US sends emergency medical supplies for Pakistan's healthcare workers

The United States government, through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), sent a shipment of emergency medical supplies to Pakistan, in the countries' continuing joint effort to combat the scourge of COVID.

According to a statement by the US Embassy in Islamabad, "this latest airlift included more than one million pieces of critical personal protective equipment, which is necessary to help protect Pakistan's frontline healthcare workers and medical professionals".

"Today, the United States is pleased to support the Government of Pakistan in protecting the country's frontline healthcare workers in the fight against COVID-19," said USAID Mission Director Julie Koenen.

"During this unprecedented time, the United States will continue to work together with Pakistan to provide critically needed medical supplies."

Earlier in June, USAID delivered a shipment of protective equipment and fingertip oximeters to be delivered to Pakistani healthcare facilities throughout the country, said the statement.

The donation also included $3.5 million in additional funding for local procurement of health-related supplies to support the overall COVID-19 response.

According to the statement, since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the United States has delivered $49.7 million in assistance to Pakistan.

Last July, USAID provided 200 ventilators and trained more than 600 health workers in 64 Pakistani hospitals, the statement added.

In addition, USAID has improved and expanded laboratory testing, disease monitoring, case tracking in all districts, infection prevention and control, and patient care.

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In the wake of India's covid crisis, a 'Black Fungus' epidemic follows

In the stifling, tightly packed medical ward at Civil Hospital, the ear, nose and throat specialist moved briskly from one bed to the next, shining a flashlight into one patient's mouth, examining another's X-rays.

The specialist, Dr. Bela Prajapati, oversees treatment for nearly 400 patients with mucormycosis, a rare and often deadly fungal disease that has exploded across India on the coattails of the coronavirus pandemic. Unprepared for this spring's devastating Covid-19 second wave, many of India's hospitals took desperate steps to save lives — steps that may have opened the door to yet another deadly disease.

"The pandemic has precipitated an epidemic," Dr. Prajapati said.

In three weeks, the number of cases of the disease — known by the misnomer "black fungus," because it is found on dead tissue — shot up to more than 30,000 from negligible levels. States have recorded more than 2,100 deaths, according to news reports. The federal health ministry in New Delhi, which is tracking nationwide cases to allot scarce and expensive antifungal medicine, has not released a fatalities figure.

The coronavirus pandemic has drawn stark lines between rich nations and poor, and the mucormycosis epidemic in India stands as the latest manifestation. During the second wave, which struck India in April, its creaky, underfunded medical system lacked beds, oxygen and other necessities as infections and deaths soared.

The mucormycosis epidemic adds even more urgency to the difficult task of protecting India's 1.4 billion people. Only a small fraction have been vaccinated against the coronavirus, and they remain vulnerable to a third wave and the consequences that could follow.

Dr. Ruchir Shah performing nasal endoscopic surgery on a patient with mucormycosis at Sterling Hospital in Ahmedabad.Credit...Atul Loke for The New York Times

"Mucormycosis will tail off and go back to baseline as the Covid cases subside," said Dr. Dileep Mavalankar, an epidemiologist. "But it may come back in the third wave unless we find out why it is happening."

Many doctors in India think they know why. The bone-and-tissue-eating fungus can attack the gastrointestinal tract, the lungs, the skin and the sinuses, where it often spreads to the eye socket and the brain if left untreated. Treatment for the disease involves complex, often disfiguring surgery and an uncommon and expensive drug, contributing to a mortality rate above 50 percent.

Mucormycosis is not passed from person to person. It develops from commonplace spores that sometimes build up in homes and hospitals. Doctors believe India's crowded hospitals, and their dire lack of medical oxygen, left the fungus an opening.

Without enough oxygen to go around, doctors in many places injected patients with steroids, a standard treatment for doctors battling Covid globally. They can reduce inflammation in the lungs and help Covid patients breathe more easily.

Many doctors prescribed steroids in quantities and for durations that far exceed World Health Organization recommendations, said Arunaloke Chakrabarti, a microbiologist and the co-author of a study examining the causes of India's mucormycosis outbreak. Those steroids may have compromised patient immune systems and made Covid-19 patients more susceptible to fungal spores.

The steroids may have also dangerously increased blood sugar levels, leaving people with diabetes vulnerable to mucormycosis. It could also increase the chance of blood clots, leading to malnourished tissue, which the "fungus attacks," Dr. Prajapati said.

Desperate doctors may not have had the chance to ask patients about whether they had diabetes or other conditions before resorting to steroids.

"Doctors hardly had any time to do patient management," Dr. Chakrabarti said. "They were all looking at how to take care of the respiratory tract."

According to the health ministry, about four out of five mucormycosis patients have had Covid-19. More than half have diabetes.

Alok Kumar Chaudry, a 30-year-old engineer with surgical tape over his left eye and hooked up to an I.V. drip at Civil Hospital, is one of those with mucormycosis who first came down with Covid.

He was studying for India's civil service exam in April in New Delhi when the second wave hit. After testing positive for the coronavirus, and with hospital beds, drugs and oxygen scarce, he jumped onto a train to his older brother's home in rural Gujarat. There, his oxygen levels plummeted to a potentially lethal 54 percent.

After two weeks on oxygen support and steroids at a local hospital, he recovered from Covid-19 but developed an acute headache on the left side of his brain. Doctors thought that steroids may have caused it and that it would go away.

"Suddenly vision in my left eye went blank," Mr. Chaudry said.

An M.R.I. showed mucormycosis. The doctors said they would have to remove his eye.

He went to Ahmedabad's Civil Hospital for a second opinion. Five specialists oversaw a surgery that involved scraping away the dead tissue in his sinus tract. To clear out remaining infection, he received a 15-day course of amphotericin B, an antifungal medication.

Dr. Chakrabarti said that if Mr. Chaudry kept his eye, he could still lose his life, since surgeons couldn't remove the thin layer of infection behind his eye without removing the eye itself.

"I've lost vision in my left eye, my studies have suffered," Mr. Chaudry said. "Definitely I want to know why mucor has formed. If it's faulty treatment, then someone is responsible. If it's the wrath of God, what can I do?"

Understand the Covid Crisis in India

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Uzbekistan's winding way to the EAEU

On December 11, 2020, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) granted Uzbekistan observer status for five years. Uzbekistan has yet to decide on acceptance of full member status. The acceptance of full member status is an essential yet controversial decision for Uzbekistan to take. A senior government official has said that Uzbekistan is weighing the pros and cons of accession. The EAEU is a treaty that regulates the free movement of capital, labor, goods as well as regionally coordinated, uniform policy-making mechanisms.

In a video conference in December of last year, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's president, emphasized the importance of the enlargement of foreign markets for Uzbekistan and presented key areas where his country will benefit from EAEU membership.

First, Mirziyoyev mentioned joint efforts on decreasing the trade distortions by gradually eliminating customs tariffs and other non-tariff barriers to trade, and emphasized infrastructure and transportation between EAEU states. The accession of Uzbekistan is geographically significant to the EAEU as it is the only country that borders all Central Asian countries. Hence, accession will accelerate the establishment of new economic corridors and regional clusters that would bring down the cost of transportation. The Center for Economic Research and Reform estimated a $20 million dollar decrease in annual fuel-related expenses and a 15% increase in exports to member states.

Unemployment in Uzbekistan is another driving force for EAEU membership. Mirziyoyev highlighted the importance of the common labor market that the EAEU provides for member states, which implies that upon accession, employment procedures for Uzbek migrants in Russia and

Kazakhstan will be eased.

The political and economic dominance of Russia is considered an external threat. The EAEU is a Russian-dominated regional agreement, where the economic and political power between Russia and other EAEU states is unequal. According to Farkhod Tolipov, the director of the Caravan of Knowledge, a think tank, Uzbekistan has seen enough cases of Russian power manipulation and it should not "repeat history," or it will be "a second USSR."

The EAEU countries are also serving as marginal land for Russia; it is creating so-called buffer zones in periods of economic and political sanctions from the U.S. Moreover, EAEU accession may hinder a much bigger goal: WTO membership. Uzbekistan had started the accession process to the WTO back in 1994, yet still cannot fully comply with WTO requirements. Acceding to the Russia-led EAEU seems like a counterbalance to WTO accession, and might cause a lengthier accession period. However, 4 out of 5 members of the EAEU are already full members of the WTO.

Internal opposition is also seen as a strong disincentive in accession to the EAEU. The presence of powerful interest groups that hold major shares in manufacturing industries precludes accession. Under the EAEU, tariffs and non-tariff barriers are strongly regulated, and the domestic manufacturing industries of Uzbekistan might face severe competition. Manufacturing industries in Uzbekistan are not ready for a market where conditions are equal for all actors.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev recently said that "If a production of high quality, competitive and exportable goods is one problem, finding a marketplace for that good is another much bigger problem," and implied that joining the EAEU is essential, otherwise Uzbekistan will be isolated.

Mirziyoyev's standpoint was supported by a senior government official, who said, "Uzbekistan needs a wider marketplace as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan." The sense of being isolated comes from the pressure that Uzbekistan officials felt; the majority of its trading partners are now part of the EAEU. The trading block sets uniform standards and licensing, and each member complies with them, while Uzbekistan products are out of compliance. For some time, there will be Russian superiority, but that is a matter of time because the EAEU as a trading block is diversifying. On November 4, 2019, Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's former prime minister, announced that Vietnam, China, and Singapore signed free trade agreements. Apart from them, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Brunei have expressed interest in signing multilateral free trade agreements.

Nepal: Flood warning for people living along River Tamakoshi floodplains

Dolakha administration of Nepal on Saturday issued a flood warning for people living along the floodplains of River Tamakoshi.

As per the administration, landslide has already damaged the river system near RongXia city, Tingri County and it could cause sudden flash food.

Earlier, Meteorologists of Nepal and other South Asian nations had predicted that this year's monsoon will arrive earlier than last year and Nepal and some other Asian countries are expected to receive normal to above-normal rainfall.

As per Nepal's Meteorological Forecasting Division, the monsoon has already hit Nepal from June 1 and it will continue for about three months.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday, as many as 20 people including three Indians have gone missing as floods triggered by heavy rains struck Sindhupalchok district in central Nepal. business

Tajikistan: China attaches strings to $204m highway grant

China has provided impoverished Tajikistan a fresh grant worth almost $204 million to continue work overhauling roads linking the center of the country to its high-altitude Pamirs region in the east.

The gift will come with strings attached, though.

Transportation Minister Azim Ibrohim told parliament on June 16 that the money would pay for work on the highway linking Kalai-Khum to Vanj and the Rushon district, RFE/RL's Tajik service, Radioi Ozodi, reported. Covering that stretch currently entails hours of exhausting and dangerous driving at times perched perilously over sharp drops.

This Chinese largesse was expected. Parliament in October 2019 ratified an agreement for Beijing to extend $360 million in grants – the only hold-up has been working out how exactly these funds were to be used.

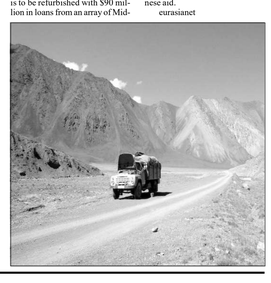
As Radioi Ozodi noted in its report, China has advanced conditions with the grant. A Chinese company will oversee the work, and construction material and equipment will be exempted from import duties. It is not known how many workers will be brought in for the job.

The eventual objective is to revamp the entire highway all the way to the Kulma Pass, which lies at a height of more than 4,300 meters above sea-level on the border between Tajikistan's Murghab district and the Kashgar Prefecture in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Province.

The grant to Tajikistan thus amounts in substance to a subsidy to Chinese companies. And it is eventually Chinese freight companies that will by and large benefit from completion of the trans-Pamiri route.

Tajikistan is benefitting from considerable international support in piecing back together a road network devastated alternately by war, in the 1990s, and then neglect and underinvestment. Infrastructure outlays have instead often focused on demolishing brutalist but serviceable Soviet-built ministry headquarters that were then replaced with buildings of questionable quality.

A 58-kilometer section of road leading from Kulob, which is in turn situated about three-and-a-half hours drive on a decent road from the capital, to Kalai-Khum is to be refurbished with $90 million in loans from an array of Middle Eastern partners: the Saudi-based Islamic Development Bank ($14 million), the Saudi Fund for Development ($30 million), the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development ($25.5 million) and the OPEC Fund for International Development ($10 million). The Tajik government has pitched in $10 million. Little work has been done as yet, however.

In addition to giving Chinese companies a leg-up, the overhauled Pamir highway will also serve as an opportunity for Beijing to project some soft power. Radioi Ozodi said it obtained an official Tajik letter committing to erecting signs along the road prominently advertising the fact that it had been built with Chinese aid.

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