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**The uncaring state?**

The PM’s Special Assistant on Health Dr Zafar Mirza has emphatically said that Pakistanis stranded in China after the breakout of the coronavirus will not be evacuated from China. Pakistan remains adamant on this, though flights to China were resumed after a brief halt lasting days.

At first glance, this decision does not sound entirely unreasonable, given WHO advice that countries decide for themselves if they can manage the possible health consequences of the virus entering the country. Pakistan of course with its crumbling, dilapidated health structure, cannot. Of course Dr Mirza and his team should be looking at the question of why the healthcare system is in this state and unable to cope with anything resembling disaster.

This question had been raised also in the terrible aftermath of the 2005 earthquake which demolished entire towns and villages across Azad Kashmir and neighbouring areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, leaving foreign aid workers who rushed to help asking where hospitals which should be available to treat people on a routine basis were and why no set up to care for the sick or injured was present on the ground to offer assistance to people in normal circumstances. Pakistan’s failure to combat polio and its status as one of only two countries which is still endemic for the disease, Afghanistan being the other, is another example of its incompetence in the sphere of disease prevention and treatment.

A few days ago, another WHO official had also pointed out that if people were evacuated, it would help the world combat the coronavirus collectively by spreading information about methodologies for this and making medical teams more familiar with diagnoses and symptoms. Yet a different official also said they understood if countries wished to put humanity above all else and reunite terrified people in China with their equally scared families in their homes.

This fear is especially real for students studying in China with the 500 or so Pakistani students in Wuhan, the city where the coronavirus outbreak first occurred, posting videos begging to be allowed to return. The students have also said they have not been provided with any food except what limited supplies they have of their own and fear that these will soon run out. Families say there is no help on offer from Pakistani missions in China and that telephone lines have in fact been cut off in some cases to prevent anxious and sometimes tearful parents from calling and seeking information about their children in China.

This is not difficult to believe. In the past too, Pakistanis in other lands have reported complete indifference to their plight on the part of embassies and consulates. Prisoners trapped in various jails for years have complained repeatedly about the lack of advice, assistance or even a visit by embassy staff to help them access whatever kind of aid they require or if this is not possible at least some words of comfort. It can obviously be extremely frightening to be in another country, perhaps without sufficient money or even behind bars in a situation where the language, the culture and the people are alien and authorities possibly hostile. It is for these situations that missions are placed in other countries and one of their foremost duties is to come to the rescue of citizens from their own country when they are in trouble.

Other countries have certainly done so. While Dr Mirza has said many foreign nationals have been left in China by their nations, airlifts have been organized by the US, the UK, New Zealand, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and a host of other nations. In some cases, special flights with crew wearing heavily protective equipment have been sent out to pick up passengers and many nations are following WHO advice and keeping those returning from China in quarantine for a period between three to 14 days to assess if they display any symptoms of a disease which essentially resembles the common cold at least in its initial stages.

In many cases, like other viruses, it cures itself within a week, and no definite treatment has been identified for it. Diagnostic kits have now been assembled by China and are being sent out to other countries. The ability of the Chinese healthcare system is also shown by the setting up with help from its military of a state-of-the-art hospital near Wuhan to treat corona victims in a mere seven days. This is no small feat, and it is questionable if any other country in the world could achieve it.

The manner in which Pakistan has handled the crisis makes the government seem especially indifferent to its citizens. Yes, perhaps it would be best to leave them in China. But surely Islamabad should be able to use its influence with Beijing, one of its closest allies, to ensure they are provided with sufficient supplies to prevent panic among young students. Also the Pakistani embassy in Beijing must be advised to treat calls from families of all the 30,000 or so Pakistanis scattered across China as a priority and not attempt to avoid them. Information provided directly to the families may also offer some solace.

The fact is that, though the coronavirus has already claimed close to 400 lives and this number is increasing by the day, with the first deaths outside China also being reported, the virus is definitely not inevitably deadly and in most cases clears up on its own, like the rhinovirus which lies behind many forms of influenza. It is also a good omen that unlike the severe acute respiratory syndrome or SARS which broke out 17 years ago, also originating in China and claimed over 800 lives, the Chinese authorities have been more open this time around about the presence of the virus and the form it takes.

At that time nearly two decades ago, a cover-up had been attempted to hide the virus from the world, leading to more confusion and chaos. This time, a communist newspaper in China broke the news and Chinese authorities have been giving official updates. For now, as the world combats the virus, Pakistan needs to show its citizens that it is indeed a caring state and has concern for the welfare of its citizens.

The actions of the embassy in Beijing and statements from the government are not offering people this sense of comfort. Neither are the fake images being posted over the media which depict the virus as a kind of visible parasite which has crawled into bodies. People should be made aware of such falsified news. The country must also see how it can most effectively tackle the problem faced by Pakistanis in China, whether this is by bringing them home or ensuring they receive help in China.

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