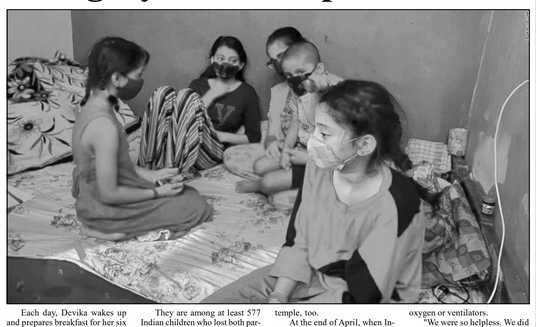
Covid orphans are a tragic legacy of India's pandemic



Each day, Devika wakes up and prepares breakfast for her six siblings.

As they sit on the floor of their brightly painted Delhi home, she places another plate of food in front of a framed photo of her parents. They died just a few weeks ago from Covid-19.

The 23-year-old teacher has become the primary caregiver and breadwinner for five of her siblings, between 4 and 14 years old, and a major pillar of strength for her eldest 20-year-old sister. She's barely had time to grieve.

"My biggest fear is whether I will be able to love them like Mom and Dad or not," said Devika, who is only using her first name over privacy concerns.

"I will earn money; I have faith in myself. My sister will also earn money; I have faith in her. We can do what needs to be done in terms of money, but the absence of parents in their lives is a huge gap to fill, how can we ever fill that void?" she said.

Devika's siblings eat breakfast in their New Delhi home on June 2, 2021. Credit: Vijay Bedi/CNN

They are among at least 577 Indian children who lost both parents to Covid between April 1 and May 25, when India was battling its second wave of the outbreak, according to government figures. But non-government organizations fear that many other orphans -- potentially thousands -- have been missed in the official count due to the difficulty in tracing children who have lost both parents.

Social workers are scrambling to track them down, worried they may be vulnerable to traffickers or end up on the streets if left to fend for themselves.

"They're together now'

Just a few months ago, life looked very different for Devika and her family. Devika was focused on studying for a bachelor of education degree, and teaching children in her spare time.

Her father worked as a pandit -- or Hindu priest -- at a temple, and visited homes to perform rituals. He insisted on going out to work, even as cases soared in the capital. Her mother mostly stayed home, taking care of the children, and sometimes helped out at the temple, too.

At the end of April, when India was reporting more than 350,000 daily cases, leaving hospitals overburdened and oxygen in desperately short supply, Devika's 38-year-old mother gave her some worrying news: she had a fever.

Devika tried to isolate the children upstairs, but it was too late. The whole family -- including her 53-year-old father -- developed a fever. Although the children were never screened for Covid-19, Devika's mother later tested positive in hospital.

Devika's parents, who both passed away during India's second wave of Covid-19

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The children recovered, but their mother's condition deteriorated and getting her proper medical care proved impossible. After visiting three hospitals in one night, Devika eventually found one in a nearby city that would take her mother, although it didn't have oxygen or ventilators.

"We were so helpless. We did whatever we could possibly do. But we failed," she said.

Around the same time, her father was admitted to a Delhi hospital. When her mother died on April 29, Devika didn't have the courage to tell him. He had a phrase he would say a lot to his wife: "Without you, there's no fun in living."

"My father doted on Mummy. They're together now."Devika

Devika recalled the moment her mother's body was taken to the Delhi hospital where her father was being treated, so he could see her one last time before she was cremated.

"Mom was in the ambulance, Dad came out of the hospital and then he saw. He lowered his eyes, and he didn't say anything," Devika said.

See P7

Pakistan steps up COVID-19 vaccine rollout with 100m target

LAHORE: Pakistan has received 14.5 million coronavirus vaccine doses since it began its vaccination campaign in February, and plans to buy a further 90 million doses to inoculate the adult population in the second half of the year, the country's health ministry has said.

Announcing its 2020-21 federal budget, Pakistani Minister of Finance Shaukat Tarin said that the government has allocated $1.1 billion to buy coronavirus vaccines and plans to vaccinate 100 million people out of the country's 216 million population by July 2022.

It has also set aside 100 billion Pakistani rupees ($641 million) to combat coronavirus in the next fiscal year.

According to data shared with Arab News by health chief Dr. Faisal Sultan, as of June 9, the country had received 14.5 million vaccine doses, of which 11.06 million had been bought from pharmaceutical companies, 2.7 million donated by China and a consignment of 1.34 million contributed by Covax, the global dose-sharing platform for poorer countries.

Last November, Pakistan's government allocated $150 million to buy COVID-19 vaccines from international manufacturers. The fund has been used to buy 11.06 million doses as well as pay transportation costs and buy the equipment needed to administer vaccines across the country, according to Dr. Rana Muhammad Safdar, director-general of health in Islamabad.

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Of the doses administered, most people — 3,513,088 — have received a Sinovac jab, Sultan said, adding that 2,548,788 people have been given the Sinopharm vaccine.

There are 1,876 vaccination centers in the country, which the government aims to increase to 4,000.

Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, has vaccinated the highest number of eligible individuals — 320,000 — or 27 percent of the city's adult population.

Most of those vaccinated in Pakistan have been men, data showed, with the ratio of men to women receiving vaccinations being 60:40.

The country has already placed orders for an additional 90 million doses of the vaccine, the health chief added.

He said that authorities expected to receive 34 million doses of the Sinovac vaccine later this year, including 4 million in June, and a further 5 million doses each month until December.

Pakistan is also securing 18 million doses of the China-produced CanSino vaccine, which includes delivery of 3 million doses of the drug every month from July to December.

The US Pfizer vaccine will be administered across the country as well, with 1 million arriving in July and 11 million between July and December, totaling 12 million doses.

Separately, Pakistan will receive another 1.23 million dose delivery of the UK-produced AstraZeneca jab this month, donated through the Covax platform.

However, the government has voiced concern at people failing to show up to receive a second jab.

"About one in five people fail to have their second dose," Sultan said.

But Safdar said that the missed appointments might be the result of a backlog in late May, and that "people are now turning up, including those who missed their dose." arabnews

Nutritional health in Nepal shows improvement

TACOMA, Washington — Due to its mountainous terrain and domestic instability, Nepal has long suffered from food insecurity. As one of the most underdeveloped countries in the world, many people in Nepal are unable to obtain sufficient nutrients from diet alone. Despite this, nutritional health in Nepal is on a steady rise.

Nutritional Inadequacy in Nepal

Many factors contribute to the nutritional standards of a country: economic growth, the quality of infrastructure and social issues. In Nepal, these combined factors have left many people with the inability to access foods with high nutritional values. As a result, many Nepalis suffer from long-term ailments associated with malnutrition.

Nepal's poor nutritional health standards are felt most strongly among women and children. They often suffer from high rates of malnutrition-related maladies, such as maternal mortality and stunting in children. Nepal has recently reduced malnutrition rates, but the lack of nutritional food still impacts a large number of children. The national stunting rates of children under 5 years old clearly showcases this. As of 2019, Nepal's stunting rate for children younger than 5 is 36%. This number is an improvement from the 57% in the 1990s, but it is still far too high, especially in impoverished communities. Stunting levels are highest in the more impoverished, far western provinces of Nepal. For example, more than half of all children in Karnali are suffering from the ailment.

Nutritional health in Nepal is also lagging among women. Anemia among women and the underweigh rate among adolescent girls are especially concerning. Anemia has risen in recent years; the rate of anemia among women increased from 35% to 41% between 2011 and 2016. In that same time period, children under 5 experienced a 7% increase in rates of anemia. The percentage of underweight women is also dangerously high. Around 17% of women ages 15 to 49 have a BMI less than 18.5, and almost a third of these women are teenagers. On top of this, Nepal has a high rate of adolescent pregnancy. When these underweight girls give birth, there is a rise in complications, such as stillbirths and neonatal death.

Farming plays a vital role in providing for Nepalis' well-being. The agricultural sector employs 66% of the country. Unfortunately, agricultural production has not grown at an adequate pace and does not meet Nepalis' dietary and monetary needs. Limited farming space, low-quality seeds, poor soil management and substandard infrastructure all contribute to this low productivity.

See P7

First USAID mission director arrives in Uzbekistan

June 10, 2021, Tashkent, Uzbekistan — Today, Mikaela Meredith assumed her duties as the first U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Mission Director in Uzbekistan. Ms. Meredith has almost 30 years of development experience with USAID. Prior to her new role, Ms. Meredith served as USAID's Country Representative in Albania from 2018-2021 and USAID Mission Director in Azerbaijan from 2015-2018. She has also served in Yemen, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo and Washington DC. She holds a Master's Degree from Columbia University's School of International Affairs in New York.

"This marks the start of a new chapter in USAID's partnership with the Government and people of Uzbekistan," said Chargé d'Affaires Alan Meltzer. "USAID's newly enhanced presence will increase our collective ability to help Uzbekistan build a vibrant private sector and civil society, cope with climate change, modernize its education and health systems, and strengthen good governance." "The establishment of the new Mission was part of the U.S. Central Asia Strategy adopted in 2020, which was reaffirmed recently by the Biden Administration," said Mikaela Meredith. "It is my honor and privilege to serve as the first Mission Director for USAID in Uzbekistan. This is an important assignment and I take this responsibility very seriously," she added. USAID's bilateral mission in Uzbekistan was established in September 2020. The new mission emphasizes the U.S. Government's long-term commitment to the Government and people of Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, USAID supports initiatives focused on improving economic growth, trade, and bolstering the private sector. Other priority areas include education, water management, health, and rule of law and citizens' access to justice as well as issues related to renewable energy, safe migration, and countering trafficking in persons. USAID's partnership with Uzbekistan began soon after the country's independence. Since 1992, the American people, through USAID, have provided over $500 million for programs that support the development of a prosperous Uzbekistan.

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Bangladesh educational institutions to remain shut till June 30

DHAKA: The Bangladeshi government has further extended the ongoing closure of educational institutions until June 30 as the Covid-19 infection rate has increased substantially in parts of the country.

The country's Ministry of Education announced the decision on Saturday, saying that "all secondary and higher secondary level educational institutions, including Islamic schools, would remain closed till June 30", reports Xinhua news agency.

Previously the closure was extended in phases till June 13. The Ministry's notification said the decision was taken upon the advice of a technical committee as the pandemic situation worsened in some parts of the country bordering India.

The decision is aimed at ensuring the safety of students, teachers, institution employees and guardians, it said.

Online academic activities of all schools and colleges will continue as usual, it added.

In a notification, the country's Ministry of Primary and Mass Education also said the ongoing closure of all primary schools and kindergartens has also been extended to June 30.

On March 16, 2020, Bangladesh had first announced to close all educational institutions in the country in an effort to halt the spread of the virus.

Since March last year, the virus has spread to nearly every Bangladesh district, and the total number of cases has risen to 824,486 with 13,071 deaths.