$3.3 billion US assistance allocated for Afghan security forces

US administration led by President Joe Biden has allocated $3.3 billion in the country's $6 trillion budget for Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). The amount shows $300 million increase comparing to the previous year.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan government has welcomed the US decision on increasing the $300 million for ANDSF in the country's fiscal year budget. Afghanistan National Security Council has said that the increase in the budget shows good relations and joint work of Afghanistan with the rest of the world.

"The increase in the US budget proposal for ANDSF shows the world's continued support to Afghan national security forces," said Rahmatullah Ander, a spokesperson to Afghanistan National Security Council.

Based on reports, if the proposed budget is approved by the US Congress, the amount will be spent for equipping, training and funding the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).

This comes amid of US and NATO troops withdrawal process have been completed by 25 percent. The increase in the budget for the support of ANDSF shows the US continued support to Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, NATO Secretary – General in his recent remarks as insisted on the organization's continued support to Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, saying that the organization believe in increasing capabilities of ANDSF.

Following the US administration announcement in connection with starting the country's troop withdrawal process from Afghanistan, Pentagon announced that US will continue ANDSF training in a third country, which was welcomed by the people and government of Afghanistan.

Undoubtedly, the US and NATO troops withdrawal process will be completed by September and it is ANDSF who will fight international terrorism and address all terrorist threats. The Afghan security forces will need continued support from the US and NATO member countries.

With the announcement of starting the US and NATO troops withdrawal process from Afghanistan, Taliban with close support of intelligence networks in the region and terrorist groups started widespread attacks on Afghan National Defense and Security Forces across the country.

The current Afghan Defense and Security Forces have received high military trainings from the US and NATO member countries and are able to defend the country and its people.

Although US and NATO member countries have spent 20 years in Afghanistan, unfortunately terrorism is still posing threats to the people of Afghanistan and the only forces that will address the threats are the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. Therefore, the US and NATO member countries as well as the international community should continue their full support from the Afghan security forces to fight international terrorism and defend their country and people.

It is worth mentioning that the US and NATO troops withdrawal process from Afghanistan started on 1 May and it is determined that process will be completed by September.

It is believed that if violence ends in Afghanistan, peace will be maintained, but if peace efforts and talks between Afghanistan government and Taliban fail, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces will face with a big test in fighting terrorism in the country.

Suraya Raiszada

Afghanistan blames Pakistan for violating air travel agreement

KABUL: The aviation authorities in Afghanistan on Monday blamed Pakistan for unilaterally and arbitrarily cutting up to 80% flights of an Afghan airliner shuttling passengers between the two neighbors. According to the Afghanistan Aviation Authority, Islamabad has cut the Kam Air flights from Islamabad to Kabul by 80%, citing the coronavirus pandemic. Mohammad Naeem, spokesman for the aviation body, told Anadolu Agency if talks with Pakistan failed to address the issue, Kabul would reciprocate the move and impose similar restrictions on Pakistan's national flag carrier Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). "The PIA is conducting five flights a week from Islamabad to Kabul, but the flights of Kam Air have been dropped from five per week to only one in clear violation of the bilateral agreement in this regard," he said, adding if COVID-19 is the reason, why not limit the PIA flights as well.

This comes amid an evident surge in flights from Pakistan to Afghanistan, carrying thousands of Pakistani migrants wishing to fly onward to the Gulf countries.

Highest single day infections, deaths Afghanistan on Monday recorded 1,566 coronavirus infections and 30 deaths – its highest single day toll in the ongoing third wave of the pandemic. With this, the cumulative total of known COVID-19 cases surged to 73,256, and the death total reached 2,974 while the number of recoveries stood at 57,630.

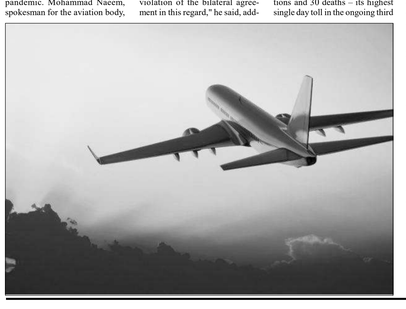
Last week, Afghanistan closed down all universities, schools, and other academic institutions.

"We are desperately trying to manage the third wave of the pandemic, but if people continued to defy health guidelines such as keeping social distance, wearing mask and washing hands, a catastrophe is imminent. Do not expect a miracle," Health Minister Waheed Majrooh said while issuing a stern warning about the surging infections.

In February, Afghanistan began the vaccine rollout following the World Health Organization's emergency use approval for the Indian-made shots. The country received 500,000 doses of Oxford/AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine from India, locally known as Covishield. It is being produced by the Serum Institute of India for mid- and low-income countries. An equal amount of the doses of the same vaccine has been gifted to Afghanistan by India.

Afghanistan's Health Ministry has repeatedly called for more international support to vaccinate at least 20% of the estimated 38 million population this year, and 60% by the end of 2022.

The Kabul Times



Despite COVID-19, Pakistan and Afghanistan make Good progress in eradicating polio

KABUL: Despite the 18-month COVID-19 pandemic, Pakistan and Afghanistan have observed a sharp decline in polio cases which the health authorities attribute to their effective back-to-back anti-polio drives.

Officials leading the polio eradication program believe that the decline occurred due to uninterrupted polio vaccination campaigns, improved security and the polio field teams' accessibility to the population in high-risk areas.

However, despite a remarkable decline in poliovirus cases, officials believe that 'vaccine refusal and hesitancy' by parents remains a bigger challenge than COVID in completely eradicating the virus.

Pakistan and Afghanistan, both members of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Eastern Mediterranean Region, are the only two countries in the world still fighting to eradicate wild polio virus as a cause of the crippling disease.

In August 2020, Nigeria achieved zero wild poliovirus cases, leaving Africa to be certified by WHO as a free of the wild poliovirus.

However, some 16 countries in Africa are still experiencing periodic outbreaks of vaccine-derived polio cases (cVDPV2). While rare, vaccine-derived polioviruses cases can occur when the weakened live virus in the oral polio vaccine passes among under-immunized populations and, over time, changes to a form that can cause acute disease. If a population is adequately immunized with polio vaccines, it will be protected from both wild polio and circulating vaccine-derived polioviruses.

A WHO report on the global battle to eradicate polio was the subject of a wide-ranging discussion Saturday at the World Health Assembly – with WHO and other member states commending Pakistan and Afghanistan and Africa on the progress seen – while also highlighting the uphill battle still faced to completely eradicate both wild and vaccine-derived forms of the disease. Member states also called upon WHO to remain committed to polio eradication – including building the capacity of national health teams to gradually take over the roles of the WHO-supported Global Polio Eradication initiative.

"We are accountable to children," said WHO Polio Director Aidan O'Leary, in describing the challenges still faced to eradicate the last remaining cases of wild poliovirus – along with tackling vaccine derived cases that continue to circulate not only in Africa and Asia, but other regions as well.

'Last Mile' in Pakistan?

On both sides of the shared 2,640-kilometer border, Pakistan and Afghanistan are focused on both forms of the virus – working alongside about dozen international health and donor agencies.

Speaking to Health Policy Watch ahead of the WHA, key Pakistani health officials expressed hope that the wild poliovirus could soon be eradicated altogether in that country.

"This is our last mile and hopefully we will achieve zero cases in 2022," said National Coordinator Dr. Shehzad Baig. He told Health Policy Watch that the last three anti-polio campaigns had been very effective reaching 90 to 95% of targets in eradicating the virus from the country – and if that track record can be maintained then the eradication target can be met.

He said that the silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic's lockdown rules meant that children had been easier to reach: "Mostly children in high-risk areas remained at home and were accessible to polio teams for vaccination," said Baig.

Stability in Pakistan's security situation since last year also contributed to effective anti-polio drives, he said adding: "Since November, there was no security challenge for 286,000 field polio workers accessing areas for polio drives in security risk regions," he said.

A WHO report submitted to the World Health Assembly (WHA) on Saturday, stated that WPV transmission is ongoing in traditional reservoirs in the northern corridor (Peshawar/Khyber), Karachi and the southern corridor (Quetta block, Balochistan), with expansion of virus to previously polio-free areas (Punjab and Sindh), and detection of virus across the country.

It also said that circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 continues to spread geographically, notably in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with ongoing breakthrough transmission complicated by a large nationwide accumulation of populations susceptible to type 2 poliovirus.

Afghanistan also Sees Progress – But Poor Reporting May be Factor

In Afghanistan, reports of polio virus cases were also on the decline this year as compared to 2020 – although surveillance remains an issue, particularly in areas where the reach of the central government is weak, officials cautioned. Just one wild polio virus case has been reported so far in Afghanistan so far in 2021, as compared to 56 in 2020, according to the Independent Monitoring Board, an international body monitoring the performance of the polio programs by the countries. And only 38 cases of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) had been reported in Afghanistan, in contrast to 308 cases in 2020.

In the wake of three WPV cases in November 2020, some 54 cross-border teams and 288 permanent transit teams (PTTs) were deployed across Afghanistan, the IMB said. The teams vaccinated 79,489 adults and 538,674 children. Wild Polio Virus type 1 is endemic to the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan, but WPV, along with more vaccine derived cases, can encroach previously polio-free areas in the north and west of the country in the absence of containment vaccine campaigns. And those had been suspended in the first six months of the pandemic.

In Pakistan, cases so far in 2021 have declined even more dramatically. According to the official data of Pakistan Polio Eradication Program (PPEP), the country saw 84 Wild Polio Virus (WPV) cases and 83 circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) virus cases in 2020 (the IMB says the number of vaccine derived cases in 2020 was even higher – 135).

This year, there has been just one WPV case reported so far, and no cVDPV2 cases.

Speaking at the WHA, the Afghan representative said, however, that still 3.5 million children are missing from the country's vaccination campaigns. Afghanistan also urged the global community for more financial support to expand the immunization campaigns in the security risk areas.

Setbacks at Start of Pandemic Followed by Renewed Vaccine Drives

In both countries, campaigns were initially suspended for the first six months of the year. For instance in Pakistan, after the first surge of COVID-19 pandemic, the country's polio program had to suspend its scheduled April National Immunization Drive (NID) – which meant that around 40 million children missed the polio drops.

That followed on interruptions in vaccine drives in 2019, as well, after attacks on polio teams occurred in the country's southern and western regions. As a result, around 250,000 children missed the polo drops as a result leading to 134 polio cases reported in 2019.

However, after the decline of the first COVID-19 wave, Pakistan's polio program, led by the Director General of Pakistan's Health Ministry, Dr Rana Muhammad Safdar rebounded. It conducted two national and three sub-national anti-polio drives between July and December 2020 to cover the immunity gaps. Then, in 2021 the country conducted another national drive to vaccine 40 million children with polio drops.

Pakistani efforts to eliminate polio were seriously undermined a decade ago when the US Central Investigation Agency (CIA) conducted a widely criticized fake polio campaign as part of its intelligence gathering operations on the whereabouts of Osama Bin Laden in Abottabad; the al-Qaeda leader was finally ambushed and killed by US troops in his compound on 2 May 2011.

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