

PESHAWAR CITY IN PAKISTAN: A POTENTIAL HOTSPOT FOR COVID-19 OUTBREAK DUE TO INFLOW OF TRAVELLERS

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This article may be cited as: Afridi WA, Hussain T. Peshawar city in Pakistan: A potential hotspot for COVID-19 outbreak due to inflow of travellers. *J Med Sci* 2020 April;28(2):189-190

DEAR EDITOR,

Peshawar is the capital city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province of Pakistan, with a population of over 2 million¹. Despite the large population, Peshawar remained relatively unaffected by the COVID-19 outbreak in Pakistan with the first confirmed case on 26th February 2020². However, now the city is reporting many cases of coronavirus and as of today (10th May 2020), the number of confirmed cases reached one thousand eight hundred and ten. There have been one hundred and forty-one casualties which are the highest number reported within the province (<https://twitter.com/HealthKPGovt/status/1259132782569230337>). The number of cases is expected to rise and with the limited testing capacity, residents are now harboring feelings of immense stress and fear that the cases reported may be far less than actual numbers.

The sudden spread of the novel coronavirus in Peshawar is mainly due to the influx of people who have returned back from other countries. As passengers continue to return home, most after performing the Muslim pilgrimage or Umrah from the corona-stricken Saudi Arabia, there are chances that the number of people affected in Peshawar may increase. Negligence, carelessness, and ignorance of these travellers can have serious consequences for not only the local residents of Peshawar but also neighbouring cities. One such case has already been reported whereby a resident of Mardan (adjacent city) threw a grand party for his kith and kin after returning from Umrah, instead of government advise of self-isolation and quarantine at home. Without realizing that he had ac-

quired the viral infection, he transmitted it to a large number of people including many from Peshawar, and died soon afterwards⁴. As a result, local transmission of the disease has already been reported in the city of Peshawar due to the carelessness of local residents and not abiding by the official lockdown instructions.

People from Peshawar often visit European countries for jobs or businesses as well as vacations. Cases of local transmission have been reported from friends and families of those who travelled recently to Europe, which has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak^{5,6}. People returning from abroad generally demonstrated a lack of responsibility in this regard and have contributed to the spread of disease within the city. One such case was identified in the locality of Hayatabad-Peshawar where a professor was infected by his brother who had returned from London⁷. Cases within the Shiite community of the city are also being reported. The community has been infected as a result of their Ziarah visits to Iran, which has the ninth-highest number of reported deaths in the world owing to the corona outbreak⁸.

The western border of Peshawar is linked with Afghanistan through the Khyber agency. The cross-border movement of thousands of people every day under Afghan-Transit Trade has further enhanced the risk of the spread of the virus across boundaries. There is a high risk of spreading this disease in Peshawar if there will be any mismanagement or lack of proper monitoring at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Proper and stringent policies are a must requirement at the moment on these border checkpoints otherwise it may lead to serious consequences and Peshawar may become a nucleus of COVID-19 in the days ahead. The provincial government, however, has ordered strict monitoring at the border entry and exit points. Moreover, as per instructions of the federal government, rigorous checking procedures are being adopted at the Bacha Khan Airport, Peshawar as well. Under the current circumstances, it is the local population that needs to be sensitized towards the severity of this issue. To prevent the spread of COVID-19 within the city, it is imperative that

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Date received: 15-06-2020

Date revised: 18-06-2020

Date accepted: 20-06-2020

the residents must show a responsible attitude and take follow the official instructions and precautionary measures to save Peshawar from becoming a hot spot of COVID-19.

FUNDING

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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