

Coronavirus Updates &gt;

# Nearly 1 in 4 hospitals treating Covid in Afghanistan have shut down, the W.H.O. warns.



By Lauren Katzenberg

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Nearly one-quarter of the hospitals treating Covid-19 in Afghanistan have closed in recent weeks, and the country's efforts to respond to the pandemic have declined, World Health Organization officials said Wednesday.

The W.H.O. issued an urgent warning on Wednesday, saying that Afghanistan is on the brink of "an imminent humanitarian catastrophe."

The notice followed a recent visit to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, where W.H.O. leaders met with the leadership of the Taliban, which is now in control of the country. The W.H.O. officials also met with United Nations partners, health care workers and patients.

"Cuts in donor support to the country's largest health project, Sehatmandi, has left thousands of health facilities without funding for medical supplies and salaries for health staff," Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the W.H.O., and Dr. Ahmed Al-Mandhari, the organization's regional director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said in a joint statement on Wednesday.

Roughly two-thirds of the country's health facilities are part of Sehatmandi, a three-year, \$600 million project administered by the World Bank and financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the European Union, the World Bank and other donors.

Because funds for the project were funneled through the Ministry of Public Health, donors withdrew their support after the Taliban seized power. Now, only one-sixth of all Sehatmandi facilities are fully functional, according to the W.H.O.

“Many of these facilities have now reduced operations or shut down, forcing health providers to make hard decisions on who to save and who to let die,” the statement said.

Officials also said that nine of the 37 hospitals treating Covid-19 in Afghanistan have closed, and coronavirus surveillance, testing and vaccination efforts have contracted.

Afghanistan, which emerged from a surge in virus infections at the end of June, is starting to see cases rise again, this time involving the highly contagious Delta variant.

Before last month, the W.H.O. said, about 2.2 million people, or about 6 percent of Afghanistan’s population, had been vaccinated against Covid-19. But in recent weeks, the organization said, vaccination rates have slowed markedly, and some 1.8 million vaccine doses in the country remain unused.

The country’s acting health minister and last remaining holdover from the pre-Taliban Cabinet, Dr. Wahid Majrooh, stepped down on Tuesday.

Martin Griffiths, the U.N.’s under secretary for emergency relief, said on Wednesday that he was releasing \$45 million to help prevent Afghanistan’s health care system from collapsing.

“Medicines, medical supplies and fuel are running out in Afghanistan,” Mr. Griffiths said in a statement. “Cold chains are compromised. Essential health care workers are not being paid.”

On top of the threat of a public health crisis, new figures released by the World Food Program suggest that 95 percent of Afghans lack secure access to adequate food, a situation that could worsen in the winter, when many remote communities are likely to be cut off from outside support for several months.

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