[Abdul Sattar](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/abdul-sattar)

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**Lessons from an epidemic**

The recent outbreak of the coronavirus seems to have created a stir and led to much concern around the world. As of Monday this week, the virus had infected 17,205 people, and killed more than 300.

The impact of the virus on the economy is yet to be determined. It is estimated that the SARS virus in the past had caused losses of billions of dollars to the Chinese economy. Some estimates suggest that the Chinese economy had suffered a loss of 40 billion dollars.

The emerging global power is likely to be affected financially this time as well. A number of events, business meetings, cultural shows and sports programmes have had to be cancelled because of the virus that has traumatised the Chinese people.

The outbreak of the virus has important lessons not only for China but for the world as well. It is not the first time that a virus or a deadly disease has hit one or another part of the globe. In reality, we have witnessed such epidemics hundreds or possibly thousands of times in human history. But, instead of addressing health issues in an effective manner, we tend to create a situation where the occurrence of such unfortunate incidents becomes more frequent. Despite being a global power, Beijing has been unable to stamp out such epidemics in time.

China has demonstrated miracles in the last few decades, by lifting more than 600 million people out of poverty, replacing Japan as the second largest economy in the world and setting on the path of overtaking the US. The Chinese GDP has risen to over 12.1 trillion dollars in the last eight years. Even the mighty American state owes 1.11 trillion dollar to China, making it the largest foreign lender.

In recent years, Beijing also carried out successful experiments of supersonic missiles, reflecting the desire of the world’s most populous country to excel in technological innovations. The country is spending around 177 billion dollars on its defence while its health budget is likely to rise to one trillion dollars this year.

It is true that China is facing a mighty military power that has the second largest number of nuclear arsenals and the largest defence budget on the earth. Washington also has over 600 military bases in more than 150 states. But if Beijing tries to catch up to the sole global power in the arms race and defence expenditure, it could hamper its efforts aimed at raising the living standards of its people, providing them quality healthcare, education and clean environment.

Around one trillion dollars for over a billion people’s health and 177 billion dollars for a few million Chinese troops is not a good idea. The outbreak suggests that the country should pump more money into health, carrying out more research on medicine and vaccines rather than manufacturing fleets that cannot serve as a strong fort against the tide of such lethal disease or virus. The USSR made hectic efforts to match American military power but at the end of the day it failed to raise the living standards of its people as effectively as it should have. Consequently, the mighty Soviet empire imploded, coming down crashing without any foreign attack. China, being a new power, should not emulate Moscow.

China may have legitimate concerns regarding its security given its rivalry with India and tension with several countries over the South China Sea. The US and other Western powers are also quick to use the situation in Hong Kong and Taiwan to pressure China but Beijing’s real victory lies in coming up with a solution for lethal diseases and viruses like corona. So far, it has been the Western world that has managed to find a treatment for every incurable disease. They are also the ones who introduced different vaccines to battle a number of viruses. If China manages to prepare vaccines for deadly diseases or viruses, it will be a real triumph of the giant economic power.

The current outbreak has lessons for the West as well. The plight of the Chinese people and damage to their economy should not be a source of comfort for the Western (and other) ruling elites. Russia, the EU, the US and other important countries and regional associations should ponder over the factors that are withholding humans from addressing health and other issues that are far more important for more than the six billion of the world’s population than the race of lethal arms between various powers of the world. They need to question why the world that is burdened with more than three billion people living in abject poverty should be spending over 1800 billion dollars on defence.

Why are a meagre 177 billion dollars spent on research and development for new medicines while only the US spends over 700 billion dollars on its defence? World leaders have not been able to fight a virus like corona. Then why should they add to the problems of our civilisation by triggering more wars and conflicts that bring not only death and destruction but a torrent of diseases?

Just look at Yemen and the outbreak of cholera there that has partly been blamed on the deadly conflict triggered by the US and its allies. The conflict has also created one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes in recent years. Every conflict-ridden area is a hotbed of disease and epidemic. Therefore, the more we avoid it, the better it will be for the world.

We as human beings and citizens of various countries think that other countries are our enemies. We tend to believe that our rivals living in another country are hell-bent on destroying us and threatening our very existence but in reality it is these diseases and viruses that we should really be scared of. It is not only during our times that diseases and epidemics have wreaked havoc with human society; they have done so in the past as well. According to the World Health Organization, 56.9 million people died in 2016 because of ten lethal diseases. Many believe that if we invest money in health instead of pumping it into arms and conflicts such diseases could be cured. According to the global health body, more than half (54 percent) were due to the top 10 causes.

Ischemic heart disease and stroke are the world’s biggest killers, accounting for a combined 15.2 million deaths in 2016. These diseases have remained the leading causes of death globally in the last 15 years. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease claimed 3.0 million lives during the same year while lung cancer (along with trachea and bronchus cancers) caused 1.7 million deaths. Diabetes killed 1.6 million people in 2016, up from less than 1 million in 2000. Deaths due to dementia more than doubled between 2000 and 2016, making it the fifth leading cause of global deaths in 2016 compared to being the 14th in 2000.

Lower respiratory infections remained the most deadly communicable disease, causing 3.0 million deaths worldwide during the year. The death rate from diarrhoeal diseases decreased by almost one million between 2000 and 2016, but still caused 1.4 million deaths in 2016. Similarly, the number of tuberculosis deaths decreased during the same period, but is still among the top 10 causes with a death toll of 1.3 million. HIV/AIDS is no longer among the world’s top 10 causes of death, having killed one million people in 2016 compared with 1.5 million in 2000. Road injuries killed 1.4 million people in 2016.

The world has spent over five trillion dollars on war on terror alone. Many believe that if even the half of this amount is allocated for the research and development of new medicines, the world could be safe from a number of lethal diseases and viruses like corona.

The writer is a freelance journalist.

Email: egalitarianism444@gmail.com