US reiterates support for equipping, strengthening Afghan air forces

As US and NATO troops withdrawal process has started since 1 May, US officials by stressing on political solution to the dispute say the best way for providing peaceful environment to the country is the US continued support to Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.

Sources close to Afghanistan government say US has committed to continued support to equipping and strengthening the Afghan air forces.

Depute spokesperson to Presidential Office Mohammad Amiri says US special peace envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad in his recent meeting with Afghan leaders has said that US is determined to further equip and strengthen the Afghan air forces.

He added that US was committed to providing further equipment including air crafts for Afghan air forces so that they could continue the war on terror in the country.

Meanwhile, officials for the ministry of defense by welcoming the US new commitment to the Afghan air forces say Afghan National Defense and Security Forces are in a good position to take responsibilities for the security of the country. They are stressing on the US continued support to ANDSF.

A number of Afghan military experts consider the US continued support to Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) particularly the Afghan air forces as effective.

"ANDSF need the US and NATO member countries' continued support and cooperation in combat training, intelligence, technic, training and transportation," said Atiqullah Amarkhil.

He said that US should provide air crafts to the Afghan air forces as the forces need urgent different air crafts to provide close air support to ground forces in fighting against insurgent groups in the country.

Javed Kohistani, another Afghan military expert, believes that it will be difficult for ANDSF to successfully act against the enemy if they are not received better and continued military training from the US and NATO member countries.

"If US had equipped the Afghan air forces in a better way, today they had the overall ability to lead all air operations against the insurgent groups in the country," Kohistani said, adding that problems and shortcomings facing the Afghan defense and security forces should be addressed so that the security forces get good achievements in battlefields.

Previously, NATO Secretary General by praising the Afghan defense and security forces for honestly fighting against terrorism had said that NATO witnessed increasing capabilities and abilities of the Afghan security forces in fight on terror, showing the forces strong and committed leadership. He had assured of NATO's continued support and cooperation with ANDSF and the Afghan government.

This comes amid of increasing violence and Taliban attacks in various provinces of the country. On the other hand, Afghan defense and security forces have assured of defending the people and country. **Suraya Raiszada**

'14 million Afghans have no food security'

KABUL: Reporting on lack of food security of 14 million Afghan people, National Information and Statistics Authority (NISA) and the UN said that over 47 percent of 33.6 million population of Afghanistan are living under the poverty line while the remaining people have no access to proper nutrition.

Mansoor, an ordinary Afghan citizen, in an interview with The Kabul Times said that every day in early morning, he leaves home to find a livelihood to his family, but he fails to get proper food. "I search garbage every night to find something to eat." Mansoor asked people to separate their garbage to useable and unusable parts and throw them separately into garbage bins.

A large number of poor people are seen every day that have been gathering around garbage bins, search for food. These people include young children who often fight each other even during searching.

These children who are future builders of Afghanistan spend their childhood in garbage bins due to poverty and continued war in the country.

Noorgal, a child who was bearing a sack on his back said that he collects empty bottles from garbage bins and then sell them. "We work in hot or cold weather to find food."

According to UN, food security is a situation that in which all people have even physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, healthy food to lead a normal daily life. Based on UN estimation, about 690 million people were starving last year most, most them in Asia, and as per UN estimation, covid-19 has added to the misery and the number might increase to even more than 130 million people in 2021.

It seems that starvation and food insecurity are prevailing more than every other country in Afghanistan. UNFAO has estimated that in 2021 about 14 million Afghan pollution would face food insecurity.

FAO has said that continued wars, insecurity, changeable situation, gender inequality, quick urbanization and unemployment are the main challenges of food insecurity in Afghanistan. According to UNFAO, malnutrition is another concern which is spreading particularly among women, children, IDPs, repatriates disabled, poor families and families whose supporters are women.

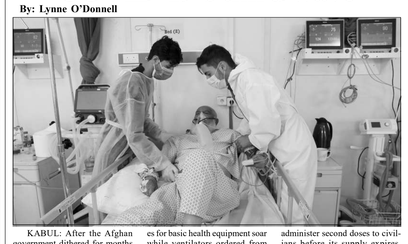
FAO adds that 41 percent of total Afghan children under five years, are directly facing with malnutrition as these data reaches in some provinces to 70 percent.

Addressing the media, general director of Ministry of Public Health's National Food Authority and Medicine, Ibrahim Shinwari said that lack of access to high quality food could cause stomach, eyes, respiratory, skin and other diseases.

According to MoPH report, 40% of Afghan population have no access to hygienic food due to sanitary reasons, lack of attention to sanitation or keeping food in improper places, lack of access to proper and sufficient food claims to UNFAO, malnutrition is another concern which is spreading particularly among women, children, IDPs, repatriates disabled, poor families and families whose supporters are women.

Afghanistan swamped by COVID-19's third wave

By: Lynne O'Donnell



KABUL: After the Afghan government dithered for months last year over how to respond to the emerging pandemic, the country is now in the midst of its third COVID-19 wave, with the government still in deep denial about the severity of the disease. Its figures are widely derided, with numbers of deaths and infections believed to be much higher than reported.

Figures reported by the Afghan Ministry of Public Health show the number of positive cases on the rise: 1,582 new cases on Monday, with 56 reported deaths, up from 1,379 new cases on Sunday. A health economist, who did not wish to be identified, said the true figure was likely as much as double that released by the ministry. Ministry of Public Health said a total of 80,615 people have been infected with the coronavirus since the first case was reported on Feb. 11, 2020; 3,195 people have died, it said.

However, health professionals said few Afghans report their illness to hospitals, and many who have fallen ill have died in their homes, suggesting official COVID-19 numbers in Afghanistan belie the gravity and widespread nature of the continuing outbreak. On a day last week when 36 deaths were officially reported nationwide, a doctor at a Kabul public hospital, who did not wish to be named, estimated deaths in the capital alone at more than 500 deaths per day.

The government argued Kabul's cemeteries have not reached capacity, proving deaths from COVID-19 are minimal. But most Kabul residents are returned to their villages for burial, where high attendance at funerals is a show of status (and an additional disease vector) and which further clouds confidence in government figures.

"The problem is that no one can prove [government information] right or wrong," said Ahmad Abid Humayun, executive director of Sanayee Development Organization.

Even as the cabinet considers returning to a nationwide lockdown, with schools and universities already back to online teaching as infection figures climb, the government has ignored pleas from nongovernmental organizations to ban travel to and from Iran and Pakistan, both countries with high infection rates and porous borders. Flights into Kabul from India, which has become the disease's epicenter, are full as Afghans flee home, a senior official said. Negative COVID-19 tests are said to be easily purchased for around $45.

The entrenched nature of COVID-19 in Afghanistan owes a lot to the mistakes made during the first three months of the outbreak last year, after which medical authorities decided to entrust the response to international and local charities. By then, it was too late to reverse the pandemic's spread, according to front-line health care workers.

And those early miscues were compounded by corruption and profiteering that has seen prices for basic health equipment soar while ventilators ordered from abroad disappear before reaching the hospitals that desperately need them. The government has failed to address allegations that funds for COVID-19 have been embezzled or misspent as public anger grows over the government's inability to curb the virus's spread and cut deaths.

"The government says it has spent $200 million on fighting COVID, but there is no adequate public information campaign, so no one knows how or where to get vaccinated," said a Kabul businessperson. "No doubt a lot of that money has gone into the deep, deep pockets of officials."

Afghanistan's efforts to deal with the public health crisis are hampered not only by endemic corruption and mistrust of the government but also the rapid drawdown of U.S. and international military forces that have helped Afghan security forces fight insurgents for almost 20 years. The Taliban, fighting to dislodge Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's administration, are holding sizable territory amid a nationwide spike in violence. Embassies are reducing staff, recommending their nationals leave the country, or are even closing, as the Australians did late last month.

And then there's all the harm done by rumor, superstition, and misinformation spread by religious leaders, Humayun said. In the absence of public information campaigns, vaccine awareness and acceptance are low, with millions of doses expiring before they can be used. Health workers implore their friends and associates to be vaccinated. Some, like Sanayee, visit people in their homes and ask them to invite relatives, friends, and staff to be vaccinated together to use the vaccines before they expire.

A now-entrenched belief that contracting COVID-19 causes infertility means people who test positive refuse to cooperate in test-and-trace programs. "They just disappear, refuse to answer the phone," Humayun said, whose organization delivers health care to Kabul, Zabul, and Faryab provinces, accounting for up to 7 million people.

Religious leaders have told their followers that "good Muslims" don't catch COVID-19, Humayun said. Charlatans have popped up peddling opium-laced potions touted as cures. "He gave it out free, and people did feel better," a government official said of herbalist Hakim Alokozai's free COVID-19 curative.

As a result, despite having numerous vaccines on hand, Afghanistan has only managed to vaccinate a tiny fraction of its population. The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine's Coronavirus Resource Center said just 0.38 percent of Afghanistan's population has been fully vaccinated, or 144,600 people, with 630,305 doses administered.

Most of those vaccines went to members of Afghanistan's security forces, accounting for up to half a million first and second doses. Vaccinators are racing to administer second doses to civilians before its supply expires, leaving out many who wish to be vaccinated as the crisis grows.

The only factor Afghanistan apparently has on its side is its population's youth: Around 70 percent of the estimated 40 million people in the country are younger than 30 years old, and more than 40 percent are younger than 15 years old. With fewer vulnerable older Afghans, that is likely to keep the overall death rate close to the global figure of 1 to 2 percent, Humayun said.

But even that is a deadly pandemic. In random conversations with Afghans, most say at least one, often more, close relatives have died of the disease. They tell anecdotal stories of hospitals and clinics being overwhelmed by patients—short of staff, expertise, equipment, and oxygen to treat COVID-19 sufferers. And it's likely to keep getting worse. Few people in Kabul wear masks in public, and there are few signs advice against crowds is being followed. Even during last year's lockdowns, most Afghans acknowledged it became an excuse for big get-togethers at home while still devastating the economy.

Vaccinations are so often shunned by the public—despite government promises to see most of the country vaccinated by late next year—those huge quantities have to be destroyed as they expire unused. Meanwhile, the cost of basic health equipment has skyrocketed. A simple box of masks, which a year ago cost $1 for 100 masks, now goes for about $15. Everything from simple items like thermometers to high-end gear like ventilators have apparently been diverted to the black market—all of which threatens to put the means of keeping COVID-19 in check beyond the reach of many Afghans.

Afghanistan's acting minister of public health, Wahid Majrooh, has implored the public to wear masks while warning of impending "disaster" amid severe oxygen shortages at hospitals across the country. As the pandemic took hold, local media reported Afghanistan had only 400 ventilators. School girls had figured out a way to make cheap versions from car parts.

The head of the health department in the northern Balkh province, Gul Ahmad Ayubi said 179 oxygen balloons went missing from the province's main hospital amid reports local strongmen were commandeering oxygen supplies for their own use.

With the situation only expected to worsen, a businessperson in Kabul echoed many Afghan's lack of concern as he dismissed the government's desperate pleas for precaution. "There are worse things here that will kill you."

Lynne O'Donnell is an Australian journalist, author, and analyst. She was the Afghanistan bureau chief for Agence France-Presse and the Associated Press between 2009 and 2017. This article also appeared in Foreign Policy weblog.