

The Disregard of Covid-19 Fourth Wave in Syria

Despite global efforts to secure Coronavirus vaccines, with nearly 6 billion vaccine doses given so far, the fourth wave of the pandemic still hit many countries as we speak[1]. The daily updated data shows a spike in infection especially in the USA at the top of the list, India, UK, as well as Turkey.

The effects of the fourth pandemic wave will definitely be felt worse in Syria due to inadequate preparedness in the health sector and poor vaccinations, on top of the ongoing war.

Escalating infection rate

Medical NGOs estimate that currently there are more than 60.000 Covid-19 infections in opposition-held areas; half of them were recorded last month at unprecedented rates since the beginning of the pandemic. These NGOs operate hospitals, health centers and supervise vaccination process, and have set up community centers to provide health care for intermediate Covid-19 infection cases. They issued a warning of the imminent collapse of the health sector due to the Coronavirus pandemic[2].

Current infection in the area has reached an extent that is beyond the capacity of the health sector in treating critical cases. The statement indicated that these NGOs' capacity are on the brink of collapse, especially after Covid-19 infected local health workers which dropped the number of doctors and nurses and increased the work pressure and exhaustion on those who are healthy.

The health situation in government-held areas is even worse; news indicates a very high number of Covid-19 infections in those areas. Official figures show infection rates not seen in previous waves. Medical experts believe that the real figures may be ten times higher than the official figures.

A Syrian Ministry of Health official said all intensive care beds are full, the numbers of infection are at its highest since March 2020 even when compared to the previous pandemic peak last summer. This is a dire situation especially when the period needed to treat a Coronavirus patient is 10-12 days.

Medical volunteers complained that their oxygen cylinder stock is running out. They have to treat many patients suffering from oxygen level decline, but they cannot help them and there is no bed left in the hospital for the patients.

Neglect and recklessness are the cause

The situation in Syria may seem similar to many other countries facing the fourth Coronavirus wave, but while facing the pandemic itself is no walk in the park, when it is added with war and all of its fallouts, the future looks too grim for the country.

However, the problem can be generally categorized into unconcerned governments policies. For example, the Turkish government allow the Syrians in Turkey to resume their visits to the opposition areas long after

the border closed, but these visits are not accompanied by any conditionings, neither from the Turkish side nor the Syrian side.

There is no PCR test requirement for Syrians before their entry to confirm that they are Covid-19 negative, and the entry process is not organized in a way that could prevent crowds. Furthermore, people in Syria - up to government employees - are not obliged to wear masks, and there are no rules regarding social distancing, whether at the border crossings or in other public facilities such as the markets.

The same situation applies in the Assad regime areas, which showed the absence of government policies in containing the pandemic from spreading further. On the contrary, the government in fact encouraged human gatherings, whether in some festivity parties after the elections, or queues at the ovens or gas stations.

Moreover, the abrupt reimplementation of offline schooling when only 4% of the population has been inoculated, the absence of preventive measures of the public and the unwillingness to quarantine those infected raise many questions about the seriousness of the Syrian government in fighting the pandemic.

The government had not taken advantage of United Nations assistance in this regard. Some emerging volunteer teams are providing a more meaningful response to patients by presenting 24-hour daily consultations and lending free oxygen cylinders to patients that need it.

It is remarkable to see the disregard of public health both in government and opposition-held areas. Despite global awareness campaigns, Syria does not respond to it; it does not implement safety measures, and many people still refuse to be inoculated as a result of misinformation spreading which is believed even by the educated. The denial state also appears among the people, refusing to acknowledge the disease and refusing to adhere to the quarantine procedures.

Coronavirus patients still receive many visitors; worse still, they can freely go to the market or workplace with no mask on, insisting that what they have is merely a bad flu, even after doctor's diagnosis.

Why is this happening? Perhaps because people are accustomed to death in all its forms, hence they are no longer interested in a new death threat. Or it may be because some people believe that death may be a relief from their suffering in this difficult life, or maybe they do not trust NGOs' or the government policy, or maybe they are just so poor to care; they are unable to stay out of work for a long time even when they are infected, or spend their money on things they might consider secondary such as masks.

For that, Syria needs an urgent intervention plan by international health organizations and concerned countries to help contain the pandemic and to accelerate the vaccination process before the region becomes a Covid-19 hotbed and transmission to neighboring countries.

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[1] COVID-19 Dashboard, <https://bit.ly/3o81efj>

[2] Press statement from the humanitarian organizations working in North west Syria about COVID-19, 20/09/2021, <https://bit.ly/3CQda9t>