

South Asia Centre Meeting
15 April 2020

Summary of Discussions

South Asia Centre at MP-IDSA held its weekly meeting on 15 April 2020, which was attended by Dr Smruti S Pattanaik, Ms Sumita Kumar, Dr Anand Kumar, Dr Nihar Nayak, Dr Priyanka Singh, Dr Gulbin Sultana, Dr Yaqoob ul Hasan, Dr Mir Ahmed Nazir, Dr Mohammad Eisa, Dr Zainab Akhter, Dr Paulami Sanyal and Dr Ashok Behuria.

Amb Sujan R Chinoy, DG, MP-IDSA, moderated the discussions. During the discussions the following points emerged.

The impact of the COVID-19 on the economy and overall security and politics of the South Asian countries were discussed in today's centre meeting. Important points that came out of today's discussion, country-wise, are given below:

Pakistan

After the second phase of extension of a relaxed lockdown, announced by Imran Khan on 14 April, the religious scholars and Ulema in the country said that congregational prayers, five times a day, and Friday namaz would continue in the mosques.

There was a meeting between the representatives of various religious scholars, representing Jamiat-e-ulema Islam (JUI), Jamiat-e-Ulema Pakistan (JuP), Jamiat-i-Islami (JI) and Tanzeem-i-Islami (TI) at the Karachi Press Club on 14 April, after which this decision was announced. A similar meeting was also held in Jamia Darul Uloom Zakria in Islamabad that was attended by senior clerics representing various seminaries, banned groups, proscribed persons and political and non-political parties and a warning was issued endorsing continuation of prayers in Mosques, especially in view of the upcoming Ramadan month that starts from 25 April.

There have been media reports about Afghan Taliban has enlisted the support of TTP leadership (particularly the Mehsud's) under its fold to fight Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-KP). Thus, it is being said that the TTP, which allegedly hobnobbed earlier with the Afghan intelligence, NDS, has now started sharing intelligence with the Taliban. Therefore, during last couple of weeks, the Taliban have been able to eliminate top police personnel and NDS officers.

These reports came at a time when TTP's media wing Umer media issued a documentary showing its former leader, now dead, Hakemullah Mehsud leading the prayer with Mullah Sangin and Sirajudin Haqqani joining it.

The Imran Khan led government is being criticized for its haphazard approach to deal with Corona virus pandemic. According to commentators in the Pakistan media Imran is not being allowed by vested interests to impose complete lockdown, which might lead to spread of the pandemic in the country unnecessarily. Given the abysmal condition of the healthcare system and poor testing facilities, in case the partial lockdown fails to stop the spread of Corona virus, the impact may well be too huge for the state to contain. Also, amid the crisis, there are also disturbing reports of wheat and sugar mafia trying to destabilize the market and the government unwilling to take this issue up, with the seriousness the situation demands.

Sri Lanka

As of now, there are 219 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 7 deaths in Sri Lanka. 61 people, testing positive for the virus, have already recovered. Government of Sri Lanka has taken preventive and precautionary measures to contain the spread of corona virus in the country, which has been appreciated both within the country and by the international community. Sri Lanka has also received external help in the form of PPEs from China and medicines from India to fight Covid-19. China offered a concessionary loan of \$500 million to Sri Lanka. The loan can be paid back over a period of 10 years with a three-year grace period, along with concessionary interest rates. An agreement in this regard was reportedly signed between Sri Lanka's Finance Ministry and the China Development Bank on 18 March.

The government's handling of the issue of disposal of the dead bodies of Covid 19 patients, releasing of an army officer from prison who was convicted for the murder of 8 Tamils during the Eelam war, and postponement of the Parliamentary elections have drawn criticism from the opposition and given rise to disappointment among the members of minority communities, political parties, human rights organisations and civil society activists.

Maldives

As of now, there are 19 positive cases of Covid 19 and no death related to the pandemic. Effective handling of the crisis situation by Government of Maldives has been appreciated at home and outside.

The main concern of the Government, however, is to address the situation arising in the country due to negative impact of the pandemic on the global economy. The government is trying to reduce its dependency on external markets for revenue earning and particularly, its dependency on import for food supply in the country. Effort is on to reduce dependency by 50 % on food import by growing enough food within the country to meet the demands of the people. Lands are being issued to the interested people to grow agricultural products at home.

Bangladesh

As of today, there are 1012 people who have tested positive for Covid 19 in Bangladesh. 46 people have died and 42 people have recovered. Covid 19 has affected Bangladesh's garment industry. Many of the garment workers have lost their job due cancellation and rescheduling of orders by major importers of Garment. According to Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporter Association (BGMEA), 1127 factories have reported \$3.13b worth of cancellation of order. Cancellation of order is going to affect 2.24 million garment workers.

Bangladesh had cancelled visa on arrival for the Chinese on 2nd of February. Going forward, on 22nd March it suspended passenger flights from all countries. However, soon afterwards, quite strangely, it made an exception for four countries-- China, UK, Thailand and Hong Kong-- saying these destinations poses low coronal risk for Bangladesh. Only on 31st March all inward- and outward-bound flights were stopped. On 18th February, China supplied 500 pieces of 'most advanced testing kits' to Bangladesh. On 8th April, Bangladesh made a request to China to provide it with face masks and other essential things to fight Covid 19.

Bangladeshi government failed to enforce its decision in favour of a complete lockdown. Religious gatherings as well as celebration of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman's birthday were allowed to take place in the month of March. Nevertheless, the government has managed to impose a complete lockdown in Cox's Bazaar district, Chittagong, where 3.4 million Rohingya refugees are residing. With the beginning of Ramadan, towards the end of April, stopping Friday congregation would be difficult.

The lockdown has been extended till 25th April by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has also announced a US\$ 1.7 billion relief package to the farmers. Additionally, her government announced an economic stimulus package worth over US\$8.5 billion, out of which, US\$3.54bn will be available for industries and service sectors, and US\$2.53b will be set aside for loans to small and medium-sized businesses at a concessional interest rate. Earlier, the government had announced US\$590m for export-oriented garment industries to overcome the crisis they are facing in terms of paying garment workers.

Afghanistan

Pakistan has been keenly watching the Taliban-U.S. deal and the US is seeking its help wants to see it smoothly through. Pakistan fears that there might be forces who are trying to sabotage the deal. The Taliban, on its side, is alleging the US is dishonouring the deal and attacking Taliban facilities in different provinces. Therefore, it is urging the US to act according to terms of the deal. The US is denying such allegations and its special representative Amb Khalilzad met Pakistan Army chief on 14 April seeking his cooperation in implementing the deal on the ground. In the US, critics of the present administration look at the deal as asymmetric and in Taliban's favour. At home alliances and counter-alliances are being built up keeping an eye on the nature and shape of post-withdrawal power architecture emerging in the horizon.

The Taliban are advertising defection of government forces into their ranks through their websites and publications perhaps trying to lure security forces at lower levels to switch their loyalty towards them. Apprehensions of gradual withdrawal of American financial support and its impact on security forces must also be playing up in the minds of both Afghan army soldiers and policemen.

The non-Taliban political leadership is hopelessly divided over the issue of election results and sharing of power. Leave apart the Taliban challenge, mediation of US Secretary of State and even his threat of fund-cut of US\$ 1bn have not raised enough concern in Kabul for President Ghani and former Chief Executive Abdullah to bury their hatchet and come together to shape the post-deal political narrative in Afghanistan, especially in the wake of the upcoming intra-Afghan dialogue which the Taliban has pledged itself to. Commercial flight suspensions to and from Afghanistan are now in force

Amidst all this, both the Afghan government and the Taliban shadow administration are claiming that they are doing whatever necessary to fight the challenge of Covid-19 in their respective areas of control. So far, Afghanistan has witnessed 714 cases of infection with 23 casualties. Herat remains the most affected part of the country. This is because of its proximity to Iran a global COvid-19 hotspot and return of pilgrims from Iran. The Islam Qala-Dogharoon land border crossings (Hirat) remain open on both sides for both individuals and commercial traffic. The Milak crossing (Nimroz) is formally open only to commercial traffic and documented citizens of Afghanistan. Afghan government plans to slow down returns of Afghan pilgrims through negotiations with Iran. Aware that such political initiatives may not gain traction, it is focusing on registration of returnees at the borders; coordination with provincial authorities to have returnees transferred to their respective provinces and transport to take them there.

Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan remain open only for commercial traffic and crossing of documented citizens back to Afghanistan. There is a concern about future uncontrolled waves of returnees arriving at the border after some people pushed their way through reception areas without undergoing health screening during the first week of April. This is especially so because of limited capacity of the Government for documenting and tracing of passport and Tazkera-holding returnees.

After closure for weeks, two main crossing points with Pakistan at Torkham and Chaman were opened by Pakistan government on 10 April. Pakistan confirmed on 8 April that Pakistan would facilitate movement of cargo trucks and containers three days per week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) to ease challenges associated with moving humanitarian cargo.

Nepal

Lockdown is extended till April 27. The number of infected cases is increased to 16 as of April 15. India-Nepal borders which was shut down on March 23, will remain closed at least until May 3. However, smooth supply of essential goods across the border continues through the lockdown.

World Bank predicts 1.5 to 2.8 % growth rate for the current and coming fiscal years in Nepal. Nepal finds its place among 25 countries who are to receive debt relief from the IMF for six months, as part of its

response to help address the impact of the Corona pandemic. As of Dec 2019, Nepal's outstanding loan to be paid the international institutions stood at \$52.36 million.

Nepal has asked China to cooperate and supply more essential medicines and medical equipment. On March 29, Nepal purchased medical equipment worth \$10 million from China. There were reportedly donations from China's Sichuan province and the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu, which include different kinds of masks, thermometers, chloroquine phosphate tablets, protective clothing, and portable ventilators weighing 1.1 tons. According to Chinese media, donations from the Alibaba Foundation and Jack Ma Foundation include 100,200 N95 masks and 20,064 test kits weighing 1.4 tons. The Nepal government has also purchased relevant goods from China. However, there were reports of Nepal briefly asked its healthcare facilities not to use the testing kits bought from China.

PMs of Nepal and India have held telephonic conversations during the lockdown. Both the leaders reportedly discussed helping stranded migrant labourers in each other's country, the supply of goods to Nepal, and Hydroxychloroquine supply from India. However, Nepal refused India's proposal to send a medical team to Nepal. Nepal, however, like Maldives, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, sought support under the SAARC Emergency Fund for containing Covid-19 and its impact. India committed \$10 mn to the emergency fund while Nepal committed \$1mn.

Nepal has sought additional funding in the range of Rs 69 billion to Rs 104 billion from International multilateral donors for the current and upcoming fiscal year to cover increased healthcare costs.

Bhutan

As of April 15, only 5 Corona infected cases have been reported in Bhutan. India-Bhutan borders have been closed till 3 May. However, the supply of essential goods from India continues.

A large number of Bhutanese are infected by the Carona virus in the US, Australia, and other countries. Bhutan government has requested these countries to provide health care and other essential items during the lockdown time to the Bhutanese living there. The government has announced Nu 30 billion funds for addressing the health crisis with the spread of COVID-19.