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Pakistan Prime Minister's positive testing of COVID-19 creates suspicions of coronavirus vaccine

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On 20 March, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan tested positive of COVID-19, two-days after receiving his first dose of China's Sinopharm vaccine. The nation, including leaders of opposition parties, sent best wishes to the prime minister and prayed for his speedy recovery.

The news reinforced scepticism over the effectiveness of the coronavirus vaccine, as Khan, 68, was in self-isolation at home. Many health professionals are doubtful of the efficacy of the vaccine, and there was already a poor response from the front-line health workers not wanting to be vaccinated. This may generate hesitancy in some people who ultimately would not want to get the jab in a country where a number of people are already concerned about the potency of the vaccine against COVID-19. Medical professionals say that Sinopharm, a Chinese state-owned company's vaccine needs two doses about a month apart. It can take up to three weeks after the second jab for the vaccine to become fully effective.

Pakistan is facing a third wave of coronavirus pandemic, which has created an emergency situation in the country. According to the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), in the last 24 hours, the national positive ratio to 10.15%, last week it was 8%.

Nine districts in Punjab province worst hit. Punjab is the most populated province where more 60% people live. The new cases makes the positivity ratio of Lahore, the capital of the Punjab province, 18.14%. The latest figures show that the country has recorded 640,988 confirmed cases with 14,028 deaths. Patients in hospitals are growing each day, despite this, there are many who do not follow restrictions announced by the government. The public has been advised to use face masks in public places, follow social distancing and safety procedures, or risk stricter restrictions being imposed. Some government ministers even don't use masks in public. Schools are located in hotspot are closed till 11 April.

Majority of Pakistanis are poor, mainly daily-wages workers and some of those people live in slums. They extensively suffer economically because of the restrictions imposed. Although the government financially supported five million families who belonged to the marginalised segments of society. Moreover, some business houses and non-governmental organisations are helping people with food. However, the need is far greater. One of the main reasons that people are not staying in the safety of their homes is, they need to go out to earn for their family members by working in places where standard operating procedures are not fully observed. Small traders are minimising the government's claim of rising coronavirus cases, because it hurts their business. Some trade unions consider the government's claim as a hoax.

China was the first country which provided vaccines to Pakistan where thousands of people volunteered for the Chinese vaccine trial. A week ago, Pakistan received another donation of 50,000 doses from China. Health workers started receiving jabs from early February while the vaccination

started for the general public on 10 March. At present, Chinese Sinopharm, Chinese CanSinoBIO, UK's Oxford-AstraZeneca and Russian Gamaleya (Sputnik V) vaccines are being used in the country.. According to the Federal Minister of Planning Asad Umar, the cabinet approved \$150 million for the purchase of vaccines. The government has announced that a purchase deal has been made with two companies. Hopefully, that vaccine will arrive in Pakistan by the end of next month. Besides, India, Pakistan's neighbour, will provide 14 million doses in the next few weeks via the World Health Organisation (WHO) for free of cost. Pakistan thanked WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on 24 March for his support on vaccine supply.

The figures show that more than 300,000 people have been vaccinated so far. In the beginning, the system was not well organised, but after receiving public complaints, some improvements have been made to the vaccination process.

Many Pakistanis are sceptical about the danger of coronavirus and the vaccination too. Conspiracy theories, misinformation and negative propaganda about vaccines are spreading via social media. Moreover, many are of the view that Chinese's vaccines are less effective than its Western counterparts. To convince people to be vaccinated, the Prime Minister Imran Khan broadcasted a live footage of himself as he was receiving a jab. This action of his was praised, as it encouraged many to do the same. During a TV show Dr. Shazlee Manzoor, ICU specialist, said that conspiracies are totally wrong.

About a week ago, a well-known columnist Saleem Safi wrote in Daily Jang, an Urdu newspaper, that the government has failed to counter conspiracy theories against the vaccines. Therefore, there is now a need for the government to start an aggressive campaign to educate the public about the dangers of coronavirus, the importance of using masks and following social distancing, and the efficacy of the coronavirus vaccines. There is an urgent need to encourage the public to go and get vaccinated in order to save themselves, the members of their families and the community around. #

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P.S.

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