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Afghanistan reports first coronavirus death

The Jakarta Post

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Afghanistan on Sunday reported its first fatality due to the novel coronavirus, after a man died in the north of the impoverished and war-torn country.

Officials said the 40-year-old victim died in Balkh province, which borders Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, from complications stemming from the COVID-19 disease.

Khaliullah Hekmati, the health director for Balkh province, told AFP that the man had suffered other health problems including with his liver and kidney. He was brought to a hospital on Wednesday, but was not quarantined there.

"He died on Friday, his tests results came back positive today," Hekmati said.

"When we went to quarantine the family, they had already moved to an area under Taliban control."

The Taliban, who in the past have been repeatedly accused of murdering health workers, last week said they would not obstruct health organizations battling the coronavirus crisis.

Afghan health officials have so far reported 34 cases of the novel coronavirus, including 10 new cases Sunday that saw the first two confirmed infections in the densely populated capital Kabul.

Two foreign diplomats were also among the 10 new cases.

Most of Afghanistan's COVID-19 cases have been linked to neighboring Iran, one of the countries hardest hit by the disease, and where millions of Afghans live as refugees.

The victim who died Friday had not returned from Iran recently, according to Hekmati.

Since the outbreak began around a month ago, tens of thousands of Afghan refugees have returned home from Iran, but only a few hundred have been tested -- raising fears the actual infection rate might be much higher than reported.

Afghanistan's porous borders, creaking hospitals, culture of hand-shaking and hugging, and large illiterate populations in crowded urban centres mean containing the crisis could be a huge challenge.