InternationalDaily

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- Distribution: 2300337 - 0793531513 - 078245600 - 0766788447
- Printed at: Azadi printing press
- Address: 2nd Floor, Liberty Printing Press Building
  2nd Microrayon, Kabul, Afghanistan

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Editorial

Pandemic and Taliban behind increasing Afghan miseries

Afghan health authorities on Saturday warned of surging cases of mucormycotic, also known as "black fungus," among coronavirus patients as the country grapples with a shortage of vaccines and medical oxygen as well as Taliban's militancy taking lives of the innocent people in each and every corner of the country.

Acting Health Minister Waheed Majorh said that health professionals had identified at least three confirmed cases of the fungal infection caused by exposure to mucor mound, commonly found in soil, plants, manure, and decaying fruits and vegetables. The condition mainly affects people who have a weak immune system causing loss of eyesight, removal of the nose and jawbone.

Underlining that official were using all available means to procure and purchase vaccines, Majorh said that low output of jabs and little competition among producers has made it difficult for Afghanistan to procure vaccines in the open market.

Amid increasing Taliban violence, the COVID-19 and now the black Fungus have added to the miseries of Afghan masses. Not only war and violence that have displaced thousands of Afghans in different provinces, but the pandemic has too already affected Afghan people's economic and social lives and taking dozens of lives on daily basis.

Thousands of schools have been closed due to Taliban's violence in northern provinces and meanwhile the COVID-19 has too forced government to shut schools before millions of Afghan students. The militants and the pandemic have been creating obstacles before the development process of the country.

Pandemics strike hard in conflict zones by overwhelming the already weak public health systems, destabilizing the country further. At the same time, in the case of COVID-19, there were also hopes that the virus may prompt opposing groups to suspend hostilities and work together when UN Secretary-General António Guterres once urged armed parties to stop fighting and called for an international ceasefire on March 23, 2020.

While some rebel groups in the Philippines and Colombia suspended hostilities, they returned to violence shortly thereafter, but some others, including Taliban increased their attacks and brought about huge challenges for the health systems to tackle the global pandemic.

Despite substantial improvements in the health sector and vast investments in the form of international aid, all of the various Afghan governments have struggled to provide basic healthcare services to the public. The country continues to be riven with infectious diseases including tuberculosis, malaria, cholera, polio, measles, rabies and typhoid fever. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a greater strain on the country's healthcare system. The return of Afghans from Iran, series of lethal attacks on healthcare workers and civilians and increasing insecurity has made the situation worse.

The strong opposition by religious fundamentalists in countries such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan have resulted in the failure of vaccination efforts against polio in the past. As a result, polio has been eradicated in most countries except for Pakistan and Afghanistan. Taliban have time and again prevent implementation of Polio vaccination drive in their held territories.

As per UN demand, Taliban and other militants should do more to ease treatment opportunities for the local people and avoid targeting health centers and public properties. As this pandemic era that taking lives of dozens of people in the country, Taliban should shun violence and ease a safe and sound environment for Afghans so that to fight pandemic, poverty, drought and economic challenges.

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After the retreat: what now for Afghanistan?

By: Emma Graham-Harrison & Akhtar Mohammad Makoii

The public flogging in Obe district, captured on video that quickly went viral this spring, was a mistake, a local Taliban judge admitted. Commanders were angry.

As the footage spread between urban Afghans, who shared it on their smartphones, it revived memories of darker times when the militants ruled the country, and an outpouring of revulsion.

Men with lashes take turns to bear down on a woman visibly bracing, even under her burqa, against the blows, and by the end screaming out in pain: "O God, I repent." An audience of men and boys watch, or snap photos and videos.

The problem, the cleric explained, was not the punishment but the video, which circulated in April as the militants were consolidating control of the area. "She committed adultery, and I would have ordered the same thing," he told the Observer in a telephone interview. "But the commanders said that we shouldn't have done it in public."

Years into taking up the post in the Taliban's shadow administration it is a sentence he still hands down regularly for "adultery", which in Afghanistan can cover any sexual relationship outside marriage and can sometimes even include rape. Men are flogged and then jailed, he added. "I recently ordered the flogging of a woman inside her home. Relatives and neighbors came to us and said there were witnesses to this man and woman being together. We lashed her 20 times."

Obe sits just to the east of the silk-road city of Herat, a valley of grape and peach orchards nestled between two mountains, famous for the curative waters of a natural hot spring. In more peaceful times people used to head to the city at weekends for picnics, to escape the heat and dust of the city.

But for years the Taliban have been fighting in Obe's fields and villages, and last month it became one of dozens of districts across Afghanistan to fall fully under the militants' control, as foreign forces accelerated a departure they are expected to complete this month. The experiences of people there offer a glimpse of what a country, or large swaths of one, ruled by the Taliban might look like, and it is a disturbing vision.

And the details of how Obe finally fell offer a worrying insight into the militants' growing confidence, resources and ambition, and also the problems hobbling Afghan security forces – from lack of air support to questionable strategic decisions – as they start a new era of going into battle without foreign backup.

On Friday, US troops left Bagram, the sprawling airbase north of Kabul that was the symbolic and operational heart of the American operation in Afghanistan. Fewer than 1,000 US troops are thought to be still in the country, mostly for security purposes in and around Kabul.

Britain is expected to bring the last of its regular troops home from Afghanistan over the weekend to match the US departure, and in a few days Boris Johnson is expected to make a statement to parliament marking the change and outlining the UK's future diplomatic presence in, and military posture towards, Afghanistan.

America and its allies arrived in the country in 2001, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, to topple the Taliban and find terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden.

The al-Qaida leader is long dead, but few politicians are willing to dwell on the reality that the international forces are leaving with the Taliban – who seemed utterly routed 20 years ago – resurgent on the ground.

Through withdrawal talks with the Americans, the militants have also gained a form of international recognition they had long craved. The group's senior envoys have responded by burnishing the image they present to the wider world.

At peace talks in the Qatari capital Doha, and across other platforms including a New York Times opinion column by their deputy leader, the Taliban's representatives have been presenting an image of change. They use the language of peace and reconciliation, and have promised women their rights as "granted by Islam – from the right to education to the right to work".

Yet in Obe they have revived most of the brutal and misogynist policies that marked their rule in the 1990s, according to multiple accounts collected by the Observer.

We spoke to civilians living in Obe, others who had recently fled, the Taliban judge, engineers working on district development projects, government soldiers who fought in the bitter last stand for the district's centre, an activist who is in regular contact with women there, and local and provincial officials. Almost all asked to remain anonymous, for fear of reprisals against them or their relatives.

"The international platform for the Taliban is truly disturbing. We live under the Taliban, we deal with them and we know they have not changed," said Halima Salimi, a women's rights activist based in Herat who receives regular death threats for her work.

She is still in contact with fellow activists in Obe, who say they are now confined to their homes and barred from work.

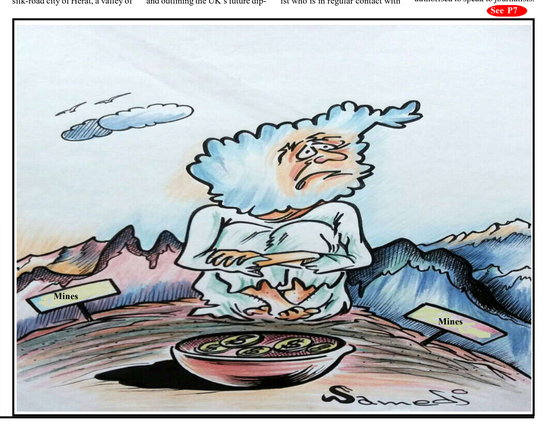
On 14 June, the last government forces in the district were helicoptered out of a besieged outpost. The militants are confident enough of their control that last week they called a meeting at the mosque in the main street to lay out their laws and plans for Obe, which include a flat 10% tax on all earnings.

The district schools have been closed for years by fighting, or boycotted by parents worried their children will be caught in crossfire. But when they reopen, girls will not be allowed to study past sixth grade, interviewees said.

Women must wear the all-enveloping burqa and cannot work or leave their home for any reason without a male "guardian", a role that can be filled even by prepubescent sons, nephews or brothers. Shopkeepers have been ordered not to serve women out alone, and Taliban beat any unaccompanied women they catch.

For women without a suitable relative, the militants have a complex system, said one mother of three who fled Obe after her home was destroyed in recent fighting.

"She must let the Taliban know there is no man in the house, and they will tell her she can only go to certain places – like here, here and here – making a kind of map restricting her movement."

Mobile phones are regularly checked by Taliban fighters, another Obe resident said, and if they find music, dancing or anything supporting the government, the owner will be beaten. If they find pictures of him or her in government uniform, they are executed. Physical punishment including amputations and floggings are handed down as sentences by judges, including the one who spoke to the Observer, who asked not to be named because he was not authorised to speak to journalists.

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