As COVID restrictions ease, will we see a rise in other viruses?

Summer for medics is usually the time we get a brief respite from seeing patients with common respiratory viruses. This vital break from infectious diseases that usually peak in the winter months, gives us some much-needed time to focus on patients with other, chronic diseases.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has meant people wearing masks, social distancing, and not really mixing with those outside their households; this has led to a drop in the number of cases of common respiratory viruses such as colds and flu – something that was welcomed by medics on the front line who were busy treating those with COVID. This reduction in cases makes sense, for the flu virus is not as infectious as the virus that causes COVID.

Some of the strictest social distancing measures were put in place as the pandemic started in 2020 when the Northern hemisphere was still in what is normally "flu season". Healthcare professionals noticed a drop in flu cases – positive tests for the flu virus plummeted by 98 percent in the United States, for example, and cases of common cold, flu, and other respiratory diseases in England were substantially lower than average in the winter of 2020/2021, GP surveillance data showed. After the flu season ended in the North, countries in the Southern hemisphere reported dramatically lower rates of flu, with Australia, Chile and South Africa reporting a grand total of just 51 cases of flu in more than 83,000 tests.

Although social distancing measures likely contributed to these lower numbers, it is unlikely to be the sole reason for this drop in cases. The marked drop in foreign travel, as well as the increase in flu vaccine uptake, spurred on by peoples' worries of contracting both COVID and flu simultaneously, undoubtedly also played a part. Of course, viral spread is far more complex than this and other factors are likely to have been at play too, but scientists agree that measures to curb the spread of COVID led to fewer cases of flu across the world. And it wasn't just influenza; researchers also saw lower rates of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) – a common virus that typically infects young children and can sometimes cause serious conditions such as pneumonia. The virus spreads through droplets – through coughing, sneezing, and on surfaces – so hand hygiene and surface washing are key to keeping it at bay.

Lower rates of respiratory viruses may sound like welcome news – and certainly, when healthcare professionals are firefighting a novel coronavirus, it is – but the worry is whether there may be a surge in cases of these viruses when social distancing measures lift. There is an additional concern around children who have largely not been mixing with one another in the usual way over the last 18 months – they likely have not developed immunity to RSV, having never encountered it, potentially leaving large numbers open to infection. Although it is a mild disease for most children, those under two years old, those with underlying health conditions, or those born prematurely are at risk of becoming seriously sick with RSV.

Adults and children rely on something called "adaptive immunity" for certain infectious diseases – the part of the immune system that relies on previous infection or encounters with bugs to activate a defence system against future attacks. Without exposure, it could mean many of us are that much more susceptible to these bugs.

We have lived with these common respiratory viruses for thousands of years, but this year is different; the winter virus season is starting earlier than ever before and it is on the backdrop of an exhausted medical workforce that has been battling the COVID-19 pandemic for the last 18 months.

As the number of people vaccinated against COVID-19 increases across the developed world, many countries are easing social distancing measures and allowing people to once again meet in places deemed high risk for respiratory viral spread – including schools, nurseries and other indoor spaces. This has led to many countries reporting a surge in respiratory illnesses across all age groups.

A clear example of the explosion in respiratory infections happened in Hong Kong, which closed its schools to in-person learning from late January to late May 2020 – and then again in early July, when more COVID cases were detected. When schools reopened in October 2020, many children got sick with rhinoviruses – one of the most common causes of the common cold. Scientists expect to see similar trends across the globe as schools and economies open up again.

In the UK, prompted by a rise in numbers of children with RSV, health chiefs issued a warning to parents, reminding them to look out for symptoms of severe infection in at-risk children – including a high temperature of 37.8 degrees Celsius (100.04 degrees Fahrenheit) or above, a dry and persistent cough, difficulty feeding, rapid or wheezing breath – and saying the NHS was preparing for a rise in hospital admissions of children with severe RSV infections. The chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency, Dr Jenny Harries, said on a blog that the country had to prepare itself for a triple threat from COVID, flu and RSV in a "worst-case scenario" winter.

Cases of RSV in children have also been rising in the US, with hospitals in Brooklyn and Utah reporting significantly more numbers of children being admitted with severe symptoms of the disease than expected at this time of year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was so concerned about increasing numbers of RSV in children this summer that it put out an advisory for healthcare workers, asking them to be alert to adults and children presenting with symptoms and to encourage testing– something highly unusual for this time of year.

We have lived with these common respiratory viruses for thousands of years, but this year is different; the winter virus season is starting earlier than ever before and it is against the backdrop of an exhausted medical workforce that has been battling the COVID pandemic for the last 18 months. At the same time, many countries are seeing rising cases of the coronavirus, mainly due to the emergence of the Delta variant. The threat of COVID, flu and RSV is a real one for many healthcare systems, so retaining a few social distancing measures such as mask-wearing and hand hygiene seems sensible.

Afghan Advertisement

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Ministry of Higher Education invites sealed bids from eligible and qualified bidders for **Procurement of Laboratory Equipment for Kabul Polytechnic University**, IFB No: **MOHE/1400/G-3263**
Bidding will be conducted through the International Competitive Bidding (ICB) procedures specified in the Afghanistan procurement law and Procurement Procedure of Afghanistan, and are open to all bidders from Eligible Sources/Countries as defined in the Bidding Documents.
Interested eligible bidders may download bid document in English version from NPA Website: www.npa.gov.af, or obtain by email from address: sariirinasrat90@gmail.com, naim.sahar2013@yahoo.com or receive by flash memory at the address given below from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM on any working day from Saturday to Thursday

All bids must be accompanied by a Bid Security (Bank Guarantee) mentioned as below in USD or an equivalent amount in a freely convertible currency.

Bid Security (Bank Guarantee) or an equivalent amount in a freely convertible currency.	Valid as per below
12,000 USD	Bank Security (Bank Guarantee) should be valid for 148 days from bid submission deadline

Pre- Bid meeting shall be held at 11.00 AM on **2021/August/30** (Monday), Procurement Directorate, Ministry of Higher Education, Kabul-Afghanistan
Bids must be delivered to the address below at or before 11.00 AM (local time) **on 11 – September- 2021.** Electronic bidding will not be permitted.
Late bids will be rejected. Bids will be opened immediately after the deadline of bid submission at the same place of bid submission, in the presence of the bidders' representatives who choose to attend in person.
The address referred to above is:
Ministry of Higher Education, Procurement Directorate, Department of Procurement of Goods & Non Consultancy Services, Kart-e-Chahar, Ministry of Higher Education, Kabul-Afghanistan.
Telephone: +93202514078
E-mail: sariirinasrat90@gmail.com,

Retired generals, military officers call on President Ghani

From P1

KABUL: The President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Mohammad Ashraf Ghani met with a number of the country's retired security and defense forces generals and officers at the Presidential Palace, a statement from the Presidential Press Office said Wednesday.

The country's President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, heard their analysis and suggestions, the statement received by The Kabul Times. At the meeting, held at the Salam Khana of the Presidential Palace, Noorul Haq Olumi, the president's representative for good governance, said that under the current hard situation they should all stand by the security and defense forces.

He said the country's retired officers are always ready to serve the people and defend their country's territorial integrity and national interests, the statement quoted. Then, Brig General Abdul Raziq Bek, Brig. General Seyyed Mohammad Samar Sadat, Brig. General Mirza Mohammad Yarmand, General Daulat Waziri and Colonel Hasib Arian spoke on the issue saying that they are ready to serve in the face of proxy war and defend the country's independence.

They also shared their plans and suggestions with the President for further strengthening the country's security and defense forces, mobilizing local uprisings and financing, equipping and reforming them in war on the country's enemy.

"The defense and survival of the republicanism is the defense and survival of Afghanistan, and our security and defense forces are fighting bravely for it, and we support our armed forces with our life, property, blood, knowledge and determination," they said.

The speakers stated that the Taliban had misused Allah-u-Akbar, that the people had taken away this holy slogan from them, and that they had left the Taliban unmotivated and helpless, the statement quoted. After hearing their speeches and suggestions, President Ghani thanked them for their good feelings, knowledge, analysis, plan and commitment, and said that this gave hope to all the people of the country. "You saw that the people responded to the Taliban treason with the calling of Allah-u-Akbar [God is the greatest]," the country's president said as quoted by the statement.

"The war of the Taliban is the war against Afghanistan, national values, traditions and the security and defense forces and we are proud that the people have unprecedentedly supported our forces and are fighting the Taliban with all their might," he said adding his efforts for strengthening the security and defense and for apolitical forces continue.

The president noted that boards will be established within the Ministry of Defense, along with the Command-in-Chief, at the level of the Ministry of Defense and relevant departments, to use the knowledge, analysis and experiences of the retired generals and officers.

The president said that in order to defend the country, 11 billion Afghanis will be reduced from the civil budget to focus well on the better and more efficient use of the resources. "Recruiting to the ranks of the security and defense forces is one of our important priorities, because the people do not want militarization, but the strengthening of the security and defense forces," the statement concluded quoting the president.

The Kabul Times

'Defining moment': What's next for Tunisia's Ennahdha?

Tunis, Tunisia – Ennahdha, the largest party in Tunisia's parliament, is facing its biggest crisis in decades after President Kais Saied's shock dismissal of the country's prime minister and suspension of Parliament on July 25.

Rached Ghannouchi, parliament speaker and Ennahdha's leader, initially called Saied's activation of Article 80 of the Tunisian constitution – which allows him to assume executive powers in times of national crisis – a "coup" and "unconstitutional".

Saied said the parliament will only be frozen for 30 days and that he would "not turn into a dictator". But, after he lifted the immunity of parliamentarians, politicians from various parties and members of Ennahdha have been arrested over the past week.

The president's actions could not have come at a worse time for 80-year-old Ghannouchi, who is facing health problems after contracting COVID.

Ghannouchi and his party face their biggest existential crisis since 1989 when former strongman President Zine Abbedine ben Ali banned Ennahdha – resulting in many members fleeing into exile or being jailed and tortured.

Now the party's future once again hangs in the balance.

Growing anger

Ennahdha was founded in 1981 as the Movement of Islamic Tendency. The party has in recent years separated its religious and political activities and prefers the term Muslim Democrat.

Since the 2011 Arab Spring revolution that overthrew Ben Ali, Ennahdha has been a key part of successive coalition governments and is now the largest party in Parliament, albeit it holding only a quarter of the seats in the assembly.

However, in recent years Ennahdha has increasingly become the focus of anger from discontented Tunisians who blame the party and the government formerly led by independent Hichem Mechichi for Tunisia's political and economic woes.

Protests over skyrocketing COVID infections and deaths, police brutality and repression, and dwindling economic prospects and unemployment at nearly 18 percent have also been simmering for many months.

On July 25, anti-government demonstrations broke out in cities across Tunisia, with protesters attacking several Ennahdha offices – which ostensibly led Saied, a political independent elected in 2019, to suspend Parliament.

Sofiane Ochour, an anti-government activist, told Al Jazeera that the final straw for him came on July 7 after Ennahdha had reportedly demanded 3 billion dinars ($2.2bn) in compensation for those imprisoned and tortured under the Ben Ali regime.

"When people are dying at the doors of hospitals, when we have no oxygen for patients, when we don't have enough doctors and doctors are dying, they are asking for 3 billion dinars, it is shameful!" he said.

Saied's move to dissolve Parliament appears to be broadly popular in Tunisia, although Ennahdha maintains a strong core base of support.

Mondher Louinissi, a member of Ennahdha's Shura Council, the party's highest authority, told Al Jazeera: "We are an elected party, we had elections and the people chose us".

However, he acknowledged that Ennahdha has made mistakes and "we need to take responsibility for that. We are in the process of an internal analysis of where mistakes were made".

Ahmed Gaaloul, adviser to Ghannouchi, told Al Jazeera Saied's moves took the party by surprise.

"We have to admit that there is a state of shock … right now everyone is in a state of fear," he said.

"It is a radical shift because [Saied] is moving the country from democracy and freedom and separation of powers to a state where power is monopolised by one person and one institution, which poses many risks to the country."

Ghannouchi had initially called for people to come out and protest against Saied, and he led a sit-in outside the parliament on July 26. Hundreds of Ennahdha and pro-Saied supporters confronted each other outside the parliament, with some throwing stones and bottles.

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"We have to admit that there is a coup because Mr Kais Saied hasn't really activated Article 80, he violated Article 80". Souid says that, under Article 80, although the president can assume executive powers, it clearly states that the parliament should still sit in continuous session. Tunisia is now in a state of suspense, waiting to see what will happen over the course of the next few weeks.