

Key Messages:

- **People confirmed to have COVID-19: 1**
- **People who are presumptive for COVID-19: 26**
- **People who have tested negative for COVID-19: 80**
- **Key concern: border crossing areas in the country's west**

(Source Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan)

WHO Key Messages – Mode of Transmission & Incubation Period: **UPDATED**

- Drawing on currently available data, it is seen that the main driver of transmission is people who have symptoms.
- WHO is aware of possible transmission of COVID-19 from people carrying the virus but who have not yet developed symptoms. Detailed exposure histories are being recorded to better understand the pre-symptomatic phase of infection and how transmission may have occurred in these few instances.
- Transmission from an asymptomatic person is rare. People who are symptomatic spread viruses more readily through coughing and sneezing.
- Current estimates of the incubation period range from 1-12.5 days with median estimate range of 5-6 days. These estimates will be refined as more data becomes available.

Situation Overview: **UPDATED**

As of 5 March 2020, a total of 95,270 people have been confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 and 3,281 people have reportedly died across 79 countries. The exact case-fatality ratio is still difficult to assess as the denominator (or type of infections, including those with mild symptoms) remains unknown. On 28 February, WHO increased its assessment of the risk of spread and the risk of impact of COVID-19 to “very high” at the global level – its top level of risk assessment – while stressing that there still is a chance of containing the virus if its chain of transmission is broken. WHO believes that containment is possible in all settings. However, the immediate measures taken by countries to prepare for possible scenarios will determine the course of the outbreak. Countries with weaker health systems and limited capacity to deal with a major disease outbreak are at particular risk. The increasing spread of the virus from and within Italy, Iran and South Korea remains a concern. Travel restrictions by countries are changing rapidly and should be monitored on daily basis.

On 24 February, Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) reported that one person with COVID-19 had been confirmed in the western province of Hirat. The person had recently travelled from Qom in Iran. It is reported that all schools in Hirat are closed and public gatherings banned until further notice. As of 5 March, MoPH is investigating 26 people presumptive for COVID-19 (see table below). The clinical condition of the person confirmed as having and those presumptive for COVID-19 is good. All 26 people presumptive for COVID-19 are being kept in isolation wards.

PROVINCE	CONFIRMED	PRESUMPTIVE
Hirat	1	20
Kandahar	-	1
Samangan	-	1
Kabul	-	1
Ghazni	-	1
Farah	-	1
Balkh	-	1
TOTAL:	1	26

Response

The focus of activities in Afghanistan is on both preparedness and containment. MoPH is working closely with WHO, Health Cluster partners, IOM and other relevant stakeholders to rapidly expand in-country preparedness and containment capacity, to strengthen detection and surveillance capacity at points-of-entry into Afghanistan, such as airports and border-crossing sites (especially in the west), and to continue the training of medical staff on case-management, risk communication and community engagement. The level of support and activities in all key areas will need to be expanded rapidly to manage the further spread of the disease.

As of 2 March, MoPH has 1,600 screening tests and 150 confirmation tests available in-country. Additionally, MoPH has recently established five committees for the surveillance of COVID-19 at the national and provincial level: Points of Entry Committee; Population Surveillance Committee; Data Management Committee; National COVID-19 Contact Tracing Committee; and the Lab Surveillance Committee.

60 UNICEF-supported MHTs are on stand-by across 13 provinces to provide primary health care services in potentially affected areas. There is a need to strengthen sanitation and hygiene promotion at the Sharak-e-Sabz displacement site as well as a lack of essential Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructure at the Islam Qala border crossing. UNICEF is currently in the process of finalising a WASH assessment at the crossing and together with the Provincial Rural Rehabilitation and Development Directorate (PRRD) will install temporary washing stations for returnees (citizens of Afghanistan) at screening facilities starting on 5 March. The construction of UNICEF-funded permanent WASH facilities at the Islam Qala border crossing is expected to begin on 7 March.

Cross Border Concerns: **UPDATED**

As of 5 March, there are five people confirmed to have COVID-19 in Pakistan. In Iran, health officials have reported 2,922 people have COVID-19 and 92 people have died after contracting the virus as of 5 March.

On 1 March, the Spin Boldak border crossing was closed by both Afghan and Pakistani border police, reportedly in connection with COVID-19. The border will remain closed for seven days. However, Pakistan's main border crossing with Afghanistan - the Torkham border crossing - remains open.

IOM reports that there has been a higher number of spontaneous returnees (citizens of Afghanistan) from Iran over recent days as many labour camps have been closed due to the rapid spread of COVID-19. Awareness raising and evidence-based sensitisation on COVID-19 facts remain key gaps and require further strengthening.

On 4 March, UNHCR announced the temporary closure of all UNHCR Encashment Centres (ECs) in the country effective Thursday, 5 March until further notice. At the ECs all returnees (citizens of Afghanistan) with a valid Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF) usually receive a grant to support their immediate humanitarian needs.

IOM and WHO are actively supporting response activities with MoPH to address preparedness and emergency coordination actions in the border provinces with Iran and Pakistan (Nangarhar, Kandahar, Nimroz and Hirat). Support includes: secondment of staff for cross border surveillance; material support; publication of MoPH and WHO Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials; billboards; community-level awareness raising and sensitisation efforts through health education sessions and Displacement Tracking Matrix focus group discussions; and use of IOM transit facilities as temporary isolation/quarantine spaces.

Education

All schools in Hirat – including temporarily learning spaces (TLS) and community-based education (CBE) – are suspended until further notice to help contain the spread of COVID-19 (although public schools and universities are currently closed for winter break and will resume on 22 March). COVID-19 is much less common in children than adults, and children tend to have a milder version of the disease.

WHO Key Message – Basic principles to reduce the general risk of transmission of acute respiratory infections include:

- Regularly and thoroughly clean hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water.
- Maintain at least 1 metre distance with anyone who is coughing.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth.
- When coughing, cover mouth and nose with a bent elbow or tissue, dispose of the used tissue immediately and clean hands.
- Stay home if unwell. Anyone with a fever, cough and difficulty breathing should seek medical attention in line with instructions from local health authorities.
- Stay informed on the latest developments about COVID-19.

Coordination:

Regional

- On 2 March, a team of WHO experts arrived in Tehran, Iran, to support the ongoing response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. The team will work with health authorities and other stakeholders to review ongoing readiness and response efforts, visit designated health facilities, laboratories and points of entry, and provide technical guidance. The plane carrying the technical team members also took a shipment of medical supplies and protective equipment to support over 15,000 health care workers, as well as enough laboratory kits enough to test and diagnose nearly 100,000 people.
- WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO) country support missions to Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan are in the final stages of planning. Other support missions requested by countries are being reviewed and will be organised accordingly.

National

- WHO together with the Health Cluster has developed and is implementing a COVID-19 Preparedness Plan to complement the MoPH *Emergency Response Plan for Coronavirus 2020* and additional funding is currently being sought for this plan.
- The Inter-Cluster Coordination Team held its second meeting on Sunday, 1 March, to discuss COVID-19 response and preparedness activities – particularly in the west. It was agreed that the current WHO preparedness plan would be updated to cover response activities and include more inter-sectoral components. This project is being led by WHO.

Sub-national

- WHO and OCHA Western Region (Hirat) are supporting the DoPH and humanitarian partners to scale-up their response to COVID-19. OCHA Afghanistan's Head of Office was in Hirat on 1-3 March where, with WHO and IOM colleagues, he met with the Provincial Governor, the Director of DoPH, and humanitarian partners, and visited the Islam Qala border crossing and Sharak-e-Sabz displacement site.

Funding:

- On 24 February, EU committed €232 million for global efforts to tackle COVID-19 outbreak. Part of these funds will be allocated immediately, while some will be released in the coming months.
- According to media reports, on 25 February, the Government of Afghanistan announced the availability of US\$15 million to respond to COVID-19 outbreak and an additional US\$10 million in reserve funds for MoPH.
- On 26 February, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator, supported by the Advisory Board of the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF), allocated US\$1.5 million for urgently required COVID-19 preparedness and response capacity in-country.
- On 1 March, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator released US\$15 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to support global efforts to contain the COVID-19 virus. The funding will help countries with fragile health systems boost their detection and response operations.
- On 3 March, the World Bank announced an initial package of up to US\$12 billion in loans and grants in immediate support to countries coping with the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. The World Bank support will prioritise the poorest countries and those at high risk with low capacity.

*** The next update will be published on 9 March 2020 unless there is a significant change in the situation ***

More Information

WHO

- WHO situation dashboard: <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/685d0ace521648f8a5beeeee1b9125cd>
- How to protect yourself against COVID-19: <https://youtu.be/1APwq1df6Mw>
- General information: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>
- Global surveillance for human infection with coronavirus disease: [https://www.who.int/publications-detail/global-surveillance-for-human-infection-with-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)](https://www.who.int/publications-detail/global-surveillance-for-human-infection-with-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov))
- Advice for public: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>
- Advice for international travel and trade: <https://www.who.int/ith/2020-24-01-outbreak-of-Pneumonia-caused-by-new-coronavirus/en/>
- Introduction to COVID-19 online course: <https://openwho.org/courses/introduction-to-ncov>
- WHO Afghanistan Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/WHOAfghanistan>
- COVID-19 myth busters: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>
- When and how to use masks: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>
- Social stigma associated with COVID-19: https://www.epi-win.com/sites/epiwin/files/content/attachments/2020-02-24/COVID19%20Stigma%20Guide%2024022020_1.pdf
- IEC material (in English, Dari and Pashtun): <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/health/documents/publication-date/2020?search=COVID-19%20Poster>

IATA

- For the latest available information on travel restrictions, please refer to this link from IATA: <https://www.iatatravelcentre.com/international-travel-document-news/1580226297.htm>

United Nations

- Medical services around the globe for UN staff: <https://hr.un.org/page/medical-services-around-globe>
- Recommendations for UN personnel: https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/Coronavirus_RMP_2020-03-02_FINAL_0.pdf

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