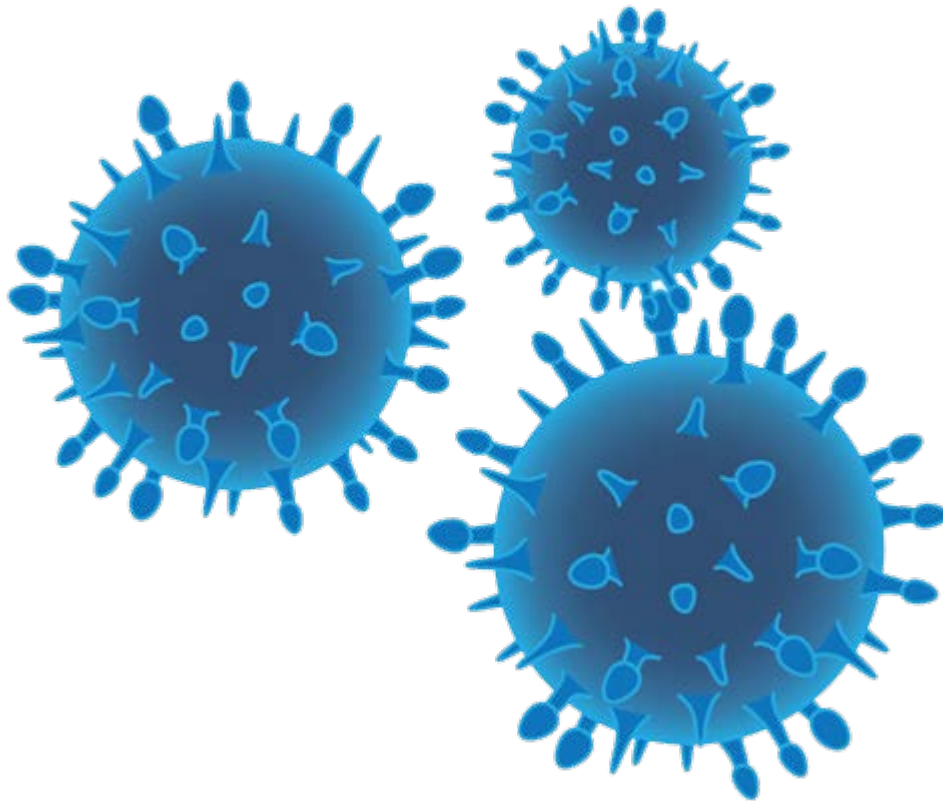


NEWSCLIPPINGS

JULY TO DECEMBER 2021

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)



Urban Resource Centre

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Poor vaccine response

PAKISTAN has one of the lowest Covid-19 vaccination rates in the world — a situation which, if not improved, can lead to multiple challenges. Thus far, only 5pc of our entire population has been vaccinated. Even if one were to look at the percentage of vaccinated people in the eligible group, the figure is a sorry 10pc. Though the data shows vaccine coverage in Islamabad is promising at 35pc, inoculation of eligible members of the population in Balochistan, Sindh and Punjab is 10pc or lower.

Experts have said that vaccine hesitancy, conspiracy theories and low awareness are major factors behind the slow vaccination rate. But the Ministry of National Health Services claims otherwise, saying that the rates are low as most people want to get vaccinated near their place of residence and are deterred by long wait times. While this may be a minor factor behind the slow pace, the issue of vaccine hesitancy is a real and dangerous one. One survey cited by doctors has revealed that there are fears about getting sick from the jab and concerns that it will alter one's DNA. The government must acknowledge how real and widespread the issue of vaccine scepticism is, and then address it with a systematic and effective awareness campaign. Failure to do so will end in a Covid-19 disaster for Pakistan — something we have fortunately avoided thus far. Experts have described a situation in which the "world is sitting on a time bomb" as the Delta variant is spreading and has mutated into the Delta Plus. There are fears of the next mutation becoming an 'immune escape virus', which the human body will no longer be able to recognise and eliminate. Areas with low vaccination rates could likely be the birthplace of the next variant, as the virus will thrive among swathes of unvaccinated people. The government must address this hesitancy and ramp up efforts to persuade people to get vaccinated, or risk a healthcare crisis and a population cut off from the world due to curbs on travel.

(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 04/07/2021)

Friends, colleagues remember scholars lost to Covid-19

The Institute of Historical and Social Research (IHSR) organised an evening of remembrance at the Zaki Hasan Auditorium at the Jinnah Medical and Dental College for several scholars who recently lost their lives to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Addressing the sombre gathering, Dr Syed Jaffar Ahmed said that everyone had read about pandemics in history but who had thought that they would also see one in their lifetime.

"It's a national and international calamity. But making the most of the time spent working from home, IHSR's researchers got the time to work on several reports about how Pakistan coped with the pandemic. We have 30 such reports ready along with books, too, penned by notable personalities such Zahida Hina and Anis Haroon," he said.

He also said that they have prepared lists of Pakistani scholars who died due to coronavirus.

Tributes paid to late academics Munir Wasti, Jazib Siddiqui, Shakeel Farooqi, Arif Rizvi, Fahmida Islam and Aquila Islam

"There have been too many precious lives that have been lost. The list was too long so we broke it down into those who belonged to Karachi but it was long even then. Still, we have gathered here today to remember some of our dear friends," he said.

Prof Dr Anwar Shaheen of the Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, spoke about her colleague Prof Dr Syed Munir Wasti.

"We have lost several beacons due to this pandemic and Prof Wasti was one of those who left us very quietly. Many of us didn't even know of his passing and could not attend his funeral," she said.

She also mentioned how serious the late professor would be about discipline among students. "He was soft, yet firm. No students were favoured by him, which made us afraid for his life. We would worry that some student may hurt him physically, so much so that we thought of replacing him," she said, adding that he also loved books and spent much of his time in the Pakistan Study Centre library.

She also remembered how her daughter, when little, attended his wife's nursery school. "Then our children also started frequenting his place and we all also befriended his pet dog and duck," she shared.

"He would also buy old books and reproduce them after reading so that more and more people can benefit from them," she said.

Writer and columnist Dr Rukhsana Saba spoke about Prof Jazib Siddiqui, who hailed from Lucknow and was expected to work to help his family at the age of seven. "But he wanted to study. And his love for education made him so enlightened that he became a poet, a journalist and a filmmaker, too. He was traditional and yet forward-looking," she said.

Dr Fayyaz Ghias remembered Karachi University's Dr Shakeel Farooqi.

"I didn't know much about him other than the fact that he taught genetics when I came to teaching pharmacy at KU," he said. "When I tried finding out about him, I was told that he had been a student leader and was still involved in politics. But he turned out to be a very open-minded gentleman when I got to know him better. Yes, he would debate and clash on topics with me but we would still remain friends as he would also hear me out," he said.

"He was a fine teacher, he was a mentor, a friend, a philosopher and guide. He also supervised PhDs and wanted his students to be enlightened rather than just earn a degree," he said.

Prof Anis Zaidi spoke about Prof Arif Rizvi. "He used to organise the best science exhibitions that everyone used to look forward to. They became quite popular and earned him much respect. He would even use money from his pocket not to mention his free time and energy for science. It is people like him who give hope to the young and prepare them for the world," he said.

Prof Aziz Fatima spoke about her friends Prof Fahmida Islam and her older sister Prof Aquila Islam, both of whom along with their younger brother succumbed to Covid-19 in Dubai recently.

Prof Fatima said that she was friend with the older sister Prof Aquila and through her she also became close to Prof Fahmida. She said both sisters were like stars in a galaxy of learned individuals as their entire family is enlightened.

“Dr Aquila had vision. She had reached where she did in her profession not by cutting anyone out. Even private universities benefited by her way of research because ‘impossible’ was not a part of her vocabulary. Everything was possible for her,” she remembered.

Senator Taj Haider said that Prof Aquila and Prof Fahmida and their family was like his own family. “Prof Aquila was my elder sister’s friend and confidante and my entire family has been terribly disturbed by the loss. Their other surviving brother veteran journalist Ghazi Salahuddin has also called this past one year as a lost year. They were all taking precautions, and then when the vaccines became available they also got themselves vaccinated. Everyone stayed at home. No one dared go outside. But then only recently they decided to travel to Dubai to see family, and there both sisters and their brother got infected with Covid,” he said, wondering at the irony of it.

“Aquila was a nuclear physicist. She had a PhD in the subject from abroad. The late Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto used to call her an asset for Pakistan. Aquila and her siblings were part of a generation which made hard work their aim,” he added.

Finally, Dr Pirzada Qasim Raza Siddiqui, who was presiding over the programme, said that all the esteemed people remembered had certain things in common. “They were all positive thinkers. Such people are there to better or improve societies. Their intellectualism is prominent,” he said.

He added that all educated people cannot be called ‘intellectuals’. “Intellectuals have a different thought process. They review things and they question. And despite having a greater understanding of things they remain humble and happy in their kind of academic work,” he said.
(By Newspaper’s Staff Reporter, Dawn, 13, 05/07/2021)

Karachi fears fourth wave ahead of Eid

Despite three waves of coronavirus and a fourth feared to be on the horizon, the people of *Karachi* appear to have become desensitised to the deadly virus. SOPs are flouted left, right and centre, while the bustling city appears as though it has long defeated the pandemic. The government on the other hand, after several incremental lockdowns and flailing economy, is now mulling to reopen the financial capital in a plucky move to resume normalcy.

Seeing the condition on ground, medical experts however fear that the city of 20 million could be on a road to ruin, where rapidly multiplying cases could once again paralyse the local healthcare system if guidelines are not followed.

In response to which, the Sindh government has implied that if cases continue to increase and people delay vaccinations, there would be no option left but to re-impose the restrictions in a bid to save the city from yet another health crisis.

Where earlier spells of the virus had triggered some kind of a precautionary response from the citizens, the third wave seems to have left people too used to of the pandemic. Despite climbing cases, mosques, bazaars and public places continue to remain abuzz till late hours in the mega city, while social-distancing appears be a long forgotten concept.

According to a survey conducted by The Express Tribune, areas including Kemari, Maripur, Sher Shah, SITE, Orangi Town, Nazimabad, North Nazimabad, New Karachi, Sohrab Goth, Federal B Area, Gulshan-e-Iqbal, Gulistan-e-Jauhar, Malir, Landhi, Korangi, Gulshan-e-Maymar, Mahmoodabad, Lines Area, Saddar, Liaquatabad, PIB, Garden, Ranchhorline and Kharadar, have emerged as most notorious for flouting coronavirus SOPs.

Public places like Mosques, Banks and Bazaars which had initially installed sanitiser gates have now removed them, while the no-mask-no-entry policy which had been introduced in private offices, malls and restaurants also appears to have fizzled out.

On the contrary however, up-scale localities like Defense Housing Authority and Clifton have been more cautious about following SOPs and health guidelines.

Social activist Imran Ul Haq still maintains that that despite greater precautions, vaccination rates have still been low in the city’s suburbs. “The reason for this is lack of effective awareness campaigns in the suburbs, where misinformation still shapes public opinion.”

As for small businesses in residential areas, Haq opined that you will find shopkeepers do not wear masks and buyers do not comply with SOPs either. “Which is how we know that the pandemic isn’t leaving this city anytime soon,” he added.

Talking about the impending fourth wave of the virus, the social activist said that considering Eidul Azha holidays are around the corner, there is a high possibility that the cases will jump by the end of this month if people are not extra cautious. “Animal markets, which people throng by tens and thousands, could become a hot bed for the virus.

Pakistan Medical Association Secretary General Professor Dr Qaiser Sajjad said that the fourth wave of coronavirus could be more dangerous as new strains of the virus emerge. Despite being vaccinated, we must be careful. “Wear a mask, keep social distance and be particularly cautious during Eid holidays,” he advised.

Sindh Education Minister Saeed Ghani said that the provincial government has been trying to provide vaccines to people across the province including Karachi, for which various measures are being taken.

“We have to acknowledge that if cases sky rocket, saving lives will be the government’s first priority. In that cases, we will have to suspend economic activities and re-impose sanctions. So I urge people to take precautions, if we are to stay in the clear,” he told The Express Tribune.

(By Aamir Khan The Express Tribune, 05, 08/07/2021)

The Delta concern

THE spread of the highly transmissible Delta variant in the country has sparked fears of a looming disaster.

NCOC chair Asad Umar this week warned that artificial intelligence models indicate "clear signs" that Pakistan is experiencing its fourth wave. The positivity ratio in Islamabad this week jumped to 7pc. The national positivity ratio was under 4pc as of yesterday, but given the rate at which the virus is spreading, it will not be long before this figure grows to untenable levels.

True, vaccination is underway, but the pace is far too slow for large swathes of the population to have achieved immunity. Less than 4m people in the country are fully vaccinated, while the government's target is 70m vaccinated adults.

In the first three waves, a combination of luck and smart lockdowns meant that Pakistan fortunately escaped the devastating scenarios that were witnessed in parts of Europe and India. However, this time, with the spread of the Delta variant, the fear that mass infections will cripple communities and healthcare infrastructure is frighteningly real.

In India, the second wave and the widespread Delta variant saw hundreds of thousands dead and many more critically ill. The spread of the disease in areas where hospital infrastructure is poor meant that citizens with little access to healthcare facilities died. This nightmare scenario unfolded in India weeks after government politicians recklessly boasted that they had beaten Covid-19.

In Pakistan, a similar attitude can be observed both among government figures and members of the public. Because Covid-19 cases and deaths have remained comparatively lower than in other countries, there is a misconception that the virus will not have the same devastating effects here as it has had in so many other countries. This misguided belief has no scientific basis.

Pakistan is lucky not to have plunged into an all-out disaster, but a variant such as Delta can take us there. In India, 55pc of deaths were caused by variants of concern. If authorities do not enforce SOPs, ramp up vaccinations, and roll out mass testing, the present wave of infections could overwhelm the existing healthcare infrastructure. This would mean hundreds of preventable deaths and worsening illnesses. The government cannot limit its actions to appeals that citizens protect themselves. It must test more, do more to speed up vaccinations and implement SOPs, such as smart lockdowns, in areas where there are outbreaks.
(By Editorial Dawn, 06, 11/07/2021)

Health dept proposes tougher restrictions to deal with fourth Covid-19 wave

The spike in Covid-19 cases has sent alarms bell ringing in the Sindh administration as health officials proposed on Monday immediate closure of primary schools, imposing a ban on indoor dining along with other restrictions fearing the fourth wave of the pandemic in the metropolis amid growing exposure of people due to approaching Eidul Azha.

The Sindh health department formally put its proposal to higher authorities warning that if the immediate measures were not taken the situation could further worsen and would ultimately lead to pressure on the health system.

They believed that the situation demanded a quick response from the authorities, which had assured to take up the proposals with the chief minister and decide the future strategy.

However, it was made clear that before any decision from the top smart lockdowns must be enforced with immediate effect on the advice of local administration, which was asked to identify areas with higher infection rate.

The measures proposed include two-day business closure, ban on indoor dining, etc

The hours-long discussion on coronavirus situation came during a meeting, which was chaired by Sindh Chief Secretary Syed Mumtaz Ali Shah at the Sindh Secretariat.

In the meeting, the chief secretary warned that marriage halls, temporary cattle markets set up before Eid, restaurants and markets would be sealed if found violating Covid-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs).

Action against SOP violators ordered

"During the meeting, the chief secretary directed all the commissioners and deputy commissioners to take strict action against violations of pandemic-related SOPs," said a statement issued after the meeting, where a number of proposals were finalised and are to be presented before the coronavirus task force headed by the Sindh CM.

The statement added: "The chief secretary directed all the divisional commissioners, including Karachi commissioner, to impose smart lockdowns in the areas where cases of coronavirus are on the rise."

The key point during the meeting emerged when Sindh Health Secretary Kazim Jatoi presented alarming numbers of infection rate mainly in Karachi and a few other urban centres of the province. He was convinced that the situation could only be controlled through restriction on certain activities of daily life.

"At the meeting, Health Secretary Jatoi proposed to close primary schools," said the statement. "He further proposed banning indoor dining, minimum attendance in wedding halls and complete closure of business two days a week. On this, the chief secretary said that the proposals of the health department would be presented in the meeting of the task force headed by the Sindh chief minister."

Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives Asad Umar, who also heads the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), last month had warned that the country might be hit by a fourth Covid-19 wave in July if SOPs were not adhered to.

Though the situation in other parts of the country does not appear so threatening, the growing number of Covid-19 patients in Sindh emerges as a serious challenge for the provincial authorities.

Karachi infection rate reaches 14pc

Sources aware of the recently updated data said that the infection rate in Karachi had touched 14 per cent mark and in Hyderabad it was around 4.5pc.

During the meeting chaired by the chief secretary, the officials of the health department informed that 3.35 million vaccinations had been carried out in the province.

“Vaccination is being carried out in the province through PPHI, 647 vaccination centres of the health department and 347 mobile teams,” said the statement.

“The chief secretary directed all the commissioners and deputy commissioners to complete the target of vaccination and said that all measures should be taken to stop the spread of coronavirus,” it said.

He also directed health authorities and deputy commissioners to increase the mobile teams for vaccination.

(By Imran Ayub Dawn, 13, 13/07/2021)

Delta variant reaches crowded jails

The highly communicable Delta variant of Covid-19 has reached Sindh's prisons, it emerged on Tuesday. At least six inmates, five of whom are incarcerated in Karachi's central prison for women, have been infected by the Delta variant.

According to the Sindh health department, at least 35 cases of the more infectious mutation of the virus have been detected in Karachi since June 2021. Of these, 18 cases were detected in the past two weeks.

Overcrowded and increasingly susceptible

As the threat of a fourth wave of the pandemic looms across the country, a health official told The Express Tribune that given the lack of inspection at the entry points of prisons, infected persons managed to enter and inmates were infected. Covid-19 guidelines were ignored at the entrances, said the health official, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Sources privy to the development apprised that the infected inmates are undergoing treatment and are all on stable conditions.

The Delta variant, which first originated in India and has since become the dominant variant in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America besides being detected in over 90 other countries, is more transmissible, say health experts. Studies thus far have found that this variant spreads more rapidly due to mutations that make it better at latching onto cells in our bodies.

Patients in whom the Delta variant has been detected in Karachi have also reportedly experienced more severe symptoms.

The emergence of this variant in Sindh's jails is especially alarming as prisons in the province are overcrowded and house inmates beyond their capacity. According to the Justice Project of Pakistan (JPP), Sindh's jails are over 32 per cent beyond their capacity. This makes the prisons potential hotbeds for the virus and inmates are at increased risk of infection.

At least 3092 inmates in Sindh have been infected since March 2020, according to the data gathered by JPP.

Severe symptoms

Meanwhile, in a statement issued on Tuesday, the Sindh health department confirmed that at least 18 cases of the Delta variant were identified in Karachi this month alone. And since June 2021, 35 such cases have been confirmed.

A family of five in Lyari was found to be infected with Delta variant, mentioned the statement, adding that the infected persons are in critical condition.

“They have all been admitted at Lyari General Hospital,” said health department spokesperson Atif Vighio.

Official documents available with The Express Tribune show that the highest cluster of the Delta variant - 23 patients - was detected in Karachi's district Central. The other 12 cases were detected in district East. Of the Delta variant cases, which were confirmed after selected Covid-19 positive samples were analysed using genome sequencing, 14 were of women. Some of these patients were said to be in critical condition.

Prevention better than cure

“Everyone is requested to get vaccinated. It is the only way to curb the virus,” pleaded Vighio, adding that thus far around 4.3 million citizens have been inoculated against the coronavirus in Sindh.

Similarly, Sindh Health Minister Dr Azra Pechuho appealed to citizens to get vaccinated and follow the coronavirus-mandated standard operating procedures (SOPs). “Always wear a mask when outdoors or in public places. The effects of the Delta variant in India are there for all to see, citizens must exercise caution and act responsibly.”

Health officials urged citizens to restrict unnecessary movement, avoid social gatherings and implement SOPs besides getting inoculated to curb the spread of the virus.

The positivity ratio in the metropolis has jumped to 15 per cent in recent days and health officials fear that this may increase in the coming days as Eidul Azha approaches.

(By Sameer Mandhro The Express Tribune, 04, 14/07/2021)

Over 40 Delta variant cases reported in Karachi in two weeks

More than 40 cases of the Delta variant — a highly virulent Covid-19 strain that has caused devastation in India a few months back — have been reported in the city during the current month.

Sources told *Dawn* the cases also involved a family of five residing in Lyari.

According to the health department data, a copy of which is available with *Dawn*, 24 cases of the Delta variant were reported last month. The tests were largely performed at the Aga Khan University Hospital and the National Institute of Health (NIH), Islamabad.

“The surge in Covid-19 across the country, particularly in Karachi is alarming, which indicates that we are in the grip of a fourth wave. The Covid-19 unit at the Indus Hospital is full and the same is the case at other major tertiary care hospitals in the city,” said Dr Samreen Sarfaraz, a senior infectious diseases expert at the Indus Hospital.

Five members of a Lyari family, as many prisoners are among those tested positive for the highly virulent Covid-19 strain

She regretted that the crisis had developed at a time when “people are tired of wearing masks all the time. The compliance [with] the standard operating procedures (SOPs) is extremely low and Eidul Azha is around the corner. Huge crowds are thronging cattle markets in complete disregard to SOPs”.

KU facility confirms 35 cases

The sources said 35 cases of the Delta variant were detected in samples collected from June 25 to July 9 and tested at the Institute of Virology at Karachi University (KU).

The cases involved several areas of districts East and Central including Gulshan-i-Iqbal, Malir, North Karachi, Shadman Town, Federal B. Area, Surjani Town, Malir, Gulshan-i-Maymar, Buffer Zone, New Karachi and North Nazimabad.

The patients included a male and four female prisoners languishing in the Karachi central prison and women jail, respectively.

“A total of 229 randomly selected samples collected from June 25 to July 9 were genotyped at the institute, which accounts for 24 per cent of the total positive samples [received]. Of these samples, 15pc of samples were detected as Delta variants,” said Prof M. Iqbal Choudhary, director of KU’s International Centre for Chemical and Biological Sciences (ICCBS).

Twelve samples of the Delta variant were received from district East, while 23 were of district Central, he added.

“The hallmark of this variant is increased transmissibility and more disease severity. It might cause a significant reduction in neutralisation of antibodies generated during previous infection or vaccination and reduce effectiveness of treatments or vaccines,” he said.

The variant identified last year in India was now spreading globally, raising fears of new coronavirus waves in countries which had reasonably controlled the pandemic, he pointed out.

“The World Health Organisation has designated the Delta variant as the variant of concern and is 60 per cent more transmissible than the Alpha (UK) variant. In the backdrop of large-scale violation of corona SOPs in Pakistan, this variant has the potential to affect a large population within a short period,” he warned.

Pechuho calls for SOPs’ implementation

Meanwhile, Sindh Health Minister Dr Azra Pechuho in a statement urged the public to strictly adhere to SOPs. The statement, however, mentioned only 35 cases of the Delta variant reported since June.

“As samples are being collected and tested continuously, laboratory results are being compiled. This variation in data only reflects this tedious process,” replied Atif Vighio representing the health department when asked about the variation in the data.

The first case of the Delta variant in Pakistan was confirmed by the National Institute of Health, Islamabad, in May this year. A month later, four international passengers who had returned from the Gulf countries to Pakistan were found Delta variant positive at Karachi airport.
(By Faiza Ilyas Dawn, 13, 14/07/2021)

Administrator dissatisfied with condition of Abbasi Covid-19 ward

Administrator Karachi Laeeq Ahmed along with Metropolitan Commissioner Danish Saeed on Friday paid a surprise visit to Covid-19 ward of Abbasi Shaheed Hospital and expressed dissatisfaction over absence of staff.

According to a press release, in-charge radiology and many house officers and post-graduates were suspended for their “lethargic attitude.”

“If doctors, paramedical staff ... post graduates and house officers ... are not on duty they will be dismissed,” he added.

He directed that as required, doctors and paramedical staff should be immediately called from other major hospitals of KMC and be posted at Abbasi Shaheed Hospital.

“In the current situation, we have to make functional the Covid-19 ward of Abbasi Shaheed Hospital in any case so that the citizens of Karachi can be provided full medical facilities here round the clock,” he said and added that there was a possibility of an increase in coronavirus patients after Eidul Azha.

The administrator said that in the current situation, it is necessary to immediately activate the Covid-19 ward of the hospital and no negligence or excuse will be tolerated.

Mr Ahmed said that doctors who do not provide services to patients suffering from coronavirus are not abiding by their oath.

He said that a 70-bed Covid-19 ward was set up at Abbasi Shaheed Hospital while a 25-bed ICU has also been established and a facility of 18 ventilators is also available for the patients at the same time but the benefit of these facilities can only be taken if this ward is fully functional.

The administrator also directed to keep the medical equipment in good condition in the Covid-19 ward so that they can be used at any time. He also directed to improve the sanitation condition and ensure the attendance of the staff concerned.

Ahmed urged the administration to continue continuous monitoring, especially of the Covid-19 ward, and to immediately address any grievances in this regard.

He said that patients coming to the hospital should be provided with the best possible medical care and guidance for further treatment. Along with fulfilling professional responsibilities, it is also the best opportunity to serve the suffering humanity, he observed.
(By APP Dawn, 14, 24/07/2021)

Govt asks people to follow NCOC guidelines against Covid fourth wave

The federal government on Saturday warned the people that the country was clearly witnessing signs of a fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic and asked them to follow the defined standard operating procedures and get themselves vaccinated to avert major restrictions and losses.

At a meeting chaired by President Dr Arif Alvi at Governor House, it was agreed that the implementation of the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) guidelines was crucial in the current scenario.

A statement issued by the Governor House said that the federal government was working on a sustainable development agenda for Sindh. The strategy promotes the sustainable use of resources to achieve the objectives of poverty alleviation and social development through the participation of the people of Sindh.

Federal Minister for Planning and Development and Special Initiatives Asad Umar briefed the meeting on the ongoing development schemes and future projects for Sindh. He said that the purpose of the strategic planning and actions was to address the ecological, economic and social issues of the province.

President appreciates efforts for development of Karachi, other districts of Sindh

The federal minister also gave a detailed briefing on the Covid-19 situation with special reference to the fourth wave due to the Indian variant of the coronavirus. He said there were clear signs of a fourth wave of Covid-19 starting in the country, primarily due to poor compliance with the SOPs and arrival of the Delta variant.

He said the government would make all-out efforts to ensure compliance of the rules with focus on a two-pronged strategy: strict enforcement of guidelines, particularly in big cities and tourist places; and by appealing to the people to wear masks, avoid crowds, and get vaccinated.

The president appreciated efforts of the federal government for the development schemes for Karachi and other districts of Sindh. However, he expressed his grave concern over the non-compliance of SOPs to check spread of the coronavirus by the people at large.

"I have myself witnessed during Eid prayers at Faisal Masjid that people were not following the NCOC's recommendations and the related SOPs were being ignored. Nevertheless, in the wake of a fourth wave of Covid-19, the observance of SOPs has become all the more important to minimise its impact through implementation of stringent measures," he added.

The president stressed that the people should get themselves vaccinated as early as possible. He also advised the people to follow instructions of the NCOC in letter and spirit to help check spread of the disease.

Dr Arif Alvi also directed the Sindh governor to convene a meeting with ulema and religious scholars before Muharram to ensure the enforcement of the SOPs during congregations and other religious events.

"We cannot ask people to abandon their faith during these testing times, but we must play our role to ensure the community can learn how to protect people from Covid-19 during the annual majalis", he added.

Besides Sindh Governor Imran Ismail, the meeting was attended by MNA Jay Parkash, MPAs Firdous Shamim Naqvi, Saeed Afridi, Khurram Sher Zaman, Bilal Ghaffar and Haleem Adil Shaikh.
(By Imran Ayub Dawn, 13, 25/07/2021)

Another doctor dies of Covid-19 in city

Another physician died of Covid-19 on Sunday, taking the tally of doctors falling victim to coronavirus since last year to 69 in Sindh. This is the second death of a doctor within three days in Karachi.

Dr Firoz Ahmed Qasmi, a senior anaesthetist, was associated with Dow University of Health Sciences for eight years.

"He remained in the hospital's intensive care unit for five days after being diagnosed with coronavirus on the first day of Eid," said a spokesperson for the DUHS.

During treatment, Dr Firoz also developed a rare inflammatory disease of the brain, he added.

Earlier, Dr Iqbal Noori associated with a private hospital died of Covid-19 on Friday after remaining hospitalised for over a week.

A Dow Medical College graduate, Dr Noori was 54.

According to the Pakistan Medical Association data, 238 doctors have so far died of coronavirus in the country, including 30 paramedics. Of them, 69 doctors were based in Sindh.

The association has appealed to all healthcare providers to strictly follow all Covid-19 related standard operating procedures (SOPs) while examining their patients.

According to the Sindh government data recently presented during the Task Force meeting, 85 per cent of Covid-19 cases now comprise unvaccinated patients and 15 per cent vaccinated patients.

"This explains why it's important to get vaccinated against the infection. With the lethal Indian variant fast spreading in the country particularly Karachi, the need for vaccination is all the more important," said Dr Qaiser Sajjad of PMA.

Vaccinated individuals, he pointed out, might still get the infection but with less severe symptoms and greater chances of recovery. "The focus must be on increasing vaccination status and ensuring that people strictly follow SOPs," he said.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, Dawn, 13, 26/07/2021)

Man arrested for 'illegally' vaccinating people in Saddar homes

The Preedy police arrested a man on the complaint of a health official on charges of "illegally" administering vaccine against Covid at homes in Saddar in return for monetary gains, said SSP South Zubair Nazeer Shaikh on Monday.

The suspect had allegedly pilfered the vaccines from a Covid vaccination centre.

The senior officer hinted that more suspects might be involved in the activity.

According to contents of the FIR reviewed by Dawn, the complainant provincial drug inspector, district South, Ghulam Ali, said he received information that certain persons had taken away Covid vaccines from a vaccination centre established by the Sindh government and were allegedly administering them to people at their homes in return for money. After receiving such information, the complainant said he approached Mohammed Ali, whose name was given to him for being involved in the activity.

The suspect agreed to administer the vaccine at home and told him that he would meet him at a restaurant in Saddar at 10.30pm on July 25. The complainant said he with Dr Sohail Raza Sher, the focal person for Covid, Dr Dilawar Jiskani and a police party reached the place where suspect Mohammed Ali was taken into custody by the police. The suspect had a box of syringes. He also had two "empty" vaccination cards inscribed with 'Govt of Sindh, health department'. The box also contained three used vials and 14 swab specimen.

During initial probe, the held suspect revealed that he was an employee of Sultan Madad Private Limited and he worked as its field officer whose owner was retired Major Amanullah Sultan, according to contents of the FIR.

Policeman, three others shot at, wounded in Lyari

The suspect told the police that the owner provided them with the vaccines, which they administered to citizens at their homes in return for money, which they gave to the retired major, contents of the FIR said.

The police registered an FIR (1171/2021) against the held suspect, Mohammed Ali, retired Major Amanullah Sultan and others under sections 420 (cheating), 409 (criminal breach of trust) and 34 (common intention) of the Pakistan Penal Code and Section 30 of the Drug Act of 1976.

Guard shot dead

A security guard was shot dead allegedly by a colleague of his in the Nagan Chowrangi area late on Tuesday night, police said.

They added that Muneer, 30, was shot and killed by another security guard, Jehanzeb, at a fuel station near Al-Haj Restaurant. The suspect escaped from the crime scene.

Sir Syed Town SHO Chaudhry Zahid Husain said that the motive could not be ascertained immediately. The investigators met the petrol pump owner and other staff who also expressed their ignorance about what actually transpired between them before the incident. The victim originally hailed from Rahim Yar Khan and the police were waiting for his relatives to lodge an FIR to initiate legal proceedings.

Policeman among four shot at, wounded

A policeman was among four persons shot at and wounded by gunmen riding motorcycles in the Kalri and Baghdadi areas on Monday morning, police said.

They added that the men opened fire on the people sitting at a restaurant in Memon Man arrested for 'illegally' vaccinating people in Saddar homes Society, Khadda Market. The suspects were fleeing when policemen deployed at a nearby checkpoint challenged them. In an ensuing exchange of fire, a policeman and a passerby were injured.

Kalri SHO Arshad Ali Khan said that the gunmen opened fire at Al-Madina Hotel at around 7.30am. As a result, Umair Mustafa, 19, and Zahid Husain, 38, suffered bullet injuries. Zahid was hit in the chest and his condition was stated to be serious.

The suspects were fleeing when Baghdadi policemen manning the checkpoint at a short distance challenged them. They opened fire on them, resulting in a bullet injury to constable Aziz Ali, 47, on his hand while a passerby, Ayaz Khan, 39, received bullet wounds on his thigh. The suspects escaped from the crime scene. The injured persons were taken to Dr Ruth Pfau Civil Hospital Karachi for treatment.

The officer said the motive for the crime may be to spread fear and chaos in the area.

Police sources said that known gangsters had been either eliminated or gone underground, but the remnants of the gang war, mostly young persons who were intoxicated, tended to resort to such crimes to “keep themselves alive” and create fear in the residents.
(By Imtiaz Ali Dawn, 13, 27/07/2021)

Hepatitis killing three to four times more people than Covid-19, warn experts

Health experts and medical scientists have warned that the hepatitis B and C viral infections are a “pandemic within a pandemic”, which are claiming three to four times more lives in Pakistan than Covid-19. They called for immediate measures for the prevention, screening and treatment of the disease.

They were speaking at an awareness session held on Tuesday at the Karachi Press Club in collaboration with Pakistan GI and Liver Diseases Society (PGLDS) in connection with World Hepatitis Day 2021, to highlight the global burden of viral hepatitis and to call for its elimination from the world by 2030. They stressed the need to have equal focus on hepatitis B and C.

“Hepatitis is three to four times more lethal viral infection in Pakistan where around 300 to 325 people are dying daily due to complications of hepatitis B and C,” said Dr Lubna Kamani, president of PGLDS. “On the other hand, Covid-19 deaths hardly cross the figure of 100 in a single day. So there is a need to have equal focus on the prevention, screening and treatment of hepatitis B and C in the country. It needs collective effort from health fraternity, government and the masses. We have to move fast before it goes out of control.”

‘There is a need to have equal focus on the prevention, screening and treatment of hepatitis B and C’

Dr Kamani, who is also a gastroenterologist associated with the Liaquat National Hospital and Aga Khan University, claimed that around 150,000 new cases of hepatitis B and C were emerging in Pakistan where the combined number of viral hepatitis patients was over 15 million, which is the largest number of people living with hepatitis B and C here after China.

“Hepatitis B and C are blood-borne diseases, which means that they are spread through an exchange of infected blood by using infected syringes, IV drips, unsterilized equipment used by dentists, needles for piercing etc. People should avoid getting injections and IV drips as much as possible,” she added.

Another leading gastroenterologist associated with the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre, Dr Nazish Butt, said hepatitis B and C were silent killers and if a person is infected with either of the virus, it remains silent in the body for years, damaging the liver of the infected person.

“The hepatitis B and C infections only come to the knowledge of an infected person when they are screened for some surgery or procedure or their liver is damaged to an extent where nothing can be done for them,” she said and added that the government should launch mass screenings for hepatitis B and C in the country to ascertain its true burden on Pakistan.

Patron of the PGLDS Prof Dr Shahid Ahmed said awareness of hepatitis B and C was key to its prevention and treatment, saying it was now a treatable viral infection and added that dozens of non-governmental organisations and government health facilities were not only screening people for viral hepatitis but were also providing free medicines for its treatment.

Other experts, including Dr Amanullah Abbasi from Dow University of Health Sciences and Dr Sajjad Jamil from the Liaquat National Hospital, said awareness of hepatitis and other factors detrimental to liver was very low in society and urged the media to play its role in highlighting the preventive measures as well as vaccination against hepatitis B, Covid-19 and other vaccine-preventable diseases.
(By Imran Ayub Dawn, 13, 28/07/2021)

KMC hospitals yet to shoulder pandemic burden

The National Command and Operation Centre had been issuing alerts cautioning the residents of Karachi of a Covid-19 outbreak of devastating proportions. Unlike past spells, the fourth wave was projected to paralyse the local healthcare system with the Delta variant, which is known to be highly transmissible and is the dominating variant in several countries across the world. Warning of its highly communicable and more threatening nature, experts had urged citizens to stay at home and observe strict caution during Eidul Azha season to curb the threat. In Karachi, the fears came to life with the positivity ratio surging to 26.3 per cent on Tuesday. By this time, a new lockdown was already in place and the city’s government hospitals were beginning to run out of capacity amid an influx of patients.

On the same day, the Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, expressing his disappointment, directed hospitals under the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) to shoulder some of the weight of Covid-19 patients in the city. “So far, hospitals under the health department of Sindh had been exclusively handling most of the coronavirus cases, but now KMC’s support has become imperative to dealing with the fourth wave,” said a health department official on conditions of anonymity.

However, according to Karachi Metropolitan Corporation Director Health Services Hameed Jamani, KMC currently lacks the funds, resources and manpower required to effectively shoulder the pandemic’s weight. Out of the 13 KMC hospitals, only Abbasi Shaheed could be equipped to handle Covid-19 patients on directives of the Sindh government. While nine of the hospitals have remained limited to administering vaccines, with no facility for virus treatment.

Jamani, who was posted as the director of health services some six months ago maintained that KMC has not been provided a single penny to facilitate healthcare during his tenure. “The first quarter of the new fiscal year’s budget was also not received and now 13 of our hospitals have run out of medicines and food rations,” he claimed, justifying KMC’s limited scope in the fight against Covid-19.

It is worth noting that a majority of KMC hospitals are located in densely populated areas of the city, which are at a higher risk of turning into viral hotbeds if left unattended. Which is why health experts, including Indus Hospital head Dr Abdul Bari, believe it is imperative to increase Karachi vaccination rate and the city's capacity of tending to the fresh onslaught of Covid-19 patients.

In this regard, the Sindh cabinet recently approved four KMC hospitals to be transferred to the provincial health department. Moreover, City Administrator Laeeq Ahmed on Monday, announced one-month additional salary and Covid-19 allowance for doctors and paramedical staff rendering services at Abbasi Shaheed Hospital's newly operational Covid-19 ward. "The step is taken to moralise the frontline practitioner so that they can perform their duties with further courage," said the administrator at a high-level meeting.

Conditions at govt hospitals

As for hospitals under the Sindh government health department, most are reportedly brimming with patients and on the verge of falling out of capacity after taking a lion's share of fourth-wave affectees in the city.

On Tuesday, the Dr Ruth Pfau Civil Hospital had to close five of its blocks, including Dental and ENT OPDs and departments of Skin, Surgery and Orthopedics, in a bid to redirect resources and manpower to its overburdened Covid-19 wing.

According to the hospital's Medical Superintendent (MS) Dr Noor Mohammad Soomro, out of the 202 beds allocated for coronavirus patients, 185 are already occupied. "The Sindh government in response, has procured 200 BIPAP machines, out of which some have been granted to the Civil Hospital, in addition to an increased supply of oxygen being given to district hospitals," he told.

Similarly, the Sindh Infectious Diseases Hospital at Nipa Chowrangi, run by Dow University, which has a total of 153 beds in its Covid-19 HDU and ICUs, all of which are now occupied with no space for more patients.

As cases continue to balloon at an unprecedented rate, it is also feared that resulting oxygen shortages may paralyse public healthcare, even if enough beds are somehow arranged. In this regard, the Sindh Health Department, acknowledging the gravity of matters, has installed oxygen tanks in five Karachi hospitals, including Sindh government hospital in Korangi, Liaquatabad government hospital and Sindh Government Services Hospital.

Addressing the public, Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre Executive Director Dr Seemin Jamali urged citizens to get vaccinated as soon as possible, to avoid the possibility of coronavirus-related complications and hospitalisation, which will also help curb the burden on public healthcare.

The claim has also been verified by World Health Organisation (WHO) Chief Scientist Dr Soumya Swaminathan, who maintained that all WHO emergency-use listed vaccines can provide considerable protection against severe viral reactions, despite the high transmutability of the new delta-variant. "People who are fully vaccinated are much less likely to end up in a hospital [due to Covid-19 delta variant]," she told during an interview with WHO's Science in Five.

(By Tufail Ahmed The Express Tribune, 04, 28/07/2021)

Centre disapproves of Karachi lockdown as Sindh mulls curbs

As the Covid-19 situation continues to deteriorate in Karachi, federal Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives Asad Umar on Thursday rejected the idea of closing entire cities to curb the spread of coronavirus.

He said Sindh was having the lowest compliance of pandemic-related standard operating procedures (SOPs) along with Balochistan i.e. 33pc.

Pakistan has been facing the fourth wave of the pandemic and the number of daily cases has been continuously increasing.

The Sindh government has been considering enforcing more restrictions and complete lockdown in Karachi. However, Asad Umar, who is also the head of the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), disagreed with the idea and said that Pakistan should go with the idea of smart lockdown which had succeeded in the past and the country did not face severe financial loss.

All public sector workers required to get vaccinated by Aug 31

"We should not forget that the working class and labourers will have to pay the price of complete lockdown. Smart lockdown is a tried-and-tested strategy and it should be implemented. Closing down the cities for weeks is not a solution," he said.

On the other hand, he praised the Sindh government's efforts to curb the spread of the virus and enforce the SOPs.

Mr Umar said SOPs compliance was 56.4pc in Islamabad, 46.6pc in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 42.7pc in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, 37.4pc in Gilgit-Baltistan and 38pc in Punjab. Sindh and Balochistan have the lowest 33pc compliance.

He said students above 18 years of age, the people working in the transport sector, public sector employees, personnel of law enforcement agencies and staff working at hotels, restaurants, wedding halls, shopping malls and banks would have to get inoculated by Aug 31. Teachers will have to get them vaccinated by Aug 1 to continue working in educational institutions.

Murtaza Wahab, the spokesman for the Sindh government, while talking to *Dawn*, was not sure about imposition of complete lockdown in Karachi but said it would be "something like that." However, he ruled out any consideration of the NCOC's (Asad Umar) advice saying the provincial government was not bound to follow the federal body's line.

"But at the same time we want political unanimity," Mr Wahab said when asked about the possible decision of a meeting of the Sindh Task Force on Coronavirus scheduled for Friday (today).

"Whatever the issue, the PTI government and party leaders have history of criticising the Sindh government. We don't want to create such a situation this time when our prime challenge is to contain spread of the coronavirus and save lives of the people. The Sindh government is

determined to give priority to people's health and lives. The decision would be made in tomorrow's meeting and I am not sure what it would be. But whatever would be best for this objective, we would go for that."

Reuters adds: Besides, the government announced on Thursday that Pakistan would ban air travel for anyone without a Covid-19 vaccine certificate from Aug 1.

From Aug 1, unvaccinated people will no longer be allowed to enter government offices, schools, restaurants and shopping malls, said Asad Umar, who heads the NCOC, a military-run body that oversees the pandemic response, at a joint news conference with the health minister in Islamabad.

Pakistan has seen coronavirus infections soar, dominated by Delta variant, and its poor health infrastructure is under extreme pressure.

The national positive test rate for Covid-19 stands at 7.53 per cent, according to the NCOC. The rate in Karachi touched 23pc in recent weeks. (By Ikram Junaidi & Imran Ayub Dawn, 01, 30/07/2021)

Sea View Beach Shut As Covid Wave Surges

People of Karachi are denied the liberty to enjoy sand and surf as the new wave of Covi-19 surges in the city.

In view of the spike in coronavirus cases again, all the routes leading to the popular Sea View Beach have been closed.

Officials of Darakshan and Sahil police stations have erected barriers, road blocks on all roads leading to Sea View, Do Darya and nearby picnic points.

According to police, action was taken in line with the directives issued by the Sindh Home Department. Officials affirmed that action will be taken against people violating the new curbs announced by the government to control the further spread of novel coronavirus disease.

Sindh government had decided to close amusement parks, water parks, beaches including Sea View, Hawke's Bay, and Thatta's Keenjhar Lake besides cinemas, theatres, indoor gyms and indoor games across the province.

Action in line with law will be taken if anyone tries to go to the sea view, the police have warned.

Throwing Covid-SOPs to the wind, scores of people crossed the barricades to reach the Sea View beach to get respite from the heat. Confining children at homes due to closure of amusement spots became difficult, the citizens shared.

Office Order

Home Department Additional Chief Secretary Qazi Shahid Pervaiz, through an office order directed divisional and districts administration to take appropriate measures to ensure compliance of Covid-19 SOPs at tourist destinations, railway stations, bus stands, cattle markets, amusement and public parks, outdoor marriage ceremonies, and hotels, restaurants and cafes, besides already specified areas.

The Home Department has decided to continue special drive to ensure compliance of Corona SOPs till July 25 amid likely increased movement and activities during Eidul Azha.

Compliance to wearing facemasks would be ensured through innovative means while only vaccinated individuals would be allowed to tourist destinations.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, The Express Tribune, 04, 18/07/2021)

Vaccination at Karachi Expo Centre suspended due to non-payment of salaries

The vaccination process at the Expo Centre — the country's biggest mass immunisation centre against coronavirus — was suspended on Saturday after data entry operators went on strike, forcing many people to leave for home without getting vaccinated.

The staff claimed that they had not been paid their salaries for three months.

Sources said the doctors, nurses and entire staff currently working at the Expo Centre were hired on a contractual basis and getting their monthly salaries in time except the data entry operators hired through a third party.

"The delay in salaries has resulted mainly because the party concerned hasn't shared details of its staff employed at the vaccination facility," said health department spokesperson Atif Vighio.

He added that the department had asked the party to help expedite the documentation process for salary payment and the staff would be paid soon.

Doctors and nurses, he pointed out, were being paid salaries in time as they had been appointed directly by the health department.

"The process of inoculation was briefly suspended as few staff members went on protest. The operation fully resumed after the staff was assured by the shift in-charge that the department would look into their grievances immediately," he said.

A total of 458 nurses, also acting as vaccinators, and 38 doctors are working in shifts at the mass vaccination facility. The number of data entry operators is over 150.

Each shift has an estimated 360 health workers to administer the Covid-19 vaccines.

It was in December when Health Minister Dr Azra Pechuho hinted at turning the Karachi Expo Centre into a coronavirus vaccination centre. The minister had also visited the centre to review the proposal and get a briefing from experts about the possibility of the plan.

The facility was finally launched this year in May.
(By Faiza Ilyas Dawn, 13, 18/07/2021)

Sindh tightens Covid curbs again

As coronavirus infections surge across the country, the Sindh government has decided to impose further restrictions beginning July 26 (Monday).

The measures, including the closure of indoor and outdoor dining at restaurants and restricted market timings, were decided on during a meeting of the provincial coronavirus task force on Friday.

Moreover, the provincial government plans to ask the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to block the mobile phone sims of all unvaccinated individuals after a week's notice.

Restrictions imposed From Monday onwards shopping malls, markets and other commercial centres will be permitted to remain open from 6am to 6pm, Fridays and Saturdays will be observed as safe days, all educational institutions will remain shut but exams are to be held as scheduled, both indoor and outdoor dining at restaurants will be banned and only takeaways will be permitted, all marriage halls will be closed, public gatherings banned, shrines will remain closed as will recreational places, and all public and private offices will be permitted to remain open with 50 percent occupancy.

Essential services like pharmacies, grocery stores and bakeries will be exempted from the restricted timings and permitted to remain open.

Vaccinations

During the meeting, Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah said that the provincial government would approach the PTA through the National Command and Operating Centre (NCOC) to urge all mobile phone users to get vaccinated within a week.

He will ask the PTA to send a service message to all users to get inoculated within a week and their mobile phone sims would be blocked should they fail to do so, he said.

Besides, the salaries of all non-vaccinated government employees would be withheld.

The meeting was apprised that 85 percent of 1,002 patients admitted in hospitals were not vaccinated.

The remaining 15 percent who had received the jabs were experiencing mild symptoms. While another sample of hospitalised patients showed 76 percent had received their first shot and 24 per cent were fully vaccinated.

The severity of the infection was higher in the former than the latter, the study found.

The meeting was further apprised that out of the 6,720,997 doses of the coronavirus vaccines received by the province, 5,312,921 have been utilised. The Sindh health department was directed to speed up inoculations through centers and mobile units. Infections spike According to the health department's data, the positivity ratio in Karachi was recorded at 21.54 on Thursday.

For the entire province it was at 10.3 per cent but the infection was rapidly spreading in the metropolis. The meeting observed that the positivity ratio in the metropolis jumped by over seven per cent in less than a week in Karachi.

According to Sindh Health Secretary Kazim Jatoi, a sample of 457 coronavirus patients was analysed and the findings revealed that 35 percent of patients contracted the infection in gatherings, 23 percent at wedding functions and 17 percent during international travel.

This month alone saw over 300 coronavirus fatalities. The meeting decided to increase curbs and to review the situation next week.

Provincial ministers Saeed Ghani and Jam Ikramullah Dharejo, Adviser to Sindh CM Murtaza Wahab, Parliamentary Secretary on Health Qasim Siraj Soomro, Sindh IGP Mushtaq Maher, Dr Bari, Dr Sara Khan of World Health Organisation, Dr Qaiser Sajjad, Dr Saeed Qureshi, representatives of the Corps V, Sindh Rangers and other officials attended the meeting.
(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, The Express Tribune, 04, 24/07/2021)

Three remanded in case of stealing corona vaccines

A local court remanded in police custody on Thursday three suspects detained for allegedly stealing corona vaccines and administering them to the public for money in a Saddar locality.

Retired Major Amanullah Sultan, owner of M/s Sultan Madad Private Limited, one of his employees and government vaccinator Mohammad Zeeshan were arrested for allegedly stealing the government vaccine and illegally administering them to people at their homes for money within the remit of the Preedy police station.

On Thursday, the investigating officer produced them before the judicial magistrate (South) to seek their physical remand.

The IO informed that the suspects administered the stolen vaccine (Pfizer) to people against Rs15,000 per jab, adding that they had vaccinated some 60 people in Saddar.

He said 14-day custody of the suspects was required.

The judge remanded them in police custody for one day directing the IO to produce them on the next date along with an investigation report.

According to the FIR, the complainant, provincial drug inspector for South district Ghulam Ali, said he had received information from “reliable sources” that certain persons had stolen Covid-19 vaccines from a vaccination centre of the Sindh government and were allegedly administering the jabs to residents at their homes in return for payment.

A case was registered against the detained suspects under relevant sections of the law.

Transfer of TV anchor murder case

A sessions' court has fixed Aug 12 to issue schedule for transfer of a case pertaining to the murder of television anchorperson Mureed Abbas and another person over shady investments running into billions of rupees to the model court for speedy trial on daily basis.

The main accused Atif Zaman along with his brother Adil Zaman has been charged with killing his two business partners — Mureed Abbas and Khizar Hayat — in DHA on the night of July 9, 2019.

On Thursday, the matter came up before additional district and sessions' judge Faraz Ahmed Chandio for recording testimonies of six witnesses.

On the last date, the court had bound the witnesses — including Mureed Abbas's wife Zara Abbas, Umar Rehan, Usama Ahmed, Imtiaz Ahmed, Mohammad Ilyas and a police constable Faizan — to appear before the court for recording their testimonies.

However, all witnesses failed to turn up for recording their statements.

State prosecutor Shakil Abbasi informed that the present case had already been recommended for speedy day-to-day trial in the Model Criminal Court because of the delaying tactics allegedly being employed by the defence.

Atif's defence counsel Ajab Khan Khattak and advocate Jibrin Nasir for the complainant were present.

The judge wrote in the order that counsel representing both sides had agreed that the schedule for the transfer of the case to the model court may be issued on the next date.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, Dawn, 14, 30/07/2021)

Sindh governor slams 'curfew-like situation' in Karachi

The strained relations between the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government in Sindh and the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf in the centre suffered another blow on Saturday when the provincial administration revised its coronavirus lockdown restrictions it had imposed a day earlier, but Islamabad still called the lockdown decision “defiance of the terms agreed between the two sides”, rejecting a “curfew-like situation in the metropolis”.

The Sindh government had revised its coronavirus lockdown restrictions, lifting the ban on pillion riding, allowing small transport to run within the limits of Karachi and giving exemption from timing restriction to certain businesses.

However, the fresh move failed to impress the federal government, which questioned the measures of the provincial administration and accused it of defying the terms it had agreed with the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) before announcing the lockdown.

MQM-P condemns provincial govt measures

“The Sindh government has created a curfew-like situation here,” Sindh Governor Imran Ismail told a press conference held at Governor House soon after Barrister Murtaza Wahab's presser. “The Sindh chief minister before announcing the lockdown had briefed the NCOC heads Asad Umar and Dr Faisal Sultan. The two sides had agreed on certain terms and conditions for the restrictions. However, when the notification was issued by the Sindh government, all those agreed terms were defied and ignored. This should not have happened. The federal government, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, is very much concerned about the situation.”

He said the smart lockdown strategy introduced by the prime minister proved effective from the beginning. It saved the economy from complete disaster and allowed the poor segment of society to stay largely unaffected from the impact of the pandemic on businesses.

“It's not Pakistan alone which utilised the strategy, but it was appreciated across the world,” said Governor Ismail, flanked by PTI lawmakers Khurram Sher Zaman and Shahzad Qureshi. “Pakistan became the third country after New Zealand and Hong Kong to get fastest recovery from the impacts of the coronavirus on economy. It's so unfortunate that we are pushing the situation back to that stage from where we came out after so much struggle.”

The Sindh governor advised the chief minister to refrain from a complete and curfew-like lockdown in the province and ensure the enforcement of SOPs in letter and spirit instead of opting for excessive measures. He made it clear that the federation was against extreme steps to contain the pandemic as the national economy could not afford shutting down industries and business activities, particularly in Karachi, the economic hub of the country.

“The Sindh government neither took the federal government on board while taking the decision nor they consulted other stakeholders, including the trade and industry community,” he said. “We think that this decision was also a violation of the apex court's judgement that directed that the guidelines be followed while dealing with the situation arising from the spread of Covid-19. The complete closure of industry and business is not a viable option and the provincial government's unilateral decision in this regard is a surprise move for the federal government as well as the NCOC.”

MQM-P reaction

The PTI's ally in the centre, Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), concurred and condemned the move of the Sindh government. It accused the provincial government of shifting the burden of its failure onto poor population of the metropolis.

"We firmly believe that the coronavirus is a pandemic and we don't deny its deadly impact and seriousness," said Senator Faisal Subzwari while addressing a press conference at the party's Bahadurabad office.

"That's the reason that when the first wave struck we launched a massive welfare operation and distributed free rations and household things among thousands of families during the lockdown. But it's unfortunate that the Sindh government has found the only solution to meet the challenge and that's lockdown. Who would ask them the details of their relief efforts? Who would ask them about their capacity-building in the health sector [during the pandemic]? What preparations they made in these 19 months and where were the funds of billions of rupees spent in the name of fight against the coronavirus?"

Accompanied by party legislators Kishwar Zehra, Mohammad Hussain and Javed Hanif, Senator Subzwari said the Sindh government failed miserably in a smooth operation of vaccination and its traditional corruption and incompetence had dented this crucial health issue as well.

"It's unfortunate that here in Sindh, this pandemic has become a business lockdown," he said. "The vaccines were supplied by the federal government and here the officials who are responsible only for smooth inoculation are selling fake certificates of vaccination. The Sindh government should take responsibility for its failure and not shift it to poor people of Karachi."

(By Imran Ayub Dawn, 13, 01/08/2021)

11 'mass vaccination centres' to administer jabs round-the-clock

Amid reports of overcrowding at coronavirus vaccination centres in the metropolis, the Sindh government declared on Sunday 11 vaccination centres as "mass vaccination facilities," which will operate round-the-clock throughout the week.

The decision was taken to prevent the rush of citizens at the two mega vaccination centres in the metropolis - Khaliqdina Hall and the Expo Centre.

According to the health department's notification, the mass vaccination centres, which will be open 24-hours a day will be at the Dow Ojha Hospital in East district; Khaliqdina Hall, JPMC and Lyari General Hospital in South district; Children Hospital, SG Hospital New Karachi, SG Hospital Liaquatabad in Central district; Sindh Government Qatar Hospital in West district; SG Hospital Murad Memon Goth in Malir district; and SG Hospital Saudabad in Korangi district, respectively.

Baton charge

Meanwhile, reports surfaced on Sunday of the police using baton charge at 'rowdy' citizens at the Lyari General Hospital. Like other centres, the vaccination centre was reportedly overrun by a horde of citizens wanting to receive coronavirus jabs.

As people waited in long queues some grew impatient and the police closed the main gate of the centre to keep such persons out. This reportedly enraged the people further and they attempted to forcibly barge in at which point the police resorted to baton charge.

The vaccination process was then temporarily suspended at the centre. Inoculations at vegetable market Separately, coronavirus vaccinations continued at the Karachi vegetable market on Sunday.

According to the market authorities, traders coming to the vegetable market are being vaccinated on the directives of the National Command and Operating Centre and the Sindh government. Around a 1,000 people are being inoculated daily in two shifts.

Virus tally

Meanwhile, Sindh reported over 2,500 coronavirus infections and 20 fatalities on Sunday. According to a statement issued by the Chief Minister's House, 2,594 new cases emerged when 18,618 samples were tested.

The provincial pandemic tally and death toll rose to 385,397 and 6,021, respectively. Another 368 persons also recovered from the infection, said Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah, lifting the number of recoveries to 332,777.

As many as 46,599 persons were under treatment for the coronavirus in Sindh as of Sunday. Of them, 45,120 were in home isolation, 39 at isolation centres and 1,440 at different hospitals.

The condition of 1,266 patients was stated to be critical, with at least 100 shifted to ventilators. According to the statement, out of 2,549 new cases, 1,755 were detected in Karachi.

Elaborating further, Shah said 690 were reported in the East district, 331 in Central, 267 in Korangi, 208 in South, 202 in Malir and 57 in West. Meanwhile, Hyderabad had 173, Tharparkar 90, Badin 81, Sanghar 68, Sujawal 58, Thatta 56, Matiari 40, Shaheed Benazirabad 38, Umerkot 33, Naushero Feroze 27, Jamshoro 24, Dadu and Tando Allahyar 18 each, Khairpur 12, Kashmore seven, Mirpurkhas and Sukkur two each, Ghotki and Jacobabad one each.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, The Express Tribune, 04, 02/08/2021)

11 mass vaccination centres set up in city after mismanagement, violence

The Sindh government announced on Sunday setting up of 11 more mass vaccination centres in the metropolis while Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah is working on a proposal to make drive-through vaccination points on a major route to prevent incidents of mismanagement and violence, which were reported on a second consecutive day of the lockdown in the provincial capital, officials said.

Longer queues were seen at the city's main vaccination facility at the Expo Centre on Sunday.

The Sindh government announced 11 mass vaccination centres in Karachi will work round the clock in addition to the existing such facility at the Expo Centre, said health department spokesperson Atif Vighio.

According to a notification issued by health secretary Dr Kazim Hussain Jatui, these centres are at the Dow's Ojha campus in East, Khaliqdina Hall, Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre and Lyari General Hospital in South, Children Hospital in Nazimabad, Sindh Government Hospital in New Karachi and Sindh Government Hospital Liaquatabad in Central, Sindh Government Qatar Hospital in West, Sindh Government Hospital Murad Memon Goth in Malir and Sindh Government Hospital at Korangi-5 and Sindh Government Hospital Saudabad in Korangi district. The health secretary said that these new mass vaccination centres had been set up "in continuation to the increased public response and demand for the vaccines in Karachi".

Incidents of chaos

Meanwhile, two incidents of chaos were reported from the old city area of Lyari and Gadap on the outskirts of the city on Sunday.

Chakiwara SHO Abdul Ghaffar Shah said that an incident occurred at the Lyari General Hospital, where a huge crowd had appeared for vaccination. The officer said that a scuffle broke out between the people and the security staff of the area's major hospital. Police intervened to prevent the situation from deteriorating.

'Drive-through vaccination facility along the Green Line route planned'

The SHO said that the police did not baton charge the people. He explained that certain people, who were seen in a video being shared on social media hitting people with sticks, were security guards of the hospital, not the police.

Another such incident was reported from the Gadap area, where vaccines had reportedly become short. It prompted the people to hold a protest there.

Several reasons are being cited behind the overrun of vaccine centres in the metropolis ranging from reported announcement of blocking mobile phone SIMs of unvaccinated people to withholding salaries of government employees.

Chief minister's spokesperson Rasheed Channa told Dawn that "earlier, people had no realisation of the importance of vaccination and now, due to the lockdown, they have found time to get themselves vaccinated".

He said the rush was not an issue as the Expo Centre had "ample space and is open air".

"The government feels that people are making the most of the lockdown," said Mr Channa.

The provincial chief executive has directed all the deputy commissioners in the city to set up more vaccination centres in their district for the people's convenience. "Vaccination centres are being set up at mosques, Imambargahs and other such places."

He said the chief minister was working on a proposal to make available "drive-through vaccination facility along the route of Green Line BRT".

Lockdown and checking

Law enforcers continued to man the checkpoints set up at various spots on main roads of the city to ensure observing of week-long lockdown on the second consecutive day, Sunday.

They detained around 60 persons, including shopkeepers, over violation of lockdown and produced them in courts, which granted them bail in a sum of Rs5,000 each.

However, the lockdown appeared lenient as compared to the first day as vehicles were seen moving freely and without being checked strictly. Except for some places, no agonising traffic jams were witnessed. Most markets and malls remained closed due to a weekly holiday.

(By Imtiaz Ali Dawn, 13, 02/08/2021)

Adults without CNICs allowed to get Covid vaccine in Sindh

As a major move in the ongoing nationwide inoculation drive, the Sindh government has also allowed Covid-19 vaccination of adults not having computerised national identity cards (CNICs).

Sources and officials said that the facility to allow vaccination to adults without CNICs was opened more than two weeks ago and over 2,000 people had already availed it. However, the offer has not been publicised much through conventional and social media.

"This initiative was formally launched more than two weeks ago," Qasim Soomro, a Sindh Assembly member of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) from Tharparkar, who is also a parliamentary secretary and one of the members of the Provincial Vaccine Administration Cell headed by the health secretary, told Dawn.

"Initially, a separate counter was set up at the Expo Centre which at that time was serving as the only round-the-clock vaccination centre. Then the facility was extended to other major urban centres and now across Sindh any adult who doesn't have a CNIC for any reason could get the jabs."

'The rush at vaccination centres is due to the deadline given for blocking SIMs and withholding salaries'

He said the provincial health department took a decision under recommendation of the provincial Task Force on Coronavirus, headed by Syed Murad Ali Shah, Sindh chief minister.

"Since these people don't have any CNICs, the vaccination staff would ask them for any document or piece of information which can help track their record and build their separate database for documentation and provincial certification. That can be anything whether it's a cellphone number, their residential address, an affidavit, contract details of their employers — anything. The prime objective is to vaccinate everyone," said Mr Soomro.

Meanwhile, provincial government spokesman and Adviser to the Sindh CM Barrister Murtaza Wahab said the number of people being vaccinated was rising “phenomenally” and things could improve in the days to come.

“Earlier, 50,000 vaccinations a day were recorded,” he said in reply to a query while talking to reporters after visiting a vaccination centre at the FB Industrial Area Association of Trade and Industry office. “But for the last few days now more than 200,000 vaccinations are being done daily. It is important to wear a mask and get vaccinated. The media has a role to play to make people aware. Those who deny the effectiveness of the vaccination should be convinced through facts and data. And the data and experts say that 87 per cent of coronavirus patients admitted to different hospitals had not been vaccinated. And those 13 per cent who got infected despite being vaccinated are stable and only have mild symptoms.”

To contain the spread of the Delta variant of Covid-19, he said the country had no other option but to complete vaccination of its people. He referred to the opinion of the doctors and health experts who wanted complete lockdown and zero tolerance on the restrictions only to save lives and contain the spread of the coronavirus.

“But still the Sindh government eased things only to help people and poor segments of society,” said Barrister Wahab.

Overcrowding at vaccination centres

Meanwhile, in a statement, the Pakistan Islamic Medical Association expressed serious concerns over the growing rush and overcrowding at vaccination centres that could increase the spread of coronavirus.

“The government should further significantly increase the number of vaccination centres and open all the vaccination centres in the city for 24 hours instead of merely extending the working hours of specific vaccination centres,” said PIMA president Dr Abdullah Muttaqi. “Extending working hours is a practical solution to reduce congestion at vaccination centres. The rush at vaccination centres is due to the deadline given for blocking SIMs and withholding salaries. The government should either withdraw or extend the deadline. The pressure on the vaccination centres is getting out of control.”

(By Imran Ayub Dawn, 13, 03/08/2021)

Several govt facilities in Karachi have capacity to treat more Covid-19 patients, data shows

While the Covid-19 situation in the city continues to pose a serious threat to the health infrastructure, with sustained pressure on certain government health facilities being the ‘first choice’ of patients, several other facilities remain under-utilised, it emerged on Tuesday.



The Aug 2 data of the health department showed that the Sindh Infectious Disease Hospital and Research Centre — the entire facility is dedicated to Covid-19 patients — had no space left for patient admission in the ICU with only one bed vacant in its high dependency unit (HDU).

The Expo Centre facility had no space left in its 100-bed HDU, but had capacity to admit 13 patients to the ICU. The Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre (JPMC) main building had space left for seven patients in the ICU and 12 beds vacant in its HDU.

The JPMC chest unit had no space in its ICU while it had the capacity to admit 29 patients more in its 60-bed HDU.

‘Sindh govt to activate more mobile units for vaccination’

The Dow International Dental and Medical College had no space in its ICU while it had space for six patients more in its 41-bed HDU. The Lyari General Hospital had space left for seven and 76 patients in its 47-bed ICU and 155-bed HDU, respectively.

The Indus Hospital had no space left in its ICU and 11-bed HDU dedicated to Covid-19 patients.

The 18-bed ICU and six-bed HDU dedicated to Covid-19 patients at the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation were all occupied.

The total number of beds vacant in ICUs and HDUs in the city was 209 and 534, respectively.

However, the data also showed that healthcare facilities, including Services Hospital, Sindh Government Hospital Liaquatabad, Sindh Government Hospital New Karachi, Sindh Government Hospital Korangi No 5, Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Trauma Centre, Social Security Hospital in Landhi and Kulsoom Bai Valika Hospital in the SITE area were either under-utilised or had not been utilised at all.

“It’s mainly due to people’s preference that there is more burden on certain public-sector health facilities. The Covid-19 situation has been the same for at least three weeks with a difference of around 100 in patient admission,” said a health department official, adding that all government-run hospitals dedicated to coronavirus patients had been upgraded and provided with all relevant treatment facilities.



In the private sector, hospitals such as the Ojha campus of Dow University Hospital, Liaquat National Hospital and Aga Khan University Hospital had no space in their ICUs and HDUs designated for Covid-19 patients.

More mobile units for vaccination

Sindh government spokesperson Barrister Murtaza Wahab said that more vaccination centres would be set up with the activation of mobile units, adds *APP*. He stated this while speaking at a press conference here on Tuesday.

For the purpose, he said, the government had invited mobile units from other districts of Sindh to Karachi. There was a lot of rush at the vaccination centres which was causing distress to the people and that was why “we must follow the SOPs”.

In the last few days, the media-assisted public awareness campaign had a positive impact, he said, adding that in one day, 222,000 people had been vaccinated in Sindh. And 11 vaccination centres had been activated round the clock. He said that this would make it easier to control the Indian [Delta] variant.

He said he was grateful to the management of Darul Uloom Korangi for setting up a vaccination camp and now ulema and students were getting vaccinated there. "We will achieve our target of 250,000 daily vaccinations," he added.

"The Delta variant is growing all over the country. Federal Minister Asad Umar said that we are going to be strict. We have to work together in this difficult time and stop the spread of the Delta variant and we have to convince the citizens and we all have to do it in consultation," he said. "Medical experts are constantly guiding us. Only by following the government guidelines will we be able to stop the spread of this epidemic and as in the past we will move towards reopening business," said Mr Wahab.

"Political leaders must show responsibility because there is a difference between the economy and human life. If life lasts, we will be able to promote tourism," he said, recounting that "we asked for coronavirus testing to be mandatory for those coming from abroad.

"If we wear masks today, we won't have to wear oxygen masks tomorrow," he remarked.
(By Dawn Reporter 13, 04/08/2021)

Karachi's insanitary conditions may aggravate Covid-19 health crisis, say experts

Expressing concern over the prevailing insanitary conditions in the city, health experts on Wednesday warned that this could complicate and aggravate the ongoing Covid-19 health crisis if immediate measures were not taken to improve the standard of hygiene and sanitation in the metropolis.

They also called upon the government to educate the general public on how to safely dispose of single-use face masks that could be releasing chemical pollutants and nanoplastic into the environment.

"Insanitary conditions help spread all kinds of viral and bacterial infections. And, if these infections combine [in patients], this could be disastrous in the current situation when we are facing a pandemic," said Dr Rafiq Khanani, a senior pathologist and president of the Infection Control Society of Pakistan.

Explaining his point, he said the relationship of coronavirus with other infections such as the mosquito-borne dengue virus was important and also relevant as most cases of dengue were seen between August and November. These cases peaked in September.
Govt urged to urgently dispose of garbage and remains of sacrificial animals from all parts of Karachi

A combination of both these infections in patients, Dr Khanani pointed out, would make diagnosis and treatment challenging as they presented with similar signs and symptoms (including high fever, body aches, nausea and vomiting).

"Besides, there is a threat of viral mutation. This happens with the use of medicines leading to development of a genetic pressure and also due to exchange of genetic material between viruses. Therefore, we can say that the coronavirus can take a more lethal form, nullifying all our efforts including vaccination," he said.

Gastro, typhoid cases on the rise

Sharing similar concerns, Dr Qaiser Sajjad of the Pakistan Medical Association said the city had been invaded by flies and mosquitoes, a major source of transmission of several infections.

"The situation is pretty bad in the country's urban areas particularly Karachi, which is seeing a rise in cases of gastroenteritis and typhoid," he said, calling upon the government to carry out fumigation and cleanliness exercises throughout the year especially near hospitals, markets and at garbage dumping sites.

"We request the government to dispose of garbage and sacrificial remains on an urgent basis. All civic agencies should at once initiate fumigation drives in their respective areas to overcome the spread of diseases," said Dr Sajjad, while citing a study according to which a fly could carry about 100 organisms that caused gastrointestinal and eye infections.

"The general public should also act with responsibility. Wash your hands with soap before eating, cover edibles and avoid eating out these days. Keep your surroundings clean. Throw your garbage at proper places," he added.

No Karachi Metropolitan Corporation official was available for comments.

'Half of Karachi not in SSWMB domain'

When contacted, executive director-operations Tariq Nizamani of the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board (SSWMB) said his department was responsible for lifting of garbage in five district municipal corporations (DMCs) and it was actively engaged and doing its "best" considering available resources.

"The department has an app that people can download and lodge complaints [through]. The department takes swift action and the complaint is addressed the same day," he said, adding all stakeholders lauded the department for its offal operation during Eid days.

When asked about heaps of garbage at several places in the city, he said almost half of the city didn't fall within their domain.

"There are 12 allied agencies including Karachi Metropolitan Corporation, cantonment boards, Karachi Port Trust and Port Qasim where the board isn't directly engaged, though it coordinates. Around 35 to 40 per cent of city localities are with agencies, 15 per cent with the two DMCs and 50 per cent with the board," he said.

The board, he said, would have an agreement with Korangi and Central DMCs by the end of this month and start operation through a Spanish company.

The government, he said, had engaged a Spanish company because the job involved high investment and use of modern methods. To another question, he claimed the city generated 10,000 tonnes to 12,000 tonnes of solid waste daily and that fumigating the city was KMC's responsibility.

(By FaizA Ilyas Dawn, 13, 05/08/2021)

Has battling poor sanitation made Lyari resilient to Covid?

"We live with cockroaches and bed bugs... so many other insects. You will see mice running everywhere.

Do you think the coronavirus is deadlier than what we have been facing for years?" asked Dawood Alam, who lives on Shah Abdul Latif Road, Lyari.

For years, Lyari's residents have lived with poor sanitation, waste and sewerage mismanagement and contaminated water.

Baffling health professionals, it appears that living in such conditions made their bodies resilient to the deadly virus that has left the world shaken.

Despite little heed paid by local residents to coronavirus restrictions imposed by the government - with many believing that the virus does not exist, not for them at least - a negligible number of cases have been reported in the area.

Those who are diagnosed with the infection, regain health swiftly, said Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto (SMBB) Medical College Lyari Principal Dr Anjum Rehman.

"The number of patients from this area is very low," she told The Express Tribune. Out of the 130 patients admitted in the Covid19 ward at her facility, only 10 hailed from Lyari.

Most of the patients had been referred to the health facility from other districts of the metropolis. "The people of Lyari have very strong immunity," she observed, adding that very few persons from the area have been tested for the contagion.

The few elderly patients who were brought to the hospital in critical condition also managed to overcome the infection and soon regained health.

"Last week we admitted a man past 75 years of age. His oxygen saturation was dangerously low at 50 per cent. And now his condition is stable and he is being discharged."

Seconding Dr Rehman's observations, *Sindh* Infectious Disease Hospital and Research Centre's (SIDHRC) Dr Abdul Wahid Rajput said that coronavirus cases among the residents of Lyari were rare.

At SIDHRC, located near Nipa Chowrangi, he said very few Covid-19 patients belonged to areas with poor living conditions.

People living in areas like Lyari have already been deprived of clean drinking water, good food and hygienic living conditions, said Dr Rajput.

Taking the hypothesis a step further, he said that he had hardly seen labourers or masons - professions common among Lyari's residents - diagnosed with the virus.

"Their immunity is stronger because of physical activities." Although it is possible that many local residents were asymptomatic or didn't get tested for the virus when they did feel symptoms or that the area was simply overlooked when it came to random testing, health officials observed that a negligible number of Covid fatalities were reported in Lyari.

"There is no virus in Lyari. It does not exist here," said Dilmurad who lives near SMBB Medical College Lyari. "It is patients from other areas who come here [to be treated for the virus]."

Like several other local residents, Dilmurad told The Express Tribune that he had not known of a single person from his neighbourhood to die of the coronavirus.

The resilience built by people living in neglected localities might have prevented them from the more vicious attacks of a pandemic that has claimed at least 4.63 million deaths worldwide.

But it also testifies to the callous negligence of the government that forced citizens to acclimate themselves to disease-riddled living conditions. (By Sameer Mandhro The Express Tribune, 04, 16/08/2021)

Fake vaccination certificates

The NCOC and NADRA have jointly developed an app to help people and officials identify fake coronavirus vaccination certificates. The app, named Pak Covid-19 Vaccination Pass App, will instantly confirm whether an inoculation certificate is genuine or fake. This will largely facilitate all, especially those travelling by air. The government has announced that partial vaccination will not be allowed for air travel after September 10. It will help people to readily access their vaccination certificates issued by NADRA as the document can be saved on mobile phones. Since the digital certificate can be stored on phones, it will not cause any problems if the certificate is lost. If the certificate is on paper, the chances of loss cannot be entirely eliminated.

The app can be downloaded using QR Code. The mobile app has been developed after sales of bogus vaccination certificates were reported, which caused alarm among the inoculated population. Those vaccinated feared that despite having taken the jab, they were vulnerable to contracting the dreaded disease from the unvaccinated. Reports circulating about people acquiring counterfeit vaccination certificates added to

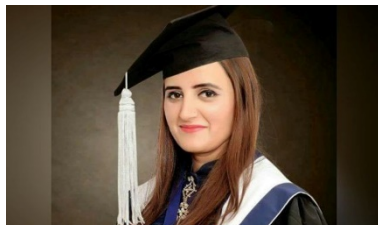
these fears. Skeptics who have obtained fake inoculation paper are exposing both the vaccinated and themselves to serious dangers. The app will help, to a considerable extent, distinguish genuine certificates from fake ones.

The government has also announced that the unvaccinated will not be permitted to travel by train from October 1. Universities too will not allow unvaccinated students and teachers on their premises after the deadlines fixed for getting the vaccine. All these measures being taken by the authorities are meant to protect people from Covid-19. We all should play our role in protecting humanity from the pandemic remembering: One for all, all for one.

(By Editorial, The Express Tribune, 14, 18/08/2021)

PAF flight lieutenant Dr Mahnoor Farzand dies of coronavirus in Karachi

Dr Mahnoor Farzand, a flight lieutenant in the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), died of Covid-19 early on Sunday morning, taking the tally of doctors falling victim to coronavirus so far in Sindh to 77.



Since Feb last year, 220 doctors in the country have died of coronavirus.

According to Pakistan Medical Association (PMA), Dr Mahnoor was eight months pregnant and under treatment for Covid-19 at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) in Malir Cantonment for a week.

"Her father, also tested positive for Covid-19, is currently under intensive care at the CMH," said Dr Qaiser Sajjad of PMA, adding that Dr Mahnoor had not got herself vaccinated against the pandemic.

'She did not get herself vaccinated due to pregnancy'

"It's extremely unfortunate and painful that we have lost two lives to coronavirus. Perhaps, the doctor did not opt for Covid-19 vaccination due to her pregnancy."

Asked about the international guidelines on Covid-19 vaccination during pregnancy, Dr Sajjad said initially experts had opposed vaccination for pregnant women and lactating mothers. But, later these guidelines changed following an analysis of a lot of scientific data on this subject that had been done over months.

"Now, experts believe that Covid-19 vaccination is safe for pregnant women and lactating mothers and strongly recommend it for both," Dr Sajjad said, urging all medical healthcare providers to get vaccinated at the earliest.

He pointed out that he personally talked to the country's top gynaecologists on this matter and the majority favoured vaccination even in the first three months of pregnancy.

"While there were some who believed that it's better not to get vaccinated against coronavirus in the first trimester, experts also strongly suggested Covid-19 vaccination in pregnancy in later months."

According to the PMA representative, the national data shows that 80 to 85 per cent of people falling victim to coronavirus are those who have not got vaccinated against the infection whereas vaccinated individuals are contracting the infection in much smaller numbers with less severity of the disease.

"We see a similar trend internationally. But, despite this evidence and loss of life, there is a section of society who isn't willing to get the vaccine jab. I appeal to these people not to endanger themselves and their loved ones."

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, Dawn, 13, 23/08/2021)

Bike riders become essential part of Covid-era economy

Most of us constantly come into contact with riders, sometimes daily. Most seldom give them a second glance.

When 25-year-old Imran asked for water while delivering a parcel to a house during an extremely hot day, the person he asked was taken aback. "It was almost as I was not seen as a human," he laughed. "I felt weird but it was very hot and I didn't have any water. I usually keep my contact minimum."

Imran, who has been working as a rider for a company for a couple of years, didn't mind the reaction. He is aware that he is invisible to most people but he knows how important his job is. "It's just like other people working in essential services — most of us are invisible but important. Like the people at a petrol station, how many of us even look at them. They are just voices and shadows in your lives, but if they are not there, it will be difficult to function."

Recently, riders like Imran have become even more important for the economy as it has shaped over the past year or so with many businesses going online.

'Everyone who has a bike can join with small or no investment and earn'

Pakistan has seen a rise in demand for businesses over the last year or so, especially since the Covid pandemic has restricted mass movement. Online shopping and delivery have become a big part of our lives, especially the younger generation.

There are so many issues that have to be addressed about motorcycle transport in Pakistan, which is rising rapidly. Planning and appraisal of the policies are needed but this can only be done if proper research is done on this topic.

One person who is aware of the importance of riders is Engineer Murtaza Asad. Asad who is a member of the PSQCA for road safety, road traffic safety management systems, is conducting an important research on bike riders in Pakistan.

Commenting on his research, Engineer Asad said that the employment opportunities created for bike riders are phenomenal and are an improvement on the services that were already being provided by people like electricians, milkmen, and others.

"In this research, we are studying how the unemployment online is tackled by employing bike riders and what are their basic needs such as health, road safety, and maintenance.

Asad has been involved in different projects from which riders will benefit like getting a basic degree, learning new skills, and adding value to their skills to help them in building a professional profile. This is important for the rider and the industry as a whole.

"Our research will help a rider to find out his niches in the industry and improve on them. And for the first time, he will get a letter of experience which will highlight his positives and strengths — for example, what are his interests and where will these interests and skills be better used. If he is good at delivery, customer service, or paperwork. This research will provide data to help companies understand the type of riders' services they can have," he said.

Engineer Asad and his team are working on research that has not been done anywhere else. "Our research extends across Pakistan and work is still being done but slowly. The main reason for this is lack of funds for the project. It seems no one wants to invest in this industry, even though it is fast-growing employment — everyone who has a bike can join with small or no investment and earn."

He said: "We still have to study more than 3.5 million bikes across Pakistan but the funds are the biggest hurdle for this and we are not being supported by anyone. [A private university] had shown interest and was going to sign with us, but it didn't work. The government is not interested in this project for some reason. The National Transport Research Center (NTRC), Sir Syed University (SSUET) and Transport Engineering Services (TES) all supported the endeavour."

Lifeline for overseas Pakistanis

Riders are also important for another section of society, the parents and families of Pakistanis living abroad who need someone to trust to step in to help to do chores, etc.

This is where Yasir Shirazi comes into the picture. He lives in the US and was constantly thinking of ways to alleviate the burden from his parents' shoulders, getting things done for them through someone he could trust.

And so he set up InstaKin in 2019 as its founder and CEO and this is his story: "InstaKin's story is my own story. Almost every migrant I have spoken to can relate to it. I have been an overseas Pakistani for the last 12 years. Like many others, I still need to get tasks accomplished in Pakistan (paying bills, etc). Over the years, I noticed that most overseas Pakistanis specifically (and overall migrant communities in general) would always complain that they are always dependent on busy friends or extended family to manage tasks on their behalf. This causes time-sensitive delays (unfortunately, sometimes there is also misuse of remittance funds)."

Through Shirazi and his team have helped thousands of migrants by providing services like hiring a rider via Instakin for getting medicines delivered to parents in Pakistan (through a service for it known as InstaRunner); getting educational and legal documents attested from back home; sending gifts to loved ones on special occasions; ordering consumer electronics and appliances that can be delivered to family back in Pakistan; hiring an event planner for a family celebration and maybe the most important, paying bills for family back home.

The InstaRunner will help generate new employment opportunities in the country and they estimate that more than 3,000 new jobs will be created directly and via the vendor network over the next two years.

(By Lubna Jerar Naqvi Dawn, 13, 24/08/2021)

Doctors' associations angry at govt for 'ignoring' Covid-19 heroes in civil awards

Doctors' representative bodies have expressed shock and concern over the government which did not recognise the services of the country's healthcare providers during the Covid-19 pandemic in the recently announced Pakistan Civil Awards.

The civil awards for 126 people, including foreign nationals, were announced by the president on Aug 14.

In the health sector, the list has only the name of Dr Shehla Baqi (from Karachi), and the services of Dr Mohammad Haroon Memon (also a medical doctor from Sindh) were recognised in the field of social work.

The investiture ceremony would take place on Pakistan Day (March 23) next year.

"We are shocked over the government's callous attitude towards healthcare workers for ignoring them while conferring civil awards despite their unrivalled services during the deadly Covid-19 pandemic," said a Pakistan Medical Association statement.

Healthcare workers, it said, had been serving the nation courageously as front-line soldiers since the pandemic reached Pakistan in February 2020.

"They have put their lives at risk. Their families remain at risk. So far, 221 doctors have attained martyrdom due to Covid-19; Punjab 78, Sindh 77, KP 56, Balochistan 6, Gilgit-Baltistan 1, Azad Jammu & Kashmir 3. Thirty-one paramedics have attained martyrdom due to Covid-19," it said.

The association called upon the government to recognise the Covid-19 heroes still fighting the war and announce civil awards for the medical fraternity immediately.

It also deplored that the government had not offered any financial support to the families of doctors and paramedics who lost their lives to Covid-19.

“Both federal and Sindh governments are yet to implement the [Shuhada] Package they announced for aggrieved families last year. We also demand that the government collect data of these families and offer them employment opportunities in the public sector.”

Earlier, Pakistan Islamic Medical Association (Pima) shared similar concerns.

“Leading figures from all walks of life have been honoured with the civil award with some 18 personalities from showbiz. But martyred doctors, nurses and paramedics have been completely ignored.

“Unfortunately, this has happened at a time when a doctor is holding the post of president,” said a Pima statement. (By Newspaper’s Staff Reporter, Dawn, 14, 26/08/2021)

Vaccine storage

AS the government prepares to administer Pfizer jabs to children under 18 years, parents have raised concerns about the vaccine’s stringent storage requirements. Though it is natural for parents to be concerned about the Covid vaccine being administered to their children — which is happening for the first time in the country — it is critical for the authorities to address questions and clarify misconceptions.

When the Pfizer vaccine was first rolled out, the biggest challenge regarding its safe and effective administration in Pakistan was maintaining the cold chain. In its early days, the manufacturers of this particular vaccine had said that it had to be maintained at a temperature of -70°C. This is an ultra-cold commercial temperature requirement which led many to believe that storing and administering this vaccine in Pakistan, where power outages and faults are not unusual, would be near-impossible. Research and advice from the manufacturer have since evolved. According to current US guidelines about Pfizer, the vaccine has to be stored between -90°C and -60°C. This means that during shipment and transfer, these below-freezing temperatures have to be maintained. Before administration, the undiluted vaccine has to be thawed. According to the FDA, undiluted vaccine vials may be stored in the refrigerator at 2°C to 8°C for up to a month. Previously, the guidelines suggested that the thawed, undiluted vaccine vials could be stored in the refrigerator for up to five days. While this change is good news for Pakistan, health authorities here must communicate these guidelines to citizens in an accessible and transparent manner. The national manager of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation has claimed it can be refrigerated for up to 10 weeks, but it is not clear which body has approved this new limit. Not only must the EPI publish the literature that backs this claim at all vaccination centres, it must also engage with concerned citizens to allay all fears about the vaccine. Vaccine scepticism must be addressed, and the only way to do it is with data backed by credible sources. (By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 04/09/2021)

Coronavirus and conflict

TWENTY years ago, on that fateful September day, the world changed forever. Even as the smoke and ash from the cataclysm was still in the air, a superpower set off on the warpath. The Sept 11, 2001, attack, the hawkish neoconservatives who were in charge of the White House decided, had to be avenged. For the next 20 years and through Democratic and Republican presidencies, America would remain on the warpath, bombing and droning, as it hunted down and struck terrorist targets.



The ‘War on Terror’, which began 20 years ago, is now over. At the end of August, the last American troops left Afghanistan; the previous month, the enormous Bagram airbase had been abandoned overnight by the American troops who left behind both civilian and military equipment. What Donald Trump had hinted at, even promised, was accomplished by the Biden administration. Five years ago, such an exit, such a cutting off and drawing down, could not have been imagined.

The war was supposed to be a forever war; the Authorisation for Use of Military Force Act had permitted just that.

There is considerable legitimacy to the argument that the war ended because of Covid-19. In March 2020, the WHO declared that the outbreak was a global pandemic, and the world changed forever. In the United States, stay-at-home orders were issued for much of the country, and with businesses affected, millions lost their jobs. To prevent the health cataclysm from morphing into an economic disaster, the American government doled out money in the form of cheques for thousands of dollars to American taxpayers to mitigate the financial setback. Since that first package of stimulus money was approved by the US Congress a year ago, there have been others, the latest a multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure bill to help the economy.

Then there have been the Covid-19 dead. The hundreds of thousands who perished in America and who continue to die today have transformed the idea of ‘immediate’ tragedy. Prior to 9/11, Americans had never confronted death and catastrophe at home on such a mass scale since the Civil War in the late 19th century. The past is always looked at through the prism of the present. So too it is with the coronavirus pandemic. Americans who have managed to stay alive will look back at Sept 11 through the lens of a plague-afflicted present. The deaths of the 9/11 victims were undeniably awful, worthy of sober remembrance, and yet the numbers were also paltry when compared to the hundreds of thousands that Covid-19 summarily killed.

In a world where climate change, pandemics and cyberwarfare are the most pressing threats, why fight a two-decade-long war?

An America suddenly crippled by Covid-19 had even less to devote to an amorphous war on terror, whose objectives seemed, at least in relation to the present, opaque and confused. We can say that this was the mindset that determined the manner in which the United States quit Afghanistan. In a world where climate change, pandemics and cyberwarfare are the most pressing threats, why fight a two-decade-long war whose outcome no longer promised the strategic gains that the United States had pursued when it started?

The extension of American influence all over the globe, the leaders of the United States have figured out, no longer requires military outposts. Big Tech, solidly dominated by American companies like Facebook and Twitter, was already doing just that, beguiling one and all in the process of capitalist self-branding.

Pakistan has been remarkably astute in seeing this change coming. Long before the US decided to exit from the region and busy itself with other goals, it turned its attention to China. Unlike the US, China, the world’s manufacturing epicentre, does have strategic goals that centre on

geographic domination. The Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese premier's project to connect China to Europe and Africa, was embraced by a Pakistan that welcomed the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. The Pakistani foreign policy establishment correctly believed that this would yield far more benefits to Pakistan than continuing to pander to an increasingly disinterested and unpredictable US. Not only is this decision yielding geostrategic benefits, it has also helped Pakistan handle its own Covid-19 crisis with imported Chinese vaccines, amongst others.

The post-9/11 world and hence post-9/11 conflict are all likely to be remote. Drones can bomb from afar, the workings of power plants and electricity grids can all be hacked; mayhem no longer requires a physical presence. Pakistan needs to capitalise on this reality as well; efforts must be made to train security personnel in cyberwarfare and fighting biological weapons. Pakistan's democratic institutions also need to focus on the cataclysms born of climate change. The heavy rains, the unbearable heat are indications of what all is to come in the months and years ahead.

It is sad that in a world where the threat of terrorism does not overshadow everything is still a bleak world. The terror of contracting Covid-19 and border closures put in place are also miserable. The world is changing at a pace that is far more rapid and transformative than anything since the invention of the printing press. Despite its meagre resources, Pakistan and Pakistani society seem to have weathered America's war on terror, and the inherent and dogged tendency to prop up Pakistan as the country everyone loves to hate. With hostilities all wrapped up, one can hope that the constant vilification of Pakistan will also fade away.

Terror cells still exist within Pakistan, and recent incidents and threats including the instability in Afghanistan have led to heightened concerns about their intentions. However, at the moment, the odds of dying from Covid-19 are much greater than of dying in a terror attack. The pandemic may have brought unending misery to millions, but it has also helped deliver what appeared to be impossible even two or three years ago — the end of the 'war on terror'.

(By Rafia Zakaria Dawn, 06, 09/09/2021)

Covid vaccination

THOUGH still far from the target of fully inoculating 70m people, the government's efforts to administer both doses of the vaccine to 20m and the first dose of the vaccine to 50m people should be commended. In the earlier stages of the vaccine roll-out, the government had set a target of fully vaccinating 70m people by the end of this year. So far, the government has administered 67,342,288 doses of the Covid-19 vaccine with the national positivity ratio hovering around 6pc. Though a large section of the public was initially hesitant to get themselves vaccinated, there has been a surge in the number of people lining up to avail the free inoculation facility. Only in the past week, the government administered more than 1m doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. At the current rate, it would take another 38 days to vaccinate another 10pc of the population. This is encouraging news. Moreover, government officials remain confident that they will not only achieve but surpass the target, as indicated by Planning Minister Asad Umar's tweet.

However, considering that the country is still several million doses short of achieving the target of 70m fully vaccinated people by the end of this year, the authorities have their work cut out for them. It is obvious that a large number of people have not returned for their second dose. Vaccine hesitancy, owing to widespread misinformation, still remains a big hurdle in the way of quicker and complete vaccination. There have been cases of infection and deaths in between doses, perhaps reducing some people's belief in the efficacy of the vaccine, without realising that both jabs are needed for stronger protection. Even with the Covid curve apparently reaching a plateau, the number of deaths still remains relatively high. So there is no room for complacency. More needs to be done to persuade people to get themselves inoculated and to ensure that SOPs continue to be maintained at all times. The government must also ensure booster shots for those who had been vaccinated earlier.

(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 12/09/2021)

Covid forever

ON Sept 7, 2021, Mike Ryan, the executive director of the World Health Organisation had some startling news to share. Covid-19, he believed, is "here to stay with us". Addressing those who think otherwise, Ryan said: "People have said we're going to eliminate or eradicate the virus. No we're not, very, very unlikely." Ryan is not alone.



Recently, the chief medical adviser, Dr Anthony Fauci, also said that like influenza, Covid-19 is going to stay with us forever. Vaccines while providing temporary protection will not eliminate the virus because it will continue proliferating in countries where people have not been vaccinated. Things could have been different, officials at the WHO have said, if the virus had been identified and isolated in its early stages. That, we all know, did not happen and as a consequence the plague-fatigued world has become a dreadful and diseased version of its former self.

It is a frightening prospect. One reason why most people endure the hardship of social distancing, of not going to restaurants, avoiding crowds, wearing masks and all the other measures is to imagine that eventually there will be respite. Mothers sending their under-12 and hence unvaccinated children to school will not have to worry that they will bring home the virus. Weddings will not be terrifying events where risk lingers everywhere and hovers over everyone. People will be able to embrace each other and enjoy each other's company without being masked up and far away. Old people will not live with the risk of a deadly upper respiratory virus that can kill them in a flash.

It appears that all of that hope of a return to normal is misguided. If WHO's Mike Ryan, Dr Fauci and scores of others are to be believed, it does not seem that there is a possibility of a return to normal. Life, from here on, is likely to involve more masking and distancing, shots and more shots, boosters against variants, boosters to whet immunity and so on. The young will take the risk, they will continue to mingle and meet in the old way, and a good number of them might pay for being so daring. Old people and disabled people will remain housebound. Borders will remain indefinitely shut, highly vaccinated countries will (unfairly) continue to ban citizens of countries where the virus is prevalent or where vaccinations are not taking place. There may even be curbs on the entry of people who have received vaccines that are thought to provide less protection than others. Disease will become a demarcation that will reiterate the boundaries between the rich and the poor, the best vaccinated and the least vaccinated. If passports were a headache in the pre-Covid world, vaccine passports will likely be an even bigger headache.

How does one prepare to live in a world where Covid-19 is a regular fixture? One glimmer of hope lies in the possibility of a pandemic morphing eventually into an endemic. This can only happen when the majority of the world has been exposed either through infection or through vaccination. At that point, the mutations, like the Delta variant will become less common as the virus has to work harder to infect people. But

making peace with the eventual possibility of being exposed also means a resignation to the reality that millions of people — the immune-compromised, the elderly, those undergoing cancer treatments or those that have received transplants — will find it hard to cling on to life. To me, the very idea that the 5m-plus global dead may be joined by many millions more is terrifying.

How does one prepare to live in a world where Covid-19 is a regular fixture?

In the meantime, some accommodations will bode well for young Pakistanis. The eventual outcome of the Western world's move towards remote working may present opportunities that have not been available yet. The inability to get visas and other obstacles that have kept people from competing for jobs abroad will not be as determinative as they used to be. It will not take long for virtual technology to make it possible to hire workers anywhere and integrate them into global teams. The more Pakistan invests in global connectivity and tries to take advantage of foreign labour markets that need workers to be data analysts or other similar professionals, the better it would be for the emerging workforce in Pakistan. Migration, especially migration for white-collar jobs that do not require physical labour or physical presence, may even become obsolete in a work from home world.

Navigating personal and familial relationships will become trickier. Whether we like it or not, Covid-19 is shrinking our social circles and our spheres of interaction. After all, interactions with strangers now come with the additional threat of being exposed to the virus. Should one really meet up with an almost-friend, a work acquaintance etc if it is not absolutely necessary? The answer for most people is no. Here too, virtual interactions will become the norm and so will our openness to considering them equivalent to real interactions in a way we would have refused a mere two years ago.

With WHO officials announcing that Covid-19 is here to stay, the writing is on the wall. The government must consider sustainable measures to combat surges which threaten to occur again and again, and invest in greater connectivity so that everyone has access to remote working and learning. Furthermore, government services provision, tax collection etc must all be shifted online to prevent as many people as possible from having to line up repeatedly for this or that. The virus is here to stay so points of physical interaction between people must be reduced in every way possible. Finally, the poor who can access none of these measures and who are being offered up as Covid-fodder desperately need more humanitarian assistance and support. In simple terms, being resigned to the perpetual presence of Covid-19 need not mean being similarly resigned to the death of millions.

(By Rafia Zakaria Dawn, 06, 15/09/2021)

Govt asked to avoid coercion for Covid-19 vaccination of children

Persuasion, not coercion, should be used to encourage parents to have their children vaccinated against Covid-19. Consent forms for the vaccination should be designed in a simple manner that doesn't create suspicion and confusion among parents. Only Pfizer vaccine should be administered to kids aged 12 and above as safety data of other Covid-19 vaccines is not available.

These points were raised by representatives of the Pakistan Paediatric Association (PPA) at a press conference held at the Karachi Press Club on Wednesday.

The event's objective was to highlight the association's stance on the recently launched Covid-19 vaccination drive for children.

During the question-answer session, the representatives were asked about a Sindh government notification barring unvaccinated students from college admission to which they replied that the association didn't support coercion for vaccination.

"The association advocates effective counselling and believes that we should be able to create a strong understanding among parents that Covid-19 vaccination is important for their child's health and that unvaccinated children pose a threat to other children and adults," said PPA secretary general Dr Khalid Shafi.

PPA says kids should only be given Pfizer vaccine as safety data of other Covid-19 vaccines is not available

Clause about side effects confusing for parents

On the note mentioned in the Covid-19 parents' consent form which says that the state isn't responsible for the vaccine's side effects (if any), the president-elect of the PPA, Prof Jamal Raza, said the association had recently met the health minister and other officials, shared their suggestions and apprised them that this clause in the consent form was confusing for parents.

"We were not consulted before the vaccination drive launch. Else, we would have given our input on the form's preparation," he said, adding that vaccination for under 18s should be done with parental consent.

Dr Shafi, however, was of the opinion that all vaccines including those for Covid-19 could have minor side effects and it's unethical not to educate parents about them in the counselling process. "It's only after experts reach the conclusion that the benefits of a vaccine outweigh its side effects that it's used for the general population."

The speakers suggested that vaccination for minors should be started first at specialised centres and arrangements for vaccination at schools could then be done in a planned manner.

"The government should separately collect and maintain data on children's vaccination. It should monitor and record the whole process in a way that helps study vaccine's side effects (if any)," said Prof Raza, adding that schools should ensure compliance to the standard operating procedures (SOPs) to prevent the spread of Delta or any other Covid-19 variant.

'Vaccine is safe for children'

Earlier, the experts expressed their support to the government vaccination efforts for children above 15. In fact, they pointed out that the association wanted the government to start vaccinating children above 12.

They also shared data according to which so far there have been 86,693 cases of Covid-19 infection among children reported in Pakistan. Of them, 177 children died. There were 11,391 cases and 34 deaths in children under the age of five.

During the spread of the Delta variant, they shared, there was a surge in Covid-19 infection among children. And, while children with Covid-19 didn't frequently develop serious illness, they might spread the disease to parents and grandparents.

"Covid-19 vaccination has now been started in children above 12 years of age in most countries and no major health problems have been observed. We want parents to know that the vaccine is safe for children," said Sindh chapter president Prof Jalal Akbar, adding that propaganda against vaccination needed to be discouraged and parents should consult their physician in case of any concern.

The experts also urged the government to start administration of Covid-19 booster doses for health workers.
(By Faiza Ilyas Dawn, 13, 16/09/2021)

Bogus vaccine certificates

While people continue to suffer from the deadly Covid-19 pandemic, it is unfortunate that a few devious people have managed to take advantage of the situation by issuing fake vaccination certificates to citizens. The illegal practice prevalent across the country is not just hampering the inoculation drive but is also a major threat to people's lives — especially considering the fact that the notorious Delta variant is rapidly spreading.

In a bid to put an end to this dangerous precedence and maintain law and order, the FIA has started to track down and arrest suspects following the NCOC's directives. Recently, suspects have been arrested from all major cities. Surprisingly, they even include staffers of vaccination centres. These suspects will be summoned for further investigation after which legal action will be taken accordingly. Such a crackdown is and will continue to be necessary in order to undo the devastation these people have caused for the sake of earning a few quick bucks. Now that the FIA has the records and lists of many of those that have gotten fake certificates, they can proceed by either imposing restrictions on them or making it mandatory for them to get vaccinated. Strict punishments should be imposed, with names of culprits publicly broadcasted, in order to deter those who have yet not come under the radar. The FIA must not become complacent until we are sure that herd immunity is achieved and majority of the population is vaccinated. Even the vaccination drives are being conducted rather smoothly and the whole process is fairly easy. Hence, there can be no justification for eligible people to not get themselves vaccinated.

Citizens need to realise that the crisis is of a collective nature. In such unprecedented situation it becomes necessary to curtail individual liberty in order to protect the masses. Therefore, it becomes a given that everyone has to play their part by getting vaccinated and abiding by SOPs. Enough people have been vaccinated for people to move past the vaccine hoax. But some credulous people still chose to stay ignorant.

(By Editorial, The Express Tribune, 14, 17/09/2021)

Health workers to get anti-Covid booster shots

The Sindh government has decided to administer booster doses of the coronavirus vaccines to all healthcare workers in the province beginning next week.

In a letter sent to the National Command and Operation Centre on Thursday, the Sindh health department stated that the constant exposure of doctors and paramedical staff to patients makes them highly vulnerable to the infection.

Given the high-risk exposure, the provincial government has decided to give a third dose of the vaccine to all public and private healthcare workers.

"To reduce the infection rate amongst the healthcare workers and to enhance immunity, it has been decided to inoculate all healthcare workers of Sindh with additional dose of Pfizer vaccine," stated the letter, a copy of which is available with The Express Tribune.

The total number of healthcare staff working in public and private hospitals and laboratories was said to be around 150,000.

Speaking to The Express Tribune, Sindh health department officials claimed that nearly all healthcare workers have been inoculated against the deadly virus with the first and second jabs.

They will be given booster shots of the Pfizer vaccine to further strengthen immunisation, confirmed officials. "It [the booster shot campaign] is expected to begin next week," said Sindh health department spokesperson Atif Vighio.

He added that the letter was sent to inform the NCOC and to get their approval. The NCOC has signed off on administering booster doses of the vaccine to citizens after charging them Rs1,270.

The provision was made last month to facilitate foreign travel of those who had received shots of the Chinese vaccines as a number of countries require the administration of American or British vaccines for travellers.

The healthcare workers in Sindh will be given Pfizer jabs free of charge, said Vighio. "They are at maximum risk," he added.

The World Health Organisation has suggested booster jabs in certain cases such as when the immunisation by previous jabs is waning or for persons who are immunocompromised.

In most cases, however, the WHO has maintained that the vaccines appear to be holding up well and the mandatory two doses should suffice.

The Sindh government had started inoculating healthcare workers when the immunisation process began early this year. "It was a successful drive," said Vighio, adding that all those who will receive booster shots have already been registered. When asked, health officials confirmed that the provincial government has sufficient doses to complete the week-long drive.

Endorsing Sindh government's initiative, Dr SM Qaisar Sajjad, the secretary general of Pakistan Medical Association (PMA), said that healthcare workers were already at increased risk given their exposure to patients and this is a welcome move.

"We have lost many doctors," he added. The pandemic has claimed the lives of at least 228 doctors across Pakistan, said Dr Sajjad. "We do not want to lose another doctor." Dr Sajjad was of the view that booster doses are being given in other countries.

"I will suggest that the NCOC gets proper information and devise a uniform policy for all healthcare workers of the country."

He said that he was not sure if everyone will be given the booster dose or those who got their second dose three months or four months back will receive the jabs. "There is a need for scientific study when to inoculate the booster dose."
(By Sameer Mandhro The Express Tribune, 04, 17/09/2021)

33 held as police launch crackdown on unvaccinated people

The Karachi police launched a campaign against unvaccinated individuals and arrested 33 persons in different parts of the city on Friday after the Sindh chief secretary expressed concerns over the police for not 'taking interest' in checking the vaccines cards of the people.

On Sept 22, the Sindh home department had issued stating that "carrying of vaccination cards at different places by the employees of certain establishments and visitors to various places or facilities has been made mandatory, and inspection of vaccination cards has been entrusted to the law enforcement agencies".

A police spokesperson told Dawn that 33 persons had been taken into custody for not possessing proof of vaccination and 18 cases under Section 188 (Disobedience to order duly promulgated by public servant) of the Pakistan Penal Code and Section 4 of the Sindh Epidemics Disease Act of 2014 were registered against them on behalf of the state.

All the arrests were made in the East zone of the police's organisational structure, the spokesperson said.

Sindh govt has ordered law enforcement agencies to take action against people without vaccination cards

Sohrab Goth SHO Zubair Nawaz said police arrested two persons, identified as Muhammad Khalid and Habib Rehman, when they failed to produce their vaccination cards during checking on a main road in Ayub Goth.

He said that the both the held persons were young and they told the police that they did not get the vaccine because of a lack of awareness about it.

The SHO said that the police began checking Covid-19 vaccination certificates from passengers and people visiting markets.

The police action against unvaccinated people was being taken on the directives of the home department, which had written a letter inspector general of police, Rangers director general and Karachi commissioner.

The letter stated that action should be taken over non-implementation of standard operating procedures while fines should also be imposed.

CS concerned over lack of action

It noted that the chief secretary had observed with 'great concern' that the law enforcers and district administration were not taking due interest in "checking of vaccination cards".

"Legal action including registration of cases or imposition of fine has also not been carried out by the authorised officers," the letter reads.

The chief secretary had directed the 'authorised officers' and law enforcement personnel to "take keen interest in checking vaccination cards of the concerned persons and the violators must be taken to task under the law".

The letter warned that the officers' performance would be judged by the chief secretary on the basis of their interest taken in the matter.

Officials said that subsequently, the police, through a letter issued by AIGP Haider Raza on Sept 22 had issued directions to police officers to start a campaign of checking of Covid-19 vaccination cards 'immediately'.

The police officers were directed to submit a report containing legal action against unvaccinated persons on a daily basis, it added.
(By Imtiaz Ali Dawn, 13, 25/09/2021)

Karachi police stopped from detaining people for not having vaccination cards

After an uproar over the arrest of over 30 people for failing to provide proof of their Covid-19 vaccination, Karachi police chief Imran Yaqoob Minhas on Saturday stopped the police from conducting 'random' checking, demanding vaccination certificates from passers-by and arresting them in case of not having one.

The city police chief directed the police to check vaccination cards at restaurants, eateries, marriage halls and other places where social gatherings were being taken place.

He clarified that FIRs should be registered against the owners and administration of these establishments over violation of the Covid-19 standard operating procedures (SOP).

Karachi police spokesperson Shazia Jahan said that the city police chief had directed the police to follow guidelines issued by the provincial government pertaining to checking of vaccination certificates at certain establishments like restaurants/dining places, marriage halls etc.

Proof of vaccination can be checked at eateries, marriage halls

On Friday, the police launched a drive against unvaccinated persons and detained 33 persons and registered 18 cases against them. The extreme measure taken by the police triggered strong reaction from their relatives as well as certain political parties.

The police had claimed that they took this action following an order issued by home department and reservations expressed by the Sindh chief secretary for not taking action against unvaccinated persons.

Market bodies told to ensure vaccination

On Saturday, the police visited shops and markets and asked their management to get themselves and their workers vaccinated.

However, their visit sparked a reaction from traders' bodies, as Atiq Mir, the chief of All Karachi Tajir Ittehad (AKTI) told Dawn that they were concerned over such action.

He said so far, he got not report regarding of arrest or punitive action against markets or shops.

He said checking of vaccination certificates of passengers and workers of certain establishments was fine, but it was not wise to detain people on roads and streets for not producing the vaccination certificate.

Mr Mir appreciated the notice taken by the city police chief over the arrests of passers-by.

A senior police officer, who wished not to be named, said that the police chief had asked his subordinates to 'properly understand' the Sindh government notification and avoid 'random' checking and detentions over proof of vaccination.

Police responsible for SOP implementation

Additional Inspector General Minhas also issued directions to the police not to arrest passers-by over lack of vaccination certificates as it was not the responsibility of the police.

He told them that the responsibility of the police was to ensure implementation of SOPs.

Meanwhile, SSP-West Suhai Aziz said in a statement that the police in district West were strictly implementing safety guidelines issued by the Sindh government.

"In the light of orders issued by the provincial government, district West police have started checking of vaccination cards in markets, shops, marriage halls and other public places," it said, adding that shopkeepers and markets administrations had been asked to keep their vaccination cards with them.

The SSP told Dawn the police in Orangi Town started "checking cards of shopkeepers along with members of market association".

"Those without cards have been advised to get vaccinated, they have also been informed that legal action would be taken in case of non-compliance," she said.

(By Imtiaz Ali Dawn, 15, 26/09/2021)

Vaccination, the way out

Applying the principle of reward for good conduct and punishment for bad behaviour, the National Command and Operation Centre has eased the coronavirus pandemic-linked restrictions in cities and areas with high rate of vaccination and tightened the existing curbs where the percentage of vaccination is unsatisfactory. This method is aimed at exhorting people to get vaccinated against the dreaded coronavirus disease.

The NCOC on Thursday announced easing of curbs wrought by the Covid-19 in Quetta, Peshawar, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Murmur, Muzaffarabad, Gilgit and Skardu. On the same day, the Sindh government relaxed some of the curbs in Karachi like allowing a gathering of 200 people in wedding halls and other indoor premises and 400 persons at outdoor venues. Relaxations have come in the wake of the declining trend of the pandemic in most parts of the country, as a result of the stepped-up vaccination drive. So far more than 27.4 million people have received the prescribed two doses of the coronavirus vaccine. On Thursday, most deaths caused by Covid-19 occurred in Punjab and K-P.

New curbs have come into effect from Oct 1. Now the unvaccinated will not be allowed domestic and international travel, they cannot enter or work at shopping malls and won't be allowed to enter educational institutions.

The only way to defeat the coronavirus pandemic is to get a vast majority of people vaccinated, as also insisted on by NCOC chief Asad Umar. This is borne out by experience in countries around the world. However, concerned citizens have been left wondering why the government is not informing people about the side effects of the coronavirus vaccines, even though some recipients of the vaccines have experienced side effects. This is emboldening those engaged in anti-vaccine propaganda. The authorities should also be focused on countering the anti-vaxxers. Moreover, it needs to be ensured that in the rush to achieve the given target of vaccination, officials don't make bogus entries.

(By Editorial, The Express Tribune, 14, 02/10/2021)

Partial compliance of Covid-19 SOPs at major malls, hotels

It was rush time around the shopping malls on Tariq Road. There were women checking out the stitched suits hanging by the roadside. Traffic was bad as motorists eyed parking spaces. The guard at the entrance of one of the biggest malls, the Dolmen Mall, was busy checking the temperature of shoppers with his infrared thermometer before allowing them in. Anyone trying to enter without a mask was turned away.

Amid the pedestrians checking out the shops through display windows, there were also several peddlers with boxes of disposable masks. A few shoppers made a beeline for them before entering the mall. Upon entering some also used the sanitizer being offered for free there. But no one was asked for their vaccination certificate.

One shopper questioned this. "There are too many people here. We can only manage taking temperatures. Checking out their vaccination certificates is going to take too much time," the guard explained as he got back to his work.

But at the same time, people were being turned away from the Dolmen Mall in Clifton for not carrying their vaccination certificates. "We are not allowing anyone without a certificate. Rules are rules," announced the woman at the entrance of the mall as she was shown what she was asking to see. But then one customer after showing her own certificate entered the mall with a friend, simply saying that he was with her. That friend was never asked to produce his certificate and ushered in after just getting his temperature checked.

At many places, visitors are not being asked about proof of vaccination

At the Ocean Mall's entrance, the guard when asked by a shopper if he would like to see the vaccination card, only shook his head. "No, thank you Madam. We are not checking vaccination cards here," he said with a smile. When asked why not, he said that the management has told him not to check for the cards because then they get fewer customers that way.

What to say of vaccination cards, although they have stickers on glass doors with the in-your-face message 'No mask, no service', many smaller shops and stores around the city, are themselves not observing this rule. Some have their masks hanging around their chins, some have pulled them down under their noses and for some their masks are lying around somewhere near their cash registers.

Apologetic attitude

You are asked to pull up at the entrance of all the city hotels for checking. They make you open your car bonnet and trunk, they pass mirrors under your car, there is a cute doggy sniffing inside your car also but are they not so careful about their guests? At the Marriott, though they asked politely if the people coming in are carrying their vaccination cards on them, they say they tried not to push it. "You see, some people mind it a lot if we inquire, especially those who are regular or repeated guests," said one guard, who seemed more interested in checking the screen of the baggage scanner through which a guest had just passed her handbag.

She reminded him that she was not a regular or a repeat guest so wouldn't he like to see her vaccination card and he smiled sheepishly. "Ma'am, you asked before I could ask you," he said. "Besides, I could tell from your face that you are vaccinated," he added.

But then after realising how strange that sounded, he said. "Look, we get snapped at for asking though we do ask. Some people say that we had already checked their cards earlier or before, so we say fine and allow them to go inside. We are not here to bother people. We are here to facilitate their entry," he said.

At the Pearl Continental Hotel, too, one was allowed to enter after getting her bag checked at the baggage scanner. The lady there was then asked if they checked guests for their vaccination cards. "Oh are you vaccinated? Do you have your card or certificate on you?" She asked then.

When inquired why she had not asked for it in the first instance, she said that she only did when reminded. "You reminded me so am asking you for it. But really, it is not part of my job description. Our supervising officer is supposed to be doing that," she pointed out. And where was the supervising officer? "He has left for home now," she shrugged, before averting her eyes, trying to get herself busy with the other guests.

At Avari Towers, the elderly guard, after letting you pick up your bag from the scanner, pointed towards a standee with the SOPs listed. "You are not one of the guests who have a room here, are you? Please can you show me your vaccination cards," he asked politely. "It's a government order. I need to check for it," he added.

When asked what happened if we were guests staying at the hotel, he said that all guests are checked for it at the counters from where they book rooms as it can be checked easily through their computerised national identity cards.

Embassy Inn on main Sharea Faisal, too, said that all guests can be checked for having being vaccinated thanks to their CNICs which can be checked through Nadra database.

"We are not holding programmes here these days. Otherwise we would be checking everyone at the entrance. But all our staying guests are cleared by me personally by sending their CNIC numbers to Nadra. Just this morning we turned away a couple of guests who were not vaccinated," the manager at the counter said.

(By Shazia Hasan Dawn, 13, 05/10/2021)

Covid complacency

WITH a steady drop in Covid-19 cases over the past few weeks and the positivity ratio reduced to below 3pc, relief is manifesting itself in overly complacent attitudes towards Covid-related SOPs. According to a report published in this newspaper, the managements of popular shopping malls in Karachi and five-star hotels appear to have a mixed policy on checking vaccination certificates of customers entering the premises. While a handful of shopping malls are following the Sindh government's instructions and asking people to show their certificates, the security staff at most shopping centres or posh hotels appear to have been instructed not to irk visitors by demanding to see their vaccination documents. Even though the provincial government has made carrying the certificates mandatory for all citizens, members of the public visiting these establishments have a lackadaisical approach. While checking vaccination certificates at entrance points requires more human resources and is a time-consuming process, it will nevertheless minimise the risk of infection and ensure the collective good of workers and customers visiting shopping malls or hotels. Letting in unvaccinated individuals would be tantamount to putting hundreds of lives at risk. After all, while the positivity ratio has gone down, the pandemic is not over as yet. We have seen the virus rebound more aggressively than before in several countries, including Pakistan. A number of Covid-19 cases are still being reported from several cities. Self-congratulations and complacency had set in last year too after the first wave of the virus. But they proved to be short-lived as the second and third more dangerous Covid-19 waves proved everyone wrong.

Similarly, the virus continues to cause damage in other countries as well, including the US, Australia and Russia. The authorities should keep reminding the people that vaccination does not eliminate the risk of contracting Covid-19, it merely reduces the severity of the disease and that taking precautions is the only way they can avoid getting infected or transmitting the virus to others.

(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 07/10/2021)

Covid's impact on students

A NUMBER of papers in academic journals show that Covid-19 has had a very significant impact on students' mental health. Some papers say that the reports of high levels of anxiety, depression and distress have increased by 200-300 per cent over the last two years. Some studies also show a differentially greater impact on women compared to men.



I am part of a global forum of Education School Deans, and each and every one of the deans has said that the demand for counselling and psychological support services in their respective universities has gone through the roof over the last two years. The universities almost without exception have had to expand student support services as much as possible. Most are still unable to cater to the increased demand.

I found a couple of recent studies regarding Pakistani students as well and they tell the same story. My experience with students at our university as well as those from other universities across Pakistan has been the same. Covid has for a variety of reasons increased pressure on students and has taken, and is taking, a heavy toll on their mental health.

Some of the pressure can be addressed through psychological support, other pressures require pharmacological interventions and now we are seeing some signs of post trauma disorders as well.

Being a university student over the last 18-odd months has not been easy.

The sources of increased pressure are varied. Many households have experienced significant negative income and wealth shocks over this period: many have lost jobs, many businesses have been closed or the revenues they generated have been drastically reduced. Applications for financial assistance even from students who enrolled as fee-paying students at the start of their programme have increased.

Many students have fallen sick over this period, many more have seen family members fall ill. Thousands of families have had to grieve for relatives, family members and/or friends. People have been more isolated and social networks for most have been adversely impacted. Even my four-year-old daughter keeps asking 'when will corona go away and when will I party with my friends'. For student groups I have interacted with, the majority have had multiple illnesses in the family and a significant number have had Covid-related deaths in their social circles.

Studying online has not been easy. Students have had to abruptly shift to online learning, they have had to vacate hostels, go into isolation due to lockdowns and even beyond explicit lockdowns. Online classes have been going on for almost 18 months now. The length of online interaction has made things harder for students. Until campuses were allowed to be opened this September some of the students who joined our university in the last academic year had not visited the campus even once. Sports activities and most co-curricular activities had also been stopped and are only restarting now. Being a student over the last 18-odd months has not been easy.

A student had to move back home when the first lockdowns went into effect in March 2020. With six other siblings in a three-room house, the student had difficulty in managing his online classes from home: finding a quiet corner for attending class was hard enough, finding a quiet space for study time was almost impossible. His stipend, from the university, was suspended for the period he went home. This put additional financial pressure on him. Then his father and older brother, the two people who were the bread earners for the family, lost their jobs. The family had to resort to borrowing from the larger family and family friends to cover even basic monthly expenses. At the same time, the student had to continue to study hard to do well in online classes. The resulting increase in tension, anxiety and the onset of depression was not hard to foresee.

Another student had moved to the hostel, after his admission, as a way of putting some distance between himself and his father. They could not get along with each other. Going back home was difficult for him. Again, it showed in the form of a trigger for severe depression.

There have been impacts on learning outcomes, academic processes and academic performance as well. Though there have been significant changes in how we teach in online mode even in the short 18-month period, online classes are still for most learners not as good as in-person classes. There have been impacts on academic processes too. Initially, when we were still learning about online teaching, cheating became rampant in online examinations. There has been some grade inflation too: see the intermediate results for this year. Academic performance has also been judged, in some places, on the previous year's performance and/or without examinations. How all of this impacts learning, we will only know over time. But we can be sure that it is unlikely to result in improved learning outcomes.

Last year, the job market was bleak as well. Students who graduated had a more difficult time finding jobs of their choice than in earlier years. There is evidence, again from across many countries, that students graduating in times of recession do have difficulty getting jobs or jobs of their choice; they have lower starting salaries and their promotions are impacted for many years to come. The market has started to recover and, hopefully, the next batch will graduate in better conditions. But again, part of Covid's impact on the employment market might persist for a number of years.

The Higher Education Commission and its provincial counterparts and universities should be aware of some of the dynamics mentioned here and, where possible, should introduce interventions that allow the impact on students, on their learning, their employment prospects and, importantly, on their mental health, to be lessened as much as possible.

(By Faisal Bari Dawn, 06, 29/10/2021)

Covid-induced curbs lifted in four cities

The Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) lifted coronavirus-induced restrictions on public gatherings in four top vaccinated cities, as the country crossed a major milestone in the national vaccination campaign with the administering of anti-Covid jab to 70 million people.

The vaccination drive, which started in February this year with frontline health workers getting the jabs on a priority basis, was expanded to various age groups in phases. The authorities had set the target of inoculating 70 million people by the end of the year.

However, Planning Minister Asad Umar, who heads the NCOC, tweeted on Saturday that the target had been achieved two months before the deadline. He added that by the end of the year, the government would exceed the target.

"We continue to make progress to vaccinate *Pakistan*. The year-end target for 2021 was seven crore [70 million] people vaccinated. Happy to report that seven crore people have now received at least one dose and four crore are fully vaccinated. With two months to go, will Insha'Allah meet, and exceed, the target," he said.

Given the progress in the vaccination campaign and the dwindling pandemic wave, the NCOC, which serves as the nerve centre of the government's anti-Covid strategy, announced steps to restore routine daily life in the country.

In a meeting, chaired by Umar, the NCOC reviewed the pandemic and vaccination situation. The participants noted that four cities - *Islamabad*, Mandi Bahauddin, Gilgit and Mirpur -- were the most vaccinated cities where more than 60% population had received the Covid jabs.

It decided to end non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) in the four cities, fully allowing public gatherings, wedding ceremonies, sports events, trade and business activities, indoor dining, subject to wearing masks and full vaccination.

The forum also allowed opening of cinema houses, gymnasias, entertainment spots as well as religious places, including shrines for the general public. It also removed the restrictions on the transport sector in the cities.

The forum put *Rawalpindi*, Jhelum, *Peshawar*, Ghazar, Kurmang, Skardu, Hunza, Bagh and Bhimber in the good category, where the 40-60% population had received the Covid jabs. It said that the NPI would continue in areas with less than 40% vaccinated population.

In the 'good' cities and less-vaccinated areas, the number of passengers in public transport has been kept at 80%. Similarly, restrictions regarding the public gatherings would continue. The forum decided to review the situation again on November 12.

Meanwhile, the NCOC said in its daily update of the disease that the single-day tally of new Covid cases increased slightly to 658 during the past 24 hours, as the national positivity ratio also increased to 1.44%. the forum added that 10 Covid patients died during the last 24 hours. (By Raza Khan The Express Tribune, 01, 31/10/2021)

Vaccination suspended at Karachi Expo Centre as staff observes strike

Vaccination at the Expo Centre was temporarily suspended on Monday when data entry operators and vaccinators observed a strike over non-payment of their salaries, forcing many people to leave for home without getting vaccinated.

The protest caused chaos at the Covid-19 mass immunisation centre set up at the Expo Centre as the staffers chanted slogans against the government. They claimed that they had not been paid for eight months.

The vaccination process resumed after government officials held talks with the protesting staffers and assured them that they would be paid their dues soon.

A source said it was the second time within four months that the vaccination had been suspended on the same issue.

Health dept says Covid-19 vaccination resumed after brief disruption

"The process was briefly suspended as several staffers at the facility are working directly under the health department and paid monthly salaries. The protest was organised by a section of employees hired by a third party," said health department spokesperson Atif Vighio.

The company, he said, had replaced several of its employees, but did not share updated information about their staff that led to the delay in payment of salaries.

"It claims that its total workforce at the facility is 180 though in reality only 60 to 80 of its people are actually attending to their rotational duties," he said.

Asked to explain why the health department did not sort out that matter for good, Mr Vighio said staff's grievances would be looked into and their dues would be cleared soon.

He could not provide data on the total staff strength at the Expo Centre.

Workload reduced

Sources said the workload at the Expo Centre had significantly reduced over the months and recently the health department had closed down one of the two halls dedicated for that purpose.

They questioned the health department's decision of continuing its contract with the company in question as now the workload at the Expo Centre could be managed by its own staff.

"Besides, the government should have hired the staff directly instead of involving any third party. This indicates some kind of malpractice (on behalf of the government).

"If the government had thought it wise to outsource the job, it should have ensured in the agreement with the company that staffers are paid on time. Else, it should have been fined. Apparently, if an agreement exists at all, it completely favours the company," said a senior health department official on the condition of anonymity.

Right now, the sources said, over 200 people had been hired for the registration purpose at the facility.

Last year, the government turned the Karachi Expo Centre into a coronavirus vaccination centre. The relevant minister had also visited the centre to review the proposal and get a briefing from experts about the possibility of the plan. The facility was finally launched this year in May. (By Faiza Ilyas Dawn, 13, 02/11/2021)

New Covid surge

PARTS of Europe and the US have seen a rise in Covid-19 cases, sparking fears of a fourth or fifth wave in several countries as winter approaches. In Austria, just days after a lockdown was announced for the unvaccinated, the government has imposed a complete national lockdown for 20 days to avert a disaster. Though it is the first EU state to impose a full lockdown this winter, other states are also watching their numbers rise and contemplating measures to curb the spread. Germany, too, is not ruling out a lockdown, and is ramping up booster vaccine availability as Covid-19 cases rise. In the US, cases are rising in more than half the states. Even in states where vaccinations are relatively higher, such as Colorado, New Mexico, Minnesota and Vermont, officials say they have noted "sustained transmission" and increased hospitalisations. The fact that cases are rising in areas where there are relatively high vaccination rates is troubling, as there are millions of citizens across the world who still have not received even one dose. In Austria, for example, about two-thirds of the people are vaccinated — a figure though low for Europe has lessons for developing countries where less than a third have been fully inoculated.

In Pakistan, infection and mortality numbers have remained relatively lower, much to the relief of the government. But despite a job well done, officials should remain vigilant as complacency will come at a high price. Vaccination though steadily expanding is still low, with just a fifth of the total population fully jabbed. Where rich countries are pushing ahead with booster jabs, given what scientists have revealed about the efficacy of the vaccine waning after a certain period of time, in Pakistan, booster shots are currently available only for those who pay for them. Authorities must ensure that in the coming days, testing and prevention messaging remains high. As scores of citizens gather indoors during wedding and holiday festivities, any rise in cases must be addressed with localised lockdowns. The NCOC must be vigilant about data coming from hospitals. A rise in hospitalisations and demand for oxygen as well as more Covid ward visitors will indicate that a new wave of infections is around the corner. There are many positives in how the government and the NCOC have handled Covid-19 waves to avert disaster, and future strategies must build on these strengths to ensure that vulnerable and yet to be vaccinated individuals do not suffer. (By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 20/11/2021)

Response to Covid

COVID-19 has exposed the fragility of existing pandemic preparedness arrangements governed largely, until now, via international health regulations (IHR) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). Various panels and working groups have mulled over the deficiencies in response and suggested ways to redress gaps for future pandemics. A special session of the World Health Assembly (WHA) is due to begin to discuss the way forward on a proposed international pandemic treaty as a framework for tackling future pandemics.



In a zero draft prepared by the working group of six countries, a treaty is proposed to be built on a broad-church basis, accommodating divergent positions of the developed and developing world. The zero draft approved this month goes some way in accommodating the concerns of the Global South. While endorsing the need for a new pandemic treaty, the draft also emphasises the importance of strengthening IHR which remain the principal governing instrument for a global pandemic. Yet the treaty

falls short when it comes to animal-human crossover as in Covid's case.

The report further proposes setting up an intergovernmental body to be put in charge of developing a WHO convention along the lines of the UN Convention on Tobacco Control. The report also calls on countries to lend support to further strengthen and amending IHR to make them workable for future epidemics. There is growing recognition that the new treaty is the best available way to tackle future pandemics. However, experts predict that the intergovernmental route will be prolonged and fragmentary. The working group will convene again in January 2022 after the special session of the WHA to draft another report for the executive board of the WHO.

The discussion on an international pandemic treaty gathered momentum in the wake of the publication of a report by the Independent Panel on Pandemic Preparedness and Response set up to review the Covid-19 response. The report noted that the pandemic could have been contained had prompt and globally coordinated measures been instituted in time. The response was delayed and a wait-and-see attitude prevailed. The report further recommended prompt action to make the vaccine widely available to the Global South as well as ensuring easy and affordable access to Covid treatment and diagnostics.

A new pandemic treaty refuses to be born.

The EU and WHO too called for a new global pandemic treaty and for strengthening the WHO role in future pandemic investigations and response. However, the proposal was cold-shouldered by China and Russia. Not far behind was the US which argued that strengthened and revamped IHR offered a better way forward than a new pandemic treaty. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken argued this position in the pages of an influential magazine. Lately, however, there are signs of the US back-peddalling on an only IHR route and leaning more towards the pandemic treaty as the wider and all-encompassing option.

However, the proposed design of the new treaty is replete with contradictory and divergent impulses. While the focus of the EU proposal is on beefing up the role of the WHO in any future pandemic, a majority of the developing world is chiefly concerned with making sure that the supply of vaccines, treatments and personal protective equipment on an equitable basis during future pandemics remains at the centre of the new pandemic treaty. The latter has also argued that the Covid response has highlighted distributional inequities in the supply of global health-related goods. These tensions lie at the heart of the fraught negotiations permeating the pandemic treaty.

Many civil society activists from the Global South see the treaty as a ploy to divert attention from the TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) waiver debate that seeks to make vaccine technology and treatments available to the developing countries by waiving intellectual property protection for the duration of the pandemic. The waiver proposal, though backed by the US and most of the Global South, is being resisted by the EU and UK. The fact that the sponsor of the treaty also happens to be the EU underscores this justly held view.

Like the rest of the Global South, the issue of vaccine equity, access to technology, treatment and diagnostics remain key concerns for a country like Pakistan. These concerns should be at the core of the treaty to prevent a repeat of the global mayhem wrought by pandemics such as Covid-19. More importantly, the new treaty should be driven by public health rather than security concerns. Here too, countries of the South, including Pakistan, should ensure that a fine balance is struck between these two positions.

(By Arif Azad Dawn, 07, 28/11/2021)

Sindh plans Pfizer booster shot for all adults

The provincial health department has decided to inoculate all people with a booster shot of Pfizer keeping in view the increased risk of transmission and re-infection posed by the new Covid-19 variant Omicron.

"The decision has been taken but the department is yet to make required arrangements for this purpose and announce a date for its launch," said a health official.

The booster jab would be offered to people who were already vaccinated with any of the Chinese vaccines, Sinopharm, Sinovac and Cansino, he added.

Currently, the facility for the booster jab is available at the Dow University of Health Sciences and Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre.

Earlier, the federal government placed a complete ban on travel from seven countries in the wake of the discovery of a new heavily mutated variant of coronavirus that has recently been reported in South Africa.

Meanwhile, experts have called upon the government to improve Covid-19 surveillance facilities at airports and other entry points of the country, especially for passengers arriving from high-risk countries.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, Dawn, 13, 29/11/2021)

Omicron threat: Sindh allows booster shots

As the world governments including Pakistan rush to contain Omicron, a new heavily mutated Covid-19 strain, the government of Sindh on Sunday allowed the administration of Pfizer booster shot aimed at curtailing the spread of the new strain.

Sindh Health Secretary Zulfiqar Ali Shah said that a decision in this regard has been taken by the provincial government and a notification will be issued soon, Express News reported.

He said that all fully vaccinated individuals can avail the facility which will be provided free-of-cost by the Sindh government, adding that the decision was taken amid fears of a new Covid-19 wave in the province.

Zulfiqar said that currently, Pfizer vaccine is only available at Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre (JPMC) and Dow University of Health Sciences' (DUHS) Ojha campus. However, he added, efforts were being made to make booster shots available in other health facilities of the province as well.

The variant, now known as Omicron, has cast doubt on global efforts to fight the pandemic because of fears that it is highly infectious, forcing countries to reimpose measures many had hoped were a thing of the past. Scientists are racing to determine the threat posed by the heavily mutated strain - particularly whether it can evade existing vaccines.

Several countries have also announced plans to restrict travel from southern Africa, where it was first detected. On Saturday, the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) banned the entry of travellers from South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Botswana and Hong Kong.

. Planning Minister Asad Umar, who heads the NCOC, confirmed the restrictions on travel from six South African countries and Hong Kong, said stressed that the emergence of the new variant further underscored the urgency to vaccinate all eligible citizens.

"Based on the emergence of the new Covid variant, notification has been issued to restrict travel from 6 South African countries and Hong Kong," Umar said in a tweet.

"The emergence of new variant makes it even more urgent to vaccinate all eligible citizens 12 years and older," he added. Meanwhile, global authorities reacted with alarm on Friday to a new coronavirus variant detected in South Africa, with the EU and Britain among those tightening border controls as researchers sought to find out if the mutation was vaccine-resistant.

Hours after Britain banned flights from South Africa and neighbouring countries and asked travellers returning from there to quarantine, the World Health Organisation (WHO) cautioned against hasty measures.

Covid situation

Fortunately no death was reported due to coronavirus on Sunday, however, 37 new cases emerged when 3,081 tests were conducted.

According to a statement issued from CM House on Sunday, 3,081 samples were tested which detected 37 cases that constituted 1.2 per cent current detection rate. Currently 6,378 patients were under treatment, of them 6,162 were in home isolation, 14 at isolation centers and 202 at different hospitals

. Condition of 197 patients was stated to be critical, including 16 shifted to ventilators.

Out of 37 new cases, 35 have been detected from Karachi. Sharing vaccination data, the statement said that 23,935,812 vaccines have been administered up to November 26. At least 74,143 people were inoculated during the last 24 hours, it said.

So far, total 24,009,955 vaccines have administered which constituted 44.67 per cent of the vaccine eligible population.
(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, The Express Tribune, 04, 29/11/2021)

Cabinet rejects audit report on Covid-19 spending

The federal cabinet on Tuesday rejected the recently-released audit report which hinted at billions of rupees of irregularities in Covid-19 expenditure, vaccination process and Ehsaas relief programme.

The cabinet meeting presided over by Prime Minister Imran Khan also asserted that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) was bound to hold the next general elections on the basis of electronic voting machines (EVMs) in line with the recent legislation carried out by the parliament.

The cabinet expressed its satisfaction over the 'reduction' in prices of food items by 0.67 per cent while media reported that according to the Consumer Price Index (CPI), inflation had risen to over 11pc in November.

On the issue of retired Justice Rana Shamim, the cabinet believed that a conspiracy had been hatched against former Supreme Court chief justice Saqib Nisar by ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Prime Minister Khan also prohibited cabinet members from travelling abroad to ensure austerity.

"The cabinet rejected the audit report on Covid-19 spending and asked three relevant organisations to give their presentations in this regard," Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said in a press conference after the cabinet meeting.

The report on "expenditures incurred on Covid-19 by federal government" released by the finance ministry had pointed out irregularities in government interventions to ensure availability of five essential items — sugar, wheat flour, oil and ghee, pulses and rice — in Utility Stores at subsidised rates.

Mr Chaudhry said the finance ministry had already rejected the audit report and Ehsaas programme in charge and PM's aide Dr Sania Nishtar had also clarified the position of her organisation.

About the use of EVM in the elections, he said: "The cabinet was of the view that following legislation on electoral reforms, the ECP was bound to hold the next general election [in 2023] through EVM."

He said the cabinet expressed reservations about videos circulating on social media which showed votes being bought for the upcoming by-poll in Lahore.

"Such illegal activities would not have come to the fore if steps had been taken by the ECP against horse trading in the recent Senate election," he added.

Free and fair polls were a lifeline for a democratic system and were the basis for formation of a government, he said, urging the ECP to take the matter of vote purchase by specific political parties in Lahore to a logical conclusion.

"If elections are not conducted through EVMs, the government might not be able to fund them," he said, adding that the existing laws only gave legitimacy to polls held via the EVMs.

He said Law Minister Dr Mohammad Farogh Naseem was of the view that on prima facie, the government could only give funds to the ECP for elections held through EVMs.

The government had formed a committee in this regard and the law ministry would give its opinion on the matter, he added.

The minister said the Election Commission should ensure the use of EVMs in the next elections as the Parliament had given a mandate in this regard.

Speaking about former judge of Gilgit-Baltistan, the information minister said during hearing on the matter on Tuesday, retired Justice Shamim told the court that he had not yet examined the affidavit attributed to him.

When asked whether he had given it to a newspaper, the former judge had responded in the court, "My affidavit is sealed in a locker in the UK. I don't know how it was leaked."

Terming the development "surprising", Mr Chaudhry said if the affidavit was in a locker how did it reach the newspaper that initially reported it, adding that "it seems that the affidavit reached the newspaper through Nawaz Sharif".

"A campaign has been launched against the judiciary and armed forces and we hope that the court would take the matter to its logical conclusion," he added.

According to media report, Justice Shamim revealed in an alleged affidavit that he had witnessed Saqib Nisar relaying instructions to a high court judge not to release former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz in corruption references.

Prices of commodities

Federal Minister Chaudhry claimed that except for tea, Pakistan had the cheapest prices of all other kitchen commodities in the region, comprising India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

“We are doing whatever we can in these times of global inflation,” he remarked.

The minister also announced that a bumper rice crop was expected this year with a harvest of nine million tonnes.

He said in just a month’s period, the cost of sugar had come down to Rs60 per kg, blaming the Sindh government for the increase in price.

“Inflation is rampant in the cities like Karachi and Hyderabad. The Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government is being portrayed as inexperienced whereas the party that has been governing the province for over 30 years has failed to check food inflation,” he added.

The 40pc upward trend in the Sensitive Price Index (SPI) was due to inflation in Karachi and Sindh, the minister said, adding that the price of tomato had registered 15.4pc decrease, onion, 7.4pc and the cost of chicken had fallen by 6.6pc. The price of a bag of wheat flour had reduced by 1pc, he added.

The minister said in Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Lahore, Multan and Faisalabad, a flour bag was available for Rs1,100 whereas in Karachi, it was priced at Rs1,404 and Rs1,443 in Hyderabad due to bad governance of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government.

He said similarly, in the international market, a sack of urea was available for Rs10,500 per bag while in Punjab, it could be bought for Rs1,700.

Gas shortage

Talking about gas, of which the country was seeing shortage with the onset of winter, the minister warned that gas reserves in the country were depleting.

“And we have not discovered any new resources,” he said, highlighting the need for a strategy to address the issue of disappearing indigenous reserves of gas and the emerging shortfall of the commodity.

He said only 28pc Pakistanis were actually being supplied gas, while “the rest of the country, deprived of the commodity’s supply, facilitated this small percentage”.

It has been learnt that PM Khan has barred cabinet members from travelling abroad to ensure austerity and urged them to work more vigorously in their respective ministry to tackle economic challenges in the country.

However, talking to Dawn, Fawad Chaudhry said the prime minister had not issued such instructions for any specific reason, but had been urging cabinet members in almost all meetings to adopt austerity measures and avoid unnecessary foreign trips.

He said the cabinet had also expressed concern over the possible spread of the new Covid-19 variant, Omicron, and asked provincial governments and citizens to ensure that inoculation was complete.

“The virus is surely going to reach the country, therefore wearing masks was necessary,” he emphasised.

Sharing other developments from the cabinet meeting, Mr Chaudhry said formalities had been completed to receive \$3 billion in safe deposits and \$1.2bn worth of oil supplies on deferred payments from Saudi Arabia.

The meeting had also given approval to limit construction of buildings around airports and tasked Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Climate Change Malik Amin Aslam to formulate a long-term policy on smog in Lahore.

The minister said the Federal Investigation Agency had also been asked to launch a programme against human trafficking.

Pakistan would also be sending 50,000 tonnes of wheat to Kabul and hosting an extraordinary meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation’s Council of Foreign Ministers to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, he added.

(By Syed Irfan Raza Dawn, 01, 01/12/2021)

Covid funds controversy

A COMPREHENSIVE and detailed report by the auditor general of Pakistan on the utilisation of Covid-19 funds by the government has raised grave concerns about misappropriations. It has been reported that it was only under IMF pressure that the government agreed to release the report. This suggests that without this pressure, the government was not willing to share with the citizens these serious allegations which must be probed on a priority basis.

According to the report, the Utility Stores Corporation has the most to answer for in terms of its procurements, quality controls and other violations of standard procedures. Various other government agencies, including the National Disaster Management Authority and the Ehsaas Programme also need to come clean about the objections raised by the AGP.

The PTI government had allocated a substantial budget for Covid relief and had claimed that this money would be utilised to help the financially weaker segments of society cope with the fallout of lockdowns and other Covid-related economic issues. However, it now turns out, as per the AGP report, that these very large sums of money were not managed very well. In fact, if the report is not refuted with evidence, it would suggest financial misappropriation and embezzlement on a very large scale. It would also raise very disturbing questions about the way that government organisations are being run and how the political oversight concerning them is weak and incompetent.

The federal government needs to come clean on all these matters and provide a detailed explanation on each of the red flags raised by the AGP’s report. At the same time, it also needs to inform the citizens why it was attempting to keep this damning report away from them and released it only under pressure from the IMF. The numbers involved are too high and the allegations levelled too serious to be ignored.

This is why it is rather strange that the NCOC is also silent on the matter. As the main coordinating body for all Covid-related activities, NCOC must ensure that the AGP report is explained to the satisfaction of citizens. The NCOC has performed well and is held up as an example of success where most countries have failed to tackle the Covid threat. However, the AGP report also casts a dark shadow on the NCOC because it was after all the umbrella that covered all activities linked to Covid-19 and the government's policies.

If these serious and specific questions of misappropriations in the AGP report are not addressed by the NCOC, they can threaten to undo the good work that the NCOC has done over the past two years. It is hoped the government will move swiftly to address every single concern in the report and take stern action wherever a wrongdoing is proved. There is no time to waste.

(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 01/12/2021)

'16m have received first Covid vaccine doses'

The Sindh government has claimed that over 16 million people have received the first doses of their vaccines, while 1.06 million have taken both doses.

This was stated during an important meeting held at the Sindh Secretariat on the Coronavirus vaccination campaign, under the chairmanship of chief secretary Syed Mumtaz Ali Shah. Additional Chief Secretary Home Qazi Shahid Pervez, Karachi Commissioner Muhammad Iqbal Memon, Health Secretary Zulfiqar Ali Shah, Colleges Secretary Khalid Haider Shah and School Education Secretary Ghulam Akbar Leghari participated in the meeting. The meeting was briefed about the ongoing vaccination campaign in the province and the drive at educational institutions.

It was further stated 0.28 million children have been vaccinated at government schools of Sindh and 82,000 took their doses at private schools. As many as 76,000 college students of the province have also been vaccinated.

In the meeting, Sindh Chief Secretary Syed Mumtaz Ali Shah said all private educational institutions of the province should ensure the vaccination of their pupils. Shah added that all deputy commissioners should ensure the target of the vaccination campaign.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, The Express Tribune, 04, 09/12/2021)

16.17m partially vaccinated against Covid in Sindh

Forty-six per cent people in Sindh are now partially vaccinated against Covid-19 as the vaccination campaign continues across the province.

This information was shared in a meeting held on Wednesday at the Sindh Secretariat.

Chaired by Chief Secretary Syed Mumtaz Ali Shah, the meeting was attended by Additional Chief Secretary-home Qazi Shahid Pervez, Karachi Commissioner Iqbal Memon, provincial secretaries Zulfiqar Ali Shah, Khalid Haider Shah, Ghulam Akbar Leghari and others.

The participants were briefed about the ongoing vaccination campaign in the province, particularly in educational institutions.

The health secretary informed the meeting that 16.175 million people had received their first dose whereas 10.6m people had got both doses of Covid-19 vaccine.

So far, he said, 282,000 students had been vaccinated in government schools while 82,000 students had been vaccinated in private schools. A total of 76,000 college students in the province had been vaccinated against coronavirus.

The chief secretary instructed officials to ensure all private educational institutions in the province were covered under the ongoing vaccination drive.

He asked all deputy commissioners to ensure that the target of the vaccination campaign was met and, in cases of failure, officials concerned should be issued a displeasure notice.

The chief secretary also directed the officials of the Peoples Primary Healthcare Initiative to complete the vaccination target.

All commissioners and deputy commissioners participated in the meeting through a video link.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, Dawn, 14, 09/12/2021)

Omicron threat in Pakistan

AS experts warned, it was only a matter of time before it would happen. Earlier this week, the first suspected case of the Omicron variant surfaced at a private hospital in Karachi. The patient, an unvaccinated middle-aged woman, has been discharged and is currently said to be isolating at home. In a video message released on Thursday, the Sindh Health Minister Azra Fazal Pechuho stated that while the behaviour of the virus indicated the presence of the Omicron variant, genome sequencing had yet to be confirmed. This variant, first reported in southern Africa, has spread to at least 57 countries. Though more research is needed, initial reports have suggested that this version of the coronavirus is more transmissible — even those who have previously contracted Covid are not immune. According to WHO, though the variant is potentially more transmissible, there was some evidence that it caused a milder infection than the Delta variant. In fact, up to Dec 6, all 212 Omicron cases reported from 18 European countries were categorised as asymptomatic or mild. This, however, warned the WHO, did not mean that caution could be thrown to the wind. Even if the infection is mild, higher transmissibility means that more people will become infected resulting in more hospitalisations. In a country like Pakistan, where the health infrastructure is in a shambolic state, there is greater danger of the tertiary healthcare system becoming overwhelmed. It is good that the government, as a pre-emptive measure, banned flights from 16 countries and tightened protocols from 13 others. The Sindh government had also issued new guidelines.

Meanwhile, at a press conference last month, Federal Planning Minister Asad Umar and SAPM Health Dr Faisal Sultan talked about ramping up Covid-19 vaccination in light of the new variant. These measures notwithstanding, the government leaders should again stress the need for

adhering to social distancing and other Covid-related SOPs in all public and private institutions. The WHO chief in his statement summed up the situation aptly: "Any complacency now will cost lives."
(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 10/12/2021)

Door-to-door vaccination drive begins after Omicron threat

The health department on Friday initiated a door-to-door Covid-19 vaccination drive in Jamshed Town that recently reported a suspected case of Omicron variant, officials told *Dawn*.

The area, they said, wasn't under any form of lockdown yet.

"A decision in this regard would be taken once (polymerase chain reaction test) results of the 51 samples obtained from people residing in the neighbourhood of the suspected female patient are received," said health department's spokesperson Atif Vighio.

The department in the meantime, he said, was focusing on community counselling on Covid-19 vaccination and compliance to the standard operating procedure (SOPs) as officials found a large number of unvaccinated individuals in the locality.

"We are telling them why it's important to get vaccinated and ensuring complete adherence to SOPs. There is no involvement of any law enforcement agency right now," he said.

About the 51 samples being tested for Covid-19, he said the department had collected double samples of each individual to minimise chances of false negative cases.

On Thursday, the health department had confirmed the first suspected case of Omicron variant in the country. The female suspected patient, a resident of Jamshed Town, had been discharged from Aga Khan University Hospital and currently under home isolation along with another family member in her 80s.

Samples collected from the suspected patient and her two male relatives, who are under treatment at the AKUH, have been collected for genome sequencing to confirm infection of Omicron variant. The results will take one to two weeks, officials said.

Health minister Dr Azra Fazal Pechuho in a statement said that the Omicron variant was very transmissible but deaths or serious illness had not been seen in recent reports coming from South Africa, where the variant was first detected.

(By Dawn, Faiza Ilyas Dawn, 13, 11/12/2021)

Omicron in Pakistan?

It was only a matter of time when news would arrive that the Omicron variant has entered Pakistan. The first "suspected" case has been reported in a 57-year-old unvaccinated woman in Karachi. While the genomic study will take some time, experts are fairly certain by the way it is behaving that this is indeed the new Omicron variant. But what does the emergence of the Omicron variant mean for Pakistan and the rest of the world?

At the onset of its emergence, medical professionals had claimed that Omicron had the potential of becoming much deadlier than the ruthless Delta variant since it has around 30 mutations on the spike protein as compared to Delta's 18. However, initial research suggests that while the virus has an increased growth and spread rate, it is less harmful than the Delta variant. Most cases detected in the 38 countries the new variant has spread to are asymptomatic without a single casualty until now. But this could also be because majority of these countries have a high vaccination rate making it less effective and that previous variants have increased overall immunity. Whatever the case, speculations are still premature and Pakistan cannot let its guard down considering its abysmally low vaccination rate. The situation could unfold differently here. The authorities must immediately trace the origins virus in Pakistan by analysing the woman's travel and contact history. Then relevant people must be tested to ascertain how much the virus has already spread. For this, the government must develop more genome testing centres and take full advantage of the New Variant Assessment Platform programme initiated by the UK.

This is our new reality and our future remains uncertain. Variants could emerge from anywhere and cause immense death and destruction. This time, South Africa had to bear the brunt with countries imposing travel bans. The world community must act in a much more mature manner and devise protocols. Otherwise, countries will be hesitant of providing essential Covid-19 information.

(By Editorial, The Express Tribune, 14, 11/12/2021)

Another suspected case of Omicron variant identified in Karachi

A suspected case of Omicron variant of coronavirus was reported on Friday, health department sources told *Dawn*.

They said the patient, a 35-year-old man, had no signs or symptoms of the illness when he arrived in Karachi from the United Kingdom on Dec 8.

They said he had apparently recovered from the illness and was currently under observation at the Qatar Hospital.

"His genome sequencing report stating that the infection appeared to be of Omicron has been sent to the National Institute of Health for further confirmation," said an official on the condition of anonymity.

Patient has recovered and is under observation at Qatar Hospital

The passenger was suspected to have coronavirus infection in random sampling being carried out at Karachi Airport with the help of a rapid antigen test.

Source said the passenger was quarantined at an airport hotel from where he escaped on Dec 10 when his PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test of coronavirus infection came positive. His samples were sent for genome study.

"His genome sequencing report came positive on Dec 13 and subsequently a search was launched for him. He was located two days later. He is now coronavirus negative and under observation at the Qatar hospital," he said.

About the standard operating procedure in place at the airport, health department sources said all passengers coming from Category C countries had to go through a rapid antigen test.

"In case the test comes positive, the patient is quarantined till he/she is negative. Since, we don't have any direct flights from South Africa [which first reported the Omicron variant] right now, we check the travel history of passengers and carry out random tests."

Pakistan had reported its first confirmed case of Omicron variant a few days back.

"The National Institute of Health, Islamabad has been able to confirm that a recently suspected sample [of a female patient] from Karachi is indeed the 'Omicron variant' of Sars-CoV2," the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) had said in a tweet.

"This is the first confirmed case but continued surveillance of identified samples is in place to identify trends," the NCOC added.

It has also allowed Pakistanis to travel inbound from category C countries; the Netherlands, Hungary, Ukraine, Ireland, Zimbabwe, Slovenia, Vietnam, Poland, Croatia, South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini and Botswana.
(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter, Dawn, 13, 18/12/2021)

Booster shots

IN a welcome move, Pakistani authorities have decided to extend the Covid-19 vaccine booster to all adults of 30 years and above. According to a recent NCOC decision, those in this category will be able to get free booster shots of their choice from Jan 1. Earlier, only people above 50 or those with compromised immunity could receive booster jabs of the vaccine they had been immunised with. But as several people couldn't travel easily because a number of countries let in only those who had been administered vaccines approved by them, the government here decided to allow people to receive booster jabs of their choice, irrespective of the vaccine they were initially administered. At a time when the Omicron variant is spearheading a potential fifth wave of infections in Europe, the decision taken by Pakistan will also provide some degree of protection to people, including those who had already been inoculated but who may once again be vulnerable to the virus as the efficacy of vaccines administered months ago tapers off. In fact, the Omicron variant is said to be highly transmissible even in people who have been vaccinated.

It is true that the WHO says the Omicron variant is a consequence of vaccine inequality, and has warned that "no country can boost its way out of the pandemic". It says that booster shots might prolong the pandemic as developed nations divert vaccine supplies away from the countries that need them most. This statement came in response to the recently announced booster programmes in the US and Israel. However, Pakistan's case appears to be quite different. While it can hardly be ranked among those who hoard vaccines, it has managed to inoculate millions, the vaccine hesitancy in the population notwithstanding. The NCOC's diligent efforts have been paying off with over 63m fully vaccinated and more than 90m having received a single dose. It must continue with its efforts to speed up regular Covid-19 vaccination alongside administering booster shots.

(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 25/12/2021)

New variant

THE new year approaches on a grim note. Covid-19 numbers are skyrocketing globally, with close to an unprecedented 900,000 cases detected daily on average between Dec 22-28. Several countries, including the US, Australia and multiple European nations have recorded all-time high numbers as the Omicron variant spreads like wild fire across the world, putting a damper on traditional end-of-year festivities and hopes of an economic revival. While studies suggest that Omicron presents with milder symptoms than earlier variants even though it is far more transmissible, unvaccinated individuals are at higher risk of serious infection. Hospitals are filling up fast with those who have been unable to or chosen not to get the jab. Even in the case of mild Covid-19 infections, a precipitous increase in numbers strains health systems by overburdening laboratories, pharmacies, medical staff, etc. Then there are knock-on effects, such as small businesses struggling to stay afloat despite loss of employees who have contracted the infection or been ordered to quarantine.

Last year around this time, the roll-out of vaccines against Covid-19 had been a harbinger of hope that the world would finally be able to put this deadly chapter behind it. While Omicron and the astonishing speed with which it is spreading has proved that to be a false dawn, we are nevertheless far better equipped than we were to stave off the infection and prevent the mass fatalities that occurred in many parts of the globe in 2020. Countries are once again putting in place measures such as limiting social gatherings, closing down venues where crowds gather including cinemas, concert halls, etc. In terms of the Omicron variant, Asia has been a comparative latecomer to the 'party'; strict quarantine rules for incoming travellers and compliance with instructions to wear masks have helped keep the numbers low in places like Japan, South Korea and Thailand.

Even before Pakistan's first case of Omicron was confirmed on Dec 13, Federal Planning Minister Asad Umar had warned that the new variant's arrival in the country was inevitable. He did, however, add that we could "reduce its effects by adopting preventive measures" and urged everyone to get themselves vaccinated. According to the National Command and Operation Centre, 30pc of Pakistan's total population and 46pc of its eligible population is fully vaccinated. Nevertheless, tough times lie ahead if the current trend continues. The number of confirmed Omicron infections had gone up to 79 by Tuesday. Equally worryingly, on Dec 29, Pakistan detected 482 new Covid-19 cases: it was the first time in nearly four weeks that the tally had exceeded 400. While public messaging about preventive measures has increased, anecdotal evidence suggests that airport protocols have become fairly lax, particularly when several flights arrive within a short span of time. With WHO warning of a Covid 'tsunami', we cannot allow any flank to be exposed.

(By Editorial, Dawn, 06, 31/12/2021)