



# PANDEMIC AND NATIONAL SECURITY



Brig Dr  
Tughral Yamin (Retd)

## ABSTRACT

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID19) not only challenged the capacities of nations to fight a pandemic, it also raised several security related issues. These included threats to the national economy, the viability of a country's health system and the diversion of resources both civil and military to fight the crisis. The pandemic tested to the limits, the vision and capacity of the national leadership and the patience and resilience of the people. The pandemic may not have run its course but most of the countries have by now arrived at a consensus policy to handle the pandemic.

Like most countries, after initial hiccups, Pakistan was able to formulate an effective policy to flatten the curve and contain the spread of the virus. However, this is not the end of the story, the pandemic has not run its course, there can be recurrences that need to be prevented and a credible cure has not yet been found.

This paper posits that epidemics or pandemics should not be taken lightly and that there should be contingencies in place to fight spread of contagions. Not only should national health systems be robust enough to fight a health crisis, but pandemic prevention strategies should be made part of the overall security matrix.

**Keywords:** COVID19, Pandemic, National Security, Health Contingencies.



The bird or avian flu, dog flu, swine flu and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS (2002-2004) were all traced back to animals. Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID19) was allegedly spread through bats sold as a local delicacy in a Chinese wet market

## Introduction

Plagues and pestilence have been visiting humankind since times immemorial. Locust, floods and turning the Sabbath breakers into monkeys have been mentioned as divine retribution to chastise the errant. Leprosy until it was cured was also considered divine punishment. In recent times AIDS has been stigmatized as a curse from God for unethical sexual mores. This is of course a generalization because people contract this disease through other means as well such as used needles and transfusion of infected blood.

Plagues spread quickly and are difficult to control. It can result in scores of deaths. Sometimes so many people die of plagues that burial becomes a problem. Justinian plague ravaged Europe during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (527-565 AD). It is said to have originated in Africa and spread through infected rats travelling on merchant ships. The Black Death bubonic plague that ravaged most of Europe and Asia in the fourteenth century was also blamed on infected rats. These rodents had travelled onboard a fleet of twelve ships that had made its way from the Black Sea and docked in the Sicilian port of Messina in 1347. The Black Death plague killed 20 million people in Europe, effectively one third of the continent's population. The third bubonic plague took place towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

More recently the bird or avian flu, dog flu, swine flu and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS (2002-2004) were all traced back to animals. The Ebola virus disease or EVD (2013-2016) in West Africa was caused by fruit bats. The zika virus that broke out in some Latin American countries in 2016 was spread by mosquitos and symptoms were like dengue fever, yellow fever, Japanese encephalitis and West Nile Viruses. Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID19) was allegedly spread through bats sold as a local delicacy in a Chinese wet market.

Plagues spread like bushfire and are difficult to control. The contagious virus is often zoonotic in nature. It can spread by carriers through coughing and

*The only way to control the spread of a contagion is by segregating the non-infected from the infected population*

sneezing. The infectious bacteria suspended in the atmosphere can be easily inhaled by those in the vicinity. The Spanish influenza (1918-1920) infected 500 million people, about a third of world's population at that time. There were several recurrences before the disease had run its course.

By December 2020, the novel corona virus has infected well over 60 million and has resulted in over a million and a half deaths world wide. In the US alone the infection rate has exceeded 15 million people and there have been over a quarter million deaths. Pakistan has been lucky because the number of people that have recovered is encouraging. The death toll so far remained below 10 thousand. Neighboring India has not been so lucky. The infection rate is around the 10 million mark and resulted in well over hundred thousand deaths.<sup>2</sup> The virus may infect more people in the coming months and years. The Spanish influenza lasted two full years.

The only way to control the spread of a contagion is by segregating the non-infected from the infected population. From medical point of view plagues are infectious disease caused by viruses. Common symptoms are fever, body aches, headaches, diarrhea and rashes. Medicine or vaccine can only be administered before the outbreak of the disease to create antibodies to fight the bacteria/virus. Before that happens, a doctor has limited options apart from prescribing analgesic like paracetamol for body aches



A health care worker greeting his daughter through a glass door as they maintained social distance due to the COVID-19 outbreak New Rochelle, New York



*The worst fallout of a health crisis like COVID19 is fear and panic among the people and a decision-making paralysis among the leaders*

and plenty of fluids to flush the system of toxins. The condition of patients suffering from previous morbidities like lung and heart disease can aggravate the health condition of an infected person. As an extreme measure he can be hooked to life support systems like a ventilator. If the symptoms are detected at an early stage, infected people can recover from novel corona virus. There is no guarantee so far that person cannot be re-infected.

### **The Nature of the Crisis**

The worst fallout of a health crisis like COVID19 is fear and panic among the people and a decision-making paralysis among the leaders. When the lethargy, inertia and denial wear off, the first instinct of the governments is to hide or downplay the outbreak and severity of the disease. The propensity to do so was most evident in case of Corona pandemic in highly industrialized and prosperous nations like the US and China.<sup>3</sup> Yet others decided not to take any action at all. It was thought rather naively that immune systems could be developed by encouraging herd mentality. This approach was most pronounced in the UK and it proved flawed, when Prime Minister Boris Johnson contracted the disease and had a close brush with death.<sup>4</sup>

There are several reasons for this ostrich like behavior. The spread of an unknown and incurable

*President Trump was not pleased and declared that the international organization was favoring China. Out of spite, he declared that his country would no longer be funding WHO*

disease causes anxiety and despondency. Dread and uncertainty are bad for the economy. Production drops, investors are wary of putting their money into businesses and people resort to hoarding of essential food items and fuel causing artificial shortages. Rumor mill will start churning bad news at a phenomenal speed to add to the misery of a government not performing well. Political trolls in the digital world capitalize on the situation by adding a spin by spreading concocted disinformation causing shaky governments to wobble. Fake news of a government's inability to handle a crisis can provide political opposition enough ammunition to tarnish the incumbent president and prime minister's image as an effective leader.

The world was slow to come to terms with the outbreak of the novel corona virus. The first case was reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in November 2019. The Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared a global health emergency by the end of January 2020.<sup>5</sup> He was at pains to explain that this was not a vote of no confidence in the Chinese health system but an advice to all countries to take suitable actions to control the pandemic. President Trump was not pleased and declared that the international organization was favoring China. Out of spite, he declared that his country would no longer be funding WHO.<sup>6</sup> He went a step further by waging a constant campaign against China, blaming a laboratory in Wuhan for the spread of the virus. He called the corona virus as the Chinese virus. The Chinese countered by alleging that a US military sports team had visited Wuhan before the outbreak and had left their luggage and gone back without winning a single medal.

Like any other international organization, WHO is dependent on voluntary contributions from member states. These contributions are calculated as per a nation's wealth. Of all countries in the world, the US has been the largest contributor to WHO. In a two-year funding cycle of 2018-2019, it had paid 237 million US dollars as membership dues and 656 million US dollars as donations. This made 14.7 percent of all the money paid to WHO. The next major contributor is Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.<sup>7</sup> This gave the US the leverage to express its annoyance by withholding its





*It was expected that the nations of the world would for once give up on violence and come up with joint plans to defeat the pandemic, but this did not happen*

contributions. This was one of the reactions that tested international leadership. It was hoped that affairs of the WHO, notwithstanding, countries would collaborate to find a vaccine to collectively save the mankind. Bill Gates announced that he would be supporting 7 factories trying to develop a vaccine.<sup>8</sup> But then it became a matter of prestige to outdo each other. Nations like China and Russia scrambled to declare that they had been able to produce and test a vaccine to prevent corona virus from affecting a human being.

It was expected that the nations of the world would for once give up on violence and come up with joint plans to defeat the pandemic, but this did not happen. The UN Secretary General Antonio Gutteres begged for a temporary truce in the time of the pandemic, but his appeal was ignored.<sup>9</sup>

### The Response

After WHO's pronouncement that corona virus was an international health hazard, each country came up with its own strategy to fight the pandemic. Some countries responded with alacrity, while others were more tentative and did not take any practical measures until the situation grew serious and hospitals were overwhelmed with infected patients and rate of deaths became alarming.

The first response by most countries was a lockdown of varying intensities. Sometimes these were nationwide and at other occasions it was restricted to cities, where cases of infection had been reported. Chinese lockdown in Wuhan was the most comprehensive. Strict curfew was imposed, and no one was allowed to move out of the city. The Wuhan lockdown became a template for a number of countries.<sup>10</sup> Government of Pakistan also adopted a fairly comprehensive lockdown policy. It also took the unprecedented step of telling the students studying in

*The Captain of a US battleship went public in his SOS for help for his sick crew and was removed from command for public disclosure of a health hazard*



The UN Secretary General Appeals for a Global Ceasefire amid the Threat of COVID-19

the Chinese province of Hubei to abide by the Chinese instructions and not return home.<sup>11</sup> This did cause some consternation among the parents.<sup>12</sup> Mercifully, there were no reports of any Pakistani student catching the infection. Sweden was perhaps the only country that opted not to impose lockdown of any kind.<sup>13</sup>

Travel restrictions were imposed, and borders were closed. Those returning from visits and pilgrimages were quarantined. A luxury cruise ship arrived with a cargo load of sick passengers in a Japanese port.<sup>14</sup> The Captain of a US battleship went public in his SOS for help for his sick crew and was removed from command for public disclosure of a health hazard.<sup>15</sup> Business were shut down leaving many people jobless. In India migrant workers trekked back home and many were killed in the arduous journey.<sup>16</sup> Unskilled expatriates in the Gulf region were left jobless and stranded and had no means of returning home. The rescue operations were late and long in coming. At home, the governments tried their best to flatten the curve i.e. to keep the daily count of infections and deaths at a manageable level. Newspapers started reporting the daily toll to keep the public in picture.

The second step was to protect the health providers. The medical staff in the hospitals – the doctors, nurses and the administrative staff – became the frontline warriors because they were placed directly in the line of fire and were exposed to the virus. It was immediately realized that it was important to save the health providers from becoming the victim of the deadly virus. There was a scramble to procure Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and N95 masks to work in hazardous environment. Masks also became essential for all citizens. There was a sudden demand for masks of all variety. The market quickly responded



*After enforcing the lockdowns and equipping the health workers with necessary tools to fight the disease, the government set up the National Command and Operational Center (NCOC) to monitor and control the disease*

to the demand of the masks of all kinds – synthetic and those made from cloth with a great deal of ingenuity. Many patients had problem breathing and there was an urgent requirement for ventilators. Hospitals were short of this equipment. It had to be imported from abroad until an indigenous production began. Hospitals stopped seeing outdoor patients and governments hired halls and pavilions to set up as quarantine centers. The testing capacity was also enhanced to test potential carriers. Some unscrupulous element started charging exorbitant fees for carrying out virus tests.

The third step was to obtain the willing collaboration of the people to abide by the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). There was an initial resistance to abide by orders to wash hands regularly, using sanitizers to disinfect oneself, wearing masks, social distancing and avoiding large gatherings. Only when the news of near and dear ones contracting the disease and dying because of virus sank in did people began observing the SOPs.

As nations came to grip with the situation, central bodies and spokesperson were nominated to advise the governments, devise policies and to keep the people informed. In the US the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) came to be recognized as the central body on virus control,<sup>17</sup> and Dr. Anthony Fauci became the face of the daily health bulletins.<sup>18</sup> In Germany their leading virologist, Dr. Christian Dorsten became the face of the nation's counter corona campaign.<sup>19</sup>

In Pakistan Dr. Zafar Mirza and later Dr. Faisal Sultan became the spokesmen of the government on issues related to corona. The initial damage control was done by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). The NDMA procured PPEs, ventilators, testing kits and set up quarantine centers. After enforcing the lockdowns and equipping the health workers with necessary tools to fight the disease, the government set up the National Command and Operational Center (NCOC) to monitor and control the disease. A public service campaign was initiated to sensitize the public about preventive measures such as washing hands

frequently for 20 seconds and wearing masks. An innovative caller tune was introduced to remind of this regimen every time they made a call.

### Future Scenarios

There can be recurrence of the disease as the businesses, offices and schools have opened up. There can be multiple scenarios e.g.

- **Sudden Spike**

The sudden spike scenario can be the most dangerous one and the government should be prepared to handle it in the most effective manner. The medical supplies should be optimal and adequate stocks should be maintained in all health facilities at the primary, intermediate and tertiary level. All hospitals should have sufficient stocks of PPEs. Testing kits must be handy and regular tests of infected population should be carried out. NCOC should remain operative to monitor the situation and to suggest to the Government to impose smart lockdowns in places where the cases have been reported.

- **Moderate Recurrence**

A moderate recurrence scenario should be expected and the government should have all policies to attend for such eventualities.

- **Slow Burn**

If the virus goes quiet and continues to simmer in isolated pockets, it can lead to a false sense of complacency. All effort must be made to eradicate the disease from all parts of the country. Random testing should continue in potential hotspots and medicine and doctors must be earmarked for a slow burn scenario.

*Possible health hazards should be made part of the national security matrix. Health officials should be asked to prepare health hazard hypotheses and prepare contingencies to fight these in a deliberate manner. The health risks should be dovetailed with external and internal threat guesstimates.*



*It is quite clear from the experiences of 2020 that there will be very little international cooperation to fight common human suffering. The Line of Control (LOC) will remain aflame and gross human rights violations will continue to be committed in Kashmir and Palestine despite a pandemic*

## Recommendations

There is a need to prepare at the policy level for a pandemic in the future. The national health policy should clearly provide guidelines on the subject. Possible health hazards should be made part of the national security matrix. Health officials should be asked to prepare health hazard hypotheses and prepare contingencies to fight these in a deliberate manner. The health risks should be dovetailed with external and internal threat guesstimates.

Substantial military resources were diverted towards providing medics and setting up quarantine centers. Military brass was involved in running NDMA and the NCOC. The capacity of the civilian administration and Ministry of Health should be enhanced to tackle the health emergencies on their own. The experiences of COVID19 must be documented and preserved for future reference and guidance.

Money should be invested in subjects like virology and pharmacology and training manpower skilled to produce drugs and vaccines. NUST has recently showcased a low cost stent. Other universities and organizations have come up with ventilators and PPEs. All medical universities should be asked to concentrate their efforts in finding an effective corona vaccine. This should become a part of the Higher Commission's and Ministry of Science & Technology's next ten year goals. Health management in the times of a pandemic should be made part of university curricula.

A pandemic also points out the possibility of bio-warfare. This is the easiest form of war and can infect entire populations and render physical fighting useless. Vaccines, serums and toxins must be procured for all kinds of natural and manmade health hazards. The public must be fully sensitized about the perils of viral diseases or toxins that can be spread easily. Hand washing and drinking safe water should be made compulsory at schools and public places.

## Conclusion

The COVID19 pandemic gave a rude jolt to the humankind. Unfortunately we have so far not learned any lessons from it. Wars did not come to an end. An urgent appeal for an international ceasefire by the UN Secretary General fell on deaf ears. Debilitating sanctions regime on countries not abiding by the rules set by powerful nations continued to take a heavy toll on the lives of the citizens. No latitude was given for the raging pandemic that was affecting all people irrespective color, cast or creed. There was a wild competition among nations to produce their own vaccine, throwing to the sidelines to arrive at a consensus drug for all human beings. These are all indicators that man is a strange animal and not even the curse of God can deter him or her making mischief for others.

It is quite clear from the experiences of 2020 that there will be very little international cooperation to fight common human suffering. The Line of Control (LOC) will remain aflame and gross human rights violations will continue to be committed in Kashmir and Palestine despite a pandemic. No matter how many resolutions are passed by the UN Security Council or the General Assembly resolutions or WHO advisories, the world will continue to be a dangerous place to live in. The Trump administration has already penalized the WHO by stopping funding. Saner countries can get together to make this international organization more potent. But till this happens the country must be prepared to take health issues seriously. More hospitals must be set up, more health staff be trained and monies be evenly divided on issues of national importance such as defense, health and education. Clearly a sick nation can neither fight a war nor win it.

*Brigadier Dr Tughral Yamin, (Retired) is a retired Pakistan Army officer. He is currently Associate Dean at Centre for International Peace and Stability (CIPS), National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), Islamabad.*

## NOTES

1. Myron Echenberg, "Pestis Redux: The Initial Years of the Third Bubonic Plague Pandemic, 1894-1901," *Journal of World History*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Fall 2002): 429-449.
2. Praveen Khanna, "Coronavirus India Live Updates: Over 50 lakh cases; RBI Governor says economic recovery will be gradual," *The Indian Express*, September 16, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/coronavirus-covid-19-india-news-today-live-updates-vaccine-cases-deaths-tracker-6596503/>, accessed 16 September 2020.
3. Teo Armus, "Live Updates: Trump Acknowledges knowingly playing down the deadly corona virus," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/09/10/coro>



- navirus-covid-live-updates-us/, accessed 10 September 2020; Rowan Scarborough, "China deliberately hid corona virus, admonished whistleblowers," Washington Post, March 20, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/20/china-hid-coronavirus-admonished-whistleblowers/>, accessed September 10, 2020.
4. Gerrard Kaonga, "Johnson's herd mentality strategy ripped into for ignoring FATAL flaw, The Express, March 15, 2020, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1255536/Coronavirus-herd-immunity-plan-UK-2020-Boris-Johnson-update-news>, accessed 10 September 2020.
  5. Merrit Kennedy, "WHO declares Corona Virus Outbreak a global health emergency, NPR, January 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/01/30/798894428/who-declares-coronavirus-outbreak-a-global-health-emergency>, accessed 10 September 2020.
  6. Brianah Ehly and Alice Miranda Olstein, "Trump Announces U.S. Withdrawal from World Health Organization, Politico.com, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/29/us-withdrawing-from-who-289799>, accessed September 16, 2020.
  7. Jessie Yeung, "WHO is halting funding to the WHO. What does this actually mean?" CNN, April 16, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/15/world/trump-who-funding-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html>, accessed 10 September 2020.
  8. Isobel Asher Hamilton, "Bill Gates is helping fund new factories for 7 potential coronavirus vaccines, even though it will waste billions of dollars," Business Insider, April 3, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/bill-gates-factories-7-different-vaccines-to-fight-coronavirus-2020-4>, accessed 10 September 2020.
  9. Antonio Guterres, "Silencing the Guns in times of COVID-19: UN Chief's call for global peace gains support in Africa," <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/coronavirus/covid-19-un-secretary-general%20%80%99s-call-global-peace-gains-international-support>, accessed 17 September 2020.
  10. Zheming Yuan, Yi Xiao, Zhijun Dai, Jianjun Huang, Zhenhai Zhang & Yuan Chen, "Modelling the effects of Wuhan's lockdown during COVID-19, China," WHO Research, May 28, 2020,
- <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/98/7/20-254045/en/>, accessed 17 September 2020.
11. Maria Abi-Habib, "As foreigners flee China, Pakistan tells its citizens to stay," The New York Times, February 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/world/asia/china-coronavirus-pakistan.html>, accessed 17 September 2020.
  12. Syed Raza Hasan, "Parents protest as Pakistani students stuck in China under coronavirus lockdown," Reuters, February 20, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-pakistan/parents-protest-as-pakistani-students-stuck-in-china-under-coronavirus-lockdown-idUSKBN20A0J9>, accessed 17 September 2020.
  13. Sweden's response to COVID-19: "Life is not carrying on as normal" July 16, 2020, <https://www.health-europa.eu/swedens-response-to-covid-19-life-is-not-carrying-on-as-normal/101515/>, accessed 16 September 2020.
  14. Joshua Hunt, "The coronavirus cruise: on board the Diamond Princess," The Economist, April 22, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2020/04/22/the-coronavirus-cruise-on-board-the-diamond-princess>, accessed 17 September 2020.
  15. "Coronavirus: US Navy removes Captain Brett Crozier who raised alarm," BBC, April 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52145230>, accessed 17 September 2020.
  16. Migrant labourers in time of corona: Jobless, homeless and miles to go to return home, Times of India, March 29, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/migrant-labourers-in-time-of-corona-jobless-homeless-and-miles-to-go-to-return-home/articleshow/74875506.cms>, accessed 17 September 2020.
  17. Details of Center for Disease Control and Prevention are available at its website <https://www.cdc.gov/>.
  18. Anthony S. Fauci, M.D., NAIAD Director, <https://www.niaid.nih.gov/about/director>, accessed 12 September 2020.
  19. Laura Spinney, "Germany's Covid19 Expert," The Guardian, April 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/26/virologist-christian-drosten-germany-coronavirus-expert-interview>, accessed 16 Sep 2020.

