Pakistan confirms first two cases of coronavirus, govt says 'no need to panic'

Pakistan on Wednesday confirmed its first two cases of the novel coronavirus as it continued its march beyond China — the source of the outbreak.

On Thursday morning, Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Health Dr Zafar Mirza called on people who have recently traveled to virus-hit countries to call on the helpline.

"If you or somebody you know have recently returned from China, Iran or a country where #COVID-19 is prevalent and if there are symptoms like fever, cough, difficulty in breathing, please report by calling at 1166," he said.

Read: Everything you need to know about the coronavirus
Yesterday, the Sindh health department announced that a young man had tested positive for the coronavirus in Karachi — the first confirmed case in Pakistan.

Shortly after, Dr Mirza had confirmed the case in Karachi and one more, both coming from Iran.

"I can confirm first two cases of coronavirus in Pakistan. Both cases are being taken care of according to clinical standard protocols & both of them are stable," said Dr Mirza via a tweet.

"No need to panic, things are under control," he added.

Later, addressing a late-night press conference in Quetta, Mirza said one of the cases was reported in Sindh while the second was confirmed in "federal areas". He added that both the affected persons had travelled to Iran in the last two weeks. He, however, refused to comment further on the two cases.

In response to a question, he said 15 suspected cases of the virus are currently under investigation, while 100 cases have tested negative so far.

He said instead of creating panic or worrying needlessly, people should "take precautions and show responsibility". Mirza urged the public to go to hospitals if they start experiencing any of the symptoms and contact the government helpline on 1166.

He said due to measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of the virus, Pakistan is the last country in the region where COVID-19 has been reported.

"We are on the right track. With Allah's blessings, this [virus] will not take the form of an outbreak in Pakistan," the SAPM said, adding that measures are in place to prevent an outbreak.

Sindh reports first case

The 22-year-old male patient in Sindh had travelled to Iran where he acquired COVID-19, Media Coordinator to the Health and Population Welfare Minister Meeran Yousuf said in a statement, days after Pakistan closed its land border with Iran, where 19 people have died from the virus.

The patient travelled from Iran to Karachi by plane on February 20. He and his family have been placed in quarantine and the Health Department is in the process of examining all the passengers that
he travelled with, the statement added.

Speaking to DawnNewsTV, Yousuf said the man had started showing symptoms while he was in Iran. His tests were carried out today at the Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH) which turned out to be positive, she said.

Yousuf said the Sindh government has informed the federal government, World Health Organisation and other partners about the confirmation of the virus in the patient. "The passengers who travelled with him were exposed as well; we will track down all the passengers and carry out their tests," she added.

"It’s a very alarming situation. Not only his case couldn’t be detected in Iran or in Pakistan when he reported at the airport, he roamed around freely in the city for almost a week during which he must have interacted with a lot of people," said Dr Qaiser Sajjad of the Pakistan Medical Association, adding that all those people who had travelled with him might also be at risk of contracting the disease.

This whole episode, he said, put a question mark over the government claims that scanners had been installed at airports to detect cases of highly infectious coronavirus.

Second case confirmed at PIMS Islamabad

According to a spokesperson for Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (Pims) in Islamabad Dr Wasim Khawaja, the coronavirus test results for a patient who came from Skardu were positive. The spokesperson said that the patient had visited Iran a month ago, adding that his condition was out of danger.

Earlier, a source in the Ministry of National Health Services also confirmed the two cases to Dawn. The source had said the other patient was admitted at Islamabad’s PIMS facility; the health secretary did not verify the claim.

"A person has been confirmed with virus in Karachi and another has been kept in isolation ward of PIMS,” the source had said. Health Secretary Dr Allah Baksh Malik, however, was reluctant to confirm that a patient had been admitted at PIMS.

School closures

Meanwhile, Balochistan government as a precautionary measure announced the closure of all education institutions in the province until March 15.

According to Balochistan Minister for Secondary and Higher Education Sardar Yar Mohammad Rind, all government schools, madressahs and private schools in the province will remain closed until March 15.

Sindh government announced that educational institutions in the province would be shut on Thursday and Friday (Feb 27 and Feb 28).
Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has called an emergency meeting on Thursday (today) to chalk out a strategy to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Suspect cases emerge

In Fateh Jang, a 45-year-old woman was admitted to a tehsil headquarters hospital on Wednesday as a suspect patient of coronavirus.

District health officer of the preventive services Dr Asad Ismail told Dawn that the woman had returned on Feb 16 after a month-long pilgrimage visit to Iran. He said that as part of emergency preventative measures, all visitors from China, Iran and other neighbouring countries were being monitored for 14 days after their arrival in Pakistan. He said the woman on Wednesday complained of flu and sore throat, following which she was moved to the isolation ward and quarantined at THQ hospital for medical observation. He said her samples were sent to the National Institute of Health in Islamabad for testing and analysis.

In Jhelum district, a woman with flu symptoms was admitted to the district headquarters hospital. She had recently returned from Iran but had not been diagnosed with the virus as of Wednesday night.

Late on Wednesday night, all the airports in the country were placed on high alert as extra staff was posted for screening of passengers.

In a tweet, Minister for Aviation Ghulam Sarwar said: "In the wake of coronavirus, all the airports have been placed on high alert and all the airport managers have been directed again to ensure 100 per cent screening of passengers."
A manager at Islamabad International Airport told Dawn that extra manpower had been made available to ensure screening of passengers.

**Spread of the coronavirus**

The novel coronavirus has killed over 2,700 people and infected more than 80,000 in 34 countries, although the vast majority of cases remain in China, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The virus is believed to have originated late last year in a food market in the Chinese city of Wuhan that was illegally selling wildlife. Health experts think it may have originated in bats and then passed to humans, possibly via another animal species.

On Wednesday, the WHO said there are now more new cases of the coronavirus reported each day outside China than inside the hardest-hit country.

The UN health agency had put the number of new cases in China at 411 on Tuesday, while those registered outside the country stood at 427.
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