing problems."

Her mother's situation quickly grew worse and on April 22 she died. A day later so did her father.

## Cremations

After their cremations, Srivastava's younger brother was taking their ashes on his motorcycle for a ceremony to immerse them in the Ganges River when he was killed in an accident. Three days after that, her heartbroken grandmother died of cardiac arrest.

Srivastava's entire family had been wiped out in a few devastating days.

Pramanik also has regrets about his family's final days.

Most of all he wishes he had paid attention to his wife's cough and off-and-on fever and never held the party for his daughter, Navanita. They had been so excited that their daughter was finally pregnant after nine years of trying and had grown complacent with health protocols at a time when they thought they were safe from the virus.

Friends suggested his wife get tested for COVID-19, but she refused.

To make matters worse, the day after the party he and his wife traveled to Navanita's house on the fringes of the capital. There the two women talked all night, making arrangements for the baby's birth in June.

Within 24 hours Pramanik's wife's fever returned, she complained of breathlessness and she was hospitalized. Three days later she died.

Distraught, the father and daughter returned to Lucknow by train. A promise was made that Navanita would take care of him.

"She told me: 'You are not alone. I am with you,'" he recalled.

When they got home, Navanita started showing symptoms.

Over the next five days the virus took over her body. She was hospitalized and finally shifted to an intensive-care unit and hooked up to a ventilator.

On the night of April 17, Pramanik and his son-in-law sat outside the ICU trying to console one another. Together they wept.

The next morning, doctors told them they needed to find a better-equipped medical facility for Navanita. Frantic calls around the city were met with refusals. Beds were full nearly everywhere.

After hours of trying, they finally found space for her. It was too late. Navanita died on the way to the new hospital, her unborn child inside her.

Two months later, Pramanik is still wracked with guilt. If only he had made different decisions, he tells himself, his wife and daughter would still be alive. He would be a grandfather.

"Sometimes I feel I have killed my wife and daughter," he said. "This thought keeps me awake the whole night."



Students wear face masks to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus in Peshawar, Pakistan, Monday, June 7. Pakistani authorities reopened educational institutes following a steady decrease in deaths and infections from the coronavirus. (AP)

## Discovery

**Lakes losing oxygen:** Oxygen levels have dropped in hundreds of lakes in the United States and Europe over the last four decades, a new study found.

And the authors said declining oxygen could lead to increased fish kills, algal blooms and methane emissions.

Researchers examined the temperature and dissolved oxygen - the amount of oxygen in the water - in nearly 400 lakes and found that declines were widespread. Their study, published in the journal Nature, found dissolved oxygen fell 5.5% in surface waters of these lakes and 18.6% in deep waters.

The authors said their findings suggest that warming temperatures and decreased water clarity from human activity are causing the oxygen decline.

"Oxygen is one of the best indicators of ecosystem health, and changes in this study reflect a pronounced human footprint," said co-author **Craig E. Williamson**, a biology professor at Miami University in Ohio.

That footprint includes warming caused by climate change and decreased water clarity caused in part by runoff from sewage, fertilizer, cars and power plants.

Dissolved oxygen losses in Earth's water systems have been reported before. A 2017 study of oxygen levels in the world's oceans showed a 2% decline since 1960. But less was known about lakes, which lost two to nine times as much oxygen as oceans, the new study's authors said.

Prior to this study, other researchers had reported on oxygen declines in individual lakes over a long period of time. But none of have looked at as many lakes around the world, said **Samuel B. Fey**, a Reed College biology professor who studies lakes and was not involved in this study.

"I think one of the really interesting findings here is that the authors were able to show that there's this pretty pronounced decline in dissolved oxygen concentrations in both the surface and (deep) parts of the lake," Fey said.

The deep water drop in oxygen levels is critical for aquatic organisms that are more sensitive to temperature increases, such as cold water fish. During summer months, they depend on cooler temperatures found deeper in the water, but if deep waters are low on oxygen, these organisms can't survive.

"Those are the conditions that sometimes lead to fish kills in water bodies," said study co-author Kevin C. Rose, a professor of biology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. "It really means that a lot of habitats for cold water fish could become inhospitable." (AP)

**Blueberry faces warming peril:** Maine's beloved wild blueberry fields are home to one of the most important fruit crops in New England, and scientists have found they are warming at a faster rate than the rest of the state.

The warming of the blueberry fields could imperil the berries and the farmers who tend to them because the rising temperatures have brought loss of water, according to a group of scientists who are affiliated with the University of Maine.

The scientists analyzed 40 years of data and found that the state experienced a 1.1

degrees Celsius (1.98 degrees Fahrenheit) increase in average temperature, but the blueberry fields of Down East Maine experienced an increase of 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.34 degrees Fahrenheit).

That seemingly small difference is significant because rising temperatures could lead to water deficits that put the blueberries at risk, said **Rafa Tasnim**, a doctoral candidate in ecology and environmental science at UMaine and the study's lead author. Lack



Williamson



Fey

of water could result in smaller crop yields and blueberries that are less likely to survive to be harvested.

"What we are expecting is the temperature is going to increase a lot and we will not get as much rainfall in the summertime especially," said Tasnim, who led a research team that published the study in the research journal Water earlier this year. "What that will mean for the wild blueberry plants is they will be water stressed." (AP)