

This is the third edition of the C-19 Access Impediment Report, looking at access constraints linked to the outbreak of Covid-19 as well as its humanitarian response. The report is produced by the HAG in collaboration with humanitarian partners. The report is published on a bi-weekly basis.

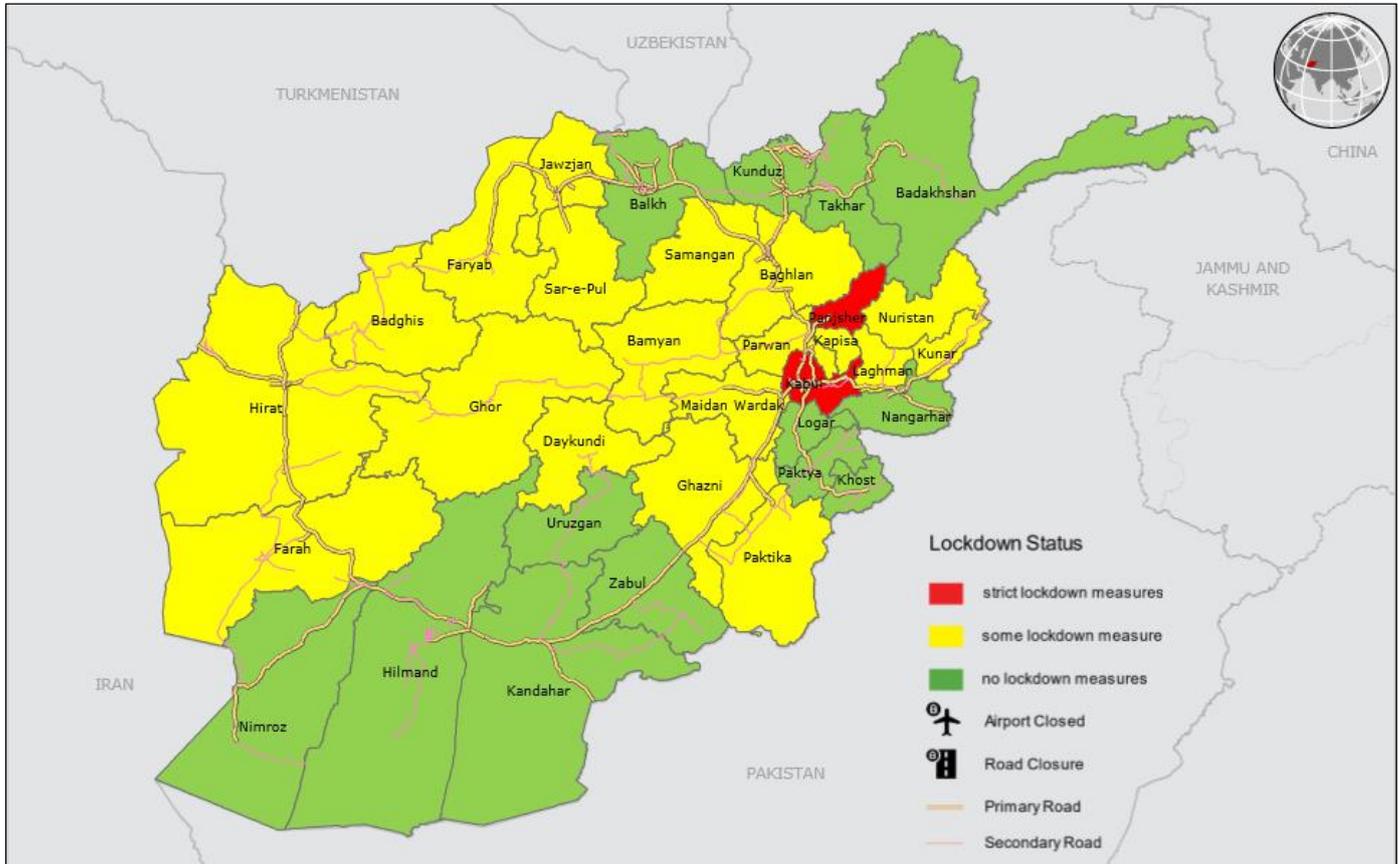


Figure 1 Lockdown Status Across Provinces as of 14 May

Protests linked to lockdown measures and C-19 response

In the last few weeks, dissatisfaction among the Afghan population with lockdown measures and the C-19 response increased, resulting in a series of protests across the country. In Nangarhar, Laghman, Ghazni, Parwan, Balkh and Ghor provinces protestors voiced concerns about an alleged lack of transparency in the government-led bread distribution to support families in need, with a protest in Chaghcharan on 9 May turning violent, when ANSF opened fire at the crowd. At least four civilians and two ANSF members were killed and another 12 civilians injured. Meanwhile, business owners organized protests in Hirat, Pul-e Khumri and Shinwar districts, calling on the government to allow the reopening of their shops and businesses.

Despite the national government announcing an extension of the lockdown measures until after Eid, a number of provinces started to relax their measures with the arrival of Ramadan, including Kandahar, Helmand and Ghazni provinces, with authorities in Badakhshan even fully lifting their lockdown as of 25 April. Likely in an attempt to prevent further protests, other provinces followed, with local authorities announcing the temporary lifting of lockdown measures in Nangarhar, Balkh, Khost, Paktya, Kunduz and Takhar provinces. While this will likely ease movement restrictions for humanitarians, growing dissatisfaction of the population with the C-19 response might in turn negatively impact humanitarian activities, with organizations needing to ensure that they are maintaining a transparent and impartial process.

Interference in C-19 response by parties to the conflict

Humanitarian partners started to report a number of interferences by both government and NSAG-TB impeding their C-19 response. In the eastern region, provincial authorities approached several organizations and requested the employees to donate parts of their salaries to the provincial C-19 response, with at least one organization yielding to the demand after a provincial official threatened to collect the money by force. Economical pressure also seems to have motivated a district governor in the western region who prevented trucks transporting food assistance for 500 families from continuing to their foreseen distribution location. The district governor insisted on conducting the distribution in the district centre, with the trucks only allowed to continue after the organization reached out to the provincial governor for support.

A decree issued by the President's Office on 27 March 2020 stipulated that all NGO and IO projects related to the C-19 response should be cleared by the Cabinet of Ministers, despite the NGO law foreseeing that emergency projects can start immediately, without going through the time consuming process of getting a Memorandum of Understanding from line Ministries, with a letter from the Ministry of Economy being sufficient to start the project. This led to some confusion and some provinces started asking partners for an authorization letter from the Cabinet of Ministers, with partners in Herat experiencing delays in the implementation of their C-19 response.

NSAG-TB reactions to the C-19 response differed across the country: In the northeastern and southern regions, NSAG-TB initially prohibited partners from conducting C-19 awareness raising programs and only allowed project implementation to continue after partners agreed to provide them with more information about the planned interventions. Also in the northeastern region, NSAG-TB members manning checkpoints in Takhar prohibited staff members from at least two different organizations to wear face masks, claiming that faith and proper adherence to Islam would provide sufficient protection against C-19. Meanwhile, in the eastern region, partners reported of local NSAG-TB representatives cooperating and supporting NGO-led awareness raising campaigns, with religious leaders sensitizing the community about the importance of social distancing. Several partners reported of NSAG-TB officials complained that they were not sufficiently involved in the development of the C-19 response, claiming that the government led response ignored beneficiaries in their areas of control.

Flight update

While commercial flights into Afghanistan remain suspended, the UNHAS air bridge between Kabul and Doha is now up and running, offering three flights a week, although UNHAS will not operate flights on 24 and 25 May during Eid celebrations. UNHAS also continues to operate flights within Afghanistan, although at a reduced frequency, while domestic commercial flights remain suspended until after Eid.

Border closures and impact on humanitarians

On 1 May, the Pakistan government announced that the Chaman and Torkham border crossings would be opened five times a week (Monday to Friday) to allow a maximum of 100 trucks per day to enter Afghanistan. On 13 May, in an attempt to address the massive backlog, Pakistan authorities further increased the number to 150 trucks per day, announcing on 16 May that both border crossing points would be open six days per week around the clock. With a lengthy disinfection process slowing down the handling, and in the absence of a priority line, this is a welcome development to help and reduce the backlog.

In the meantime, there is a continued risk for perishable goods to go bad, with the delay also resulting in the expiration of exemption certificates required for goods to enter Afghanistan and be exempt from tariffs and the renewal taking time due to government departments working slower during lockdown. For smaller humanitarian actors this means that cargo is not able to cross or be processed while larger humanitarian actors have to engage in time consuming administrative procedures. There are also reports of commercial suppliers refusing transportation of some humanitarian cargo, unwilling to spend extended amounts of time in truck queues.

While the Pakistan government initially foresaw to allow border crossings for individuals twice a week on Friday and Saturday, they have shown flexibility, allowing border crossings whenever there is a certain amount of people, with 9 May recording 5,523 Pakistanis crossing into Pakistan at Chaman, while 585 Afghans returned back home.

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