

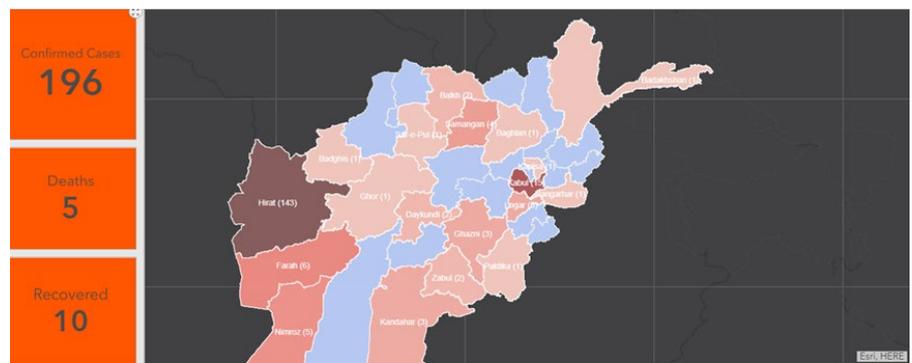
## Key Messages: **UPDATED**

- **People confirmed to have COVID-19: 196** (Source: Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) of Afghanistan)
- **Deaths from COVID-19: 5**
- **Tests completed: 1,807**
- **Key concerns: Border crossing areas, movement restrictions, testing capacity, commodity prices, floods, plans for camp and camp-like quarantine, strategic messaging and rumour management**

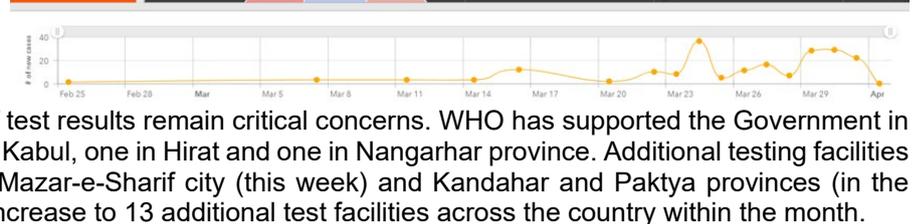
## Situation Overview: **UPDATED**

According to **Johns Hopkins University data**, as of 1 April 862,234 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed and 42,404 deaths have been reported across 180 countries and territories. The COVID-19 pandemic is straining health systems worldwide. WHO is calling on countries to balance the demands of responding directly to COVID-19, while maintaining essential health services. WHO has stressed that to defeat the virus, countries need aggressive and targeted tactics. Aggressive measures to find, test, isolate and treat cases, as well as trace contacts are not only the best and fastest way out of social and economic restrictions – they are also the best way to prevent them.

**In Afghanistan, MoPH reports show that 196 people across 19 provinces are now confirmed to have the virus.** Hirat is still the most affected part of the country, now with 143 of the confirmed cases. Five people have now died from the virus. Contact tracing for the people confirmed with COVID-19 is ongoing.



To date, testing has been small scale which may account for the relatively low number of confirmed cases given the high number of people crossing the border from Iran. MoPH reports that 1,807 tests have so far been conducted. Low community testing and slow turn-around of test results remain critical concerns. WHO has supported the Government in the establishment of two testing facilities in Kabul, one in Hirat and one in Nangarhar province. Additional testing facilities are also expected to begin operations in Mazar-e-Sharif city (this week) and Kandahar and Paktya provinces (in the coming week). There are further plans to increase to 13 additional test facilities across the country within the month.



Quarantine measures are being implemented for people who are either suspected or confirmed to have the virus. There are concerns that this is not being implemented in a consistent manner nationally with sub-optimal quarantine and isolation practices being applied in some locations. Humanitarian partners stress that quarantine and isolation should only be conducted for people presenting with symptoms of COVID-19 and no more than one person should be housed in one room or tent. Partners urge the authorities to refrain from keeping people in quarantine/isolation facilities for extended periods for repeated testing. Individuals who first tested negative may become contaminated by COVID-19-affected individuals while being kept in the same facilities. Partners also stress that when quarantine is organised in public facilities, strict gender separation should be observed so that men and women are not kept in the same rooms, unless they are close relatives.

### PARENTING TIPS DURING THE PANDEMIC .....

UNICEF has developed a set of **parenting tips** for parents facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Some key points are listed below:

- One-on-one time – set aside time to spend with each child and ask them what they want to do
- Keeping it positive – explain the behaviour you want to see; keep calm and use positive words. Shouting stresses children more; praise your child for good behaviour and help your teens stay connected with their friends
- Get structured – create a flexible but consistent daily routine (make a schedule for you and your children that has time for structured activities, including exercise and free time; teach your child about keeping safe distances; and make handwashing and hygiene fun giving children points and praise for regular handwashing)
- Bad behaviour - catch bad behaviour early and redirect your child's attention from a bad to a good behaviour; use consequences to help teach your children responsibility
- Keep calm and manage stress – it's important to take time to manage self-stress. Take care of yourself, so you can support your children, take a pause when you are feeling stressed yourself
- Talking about COVID-19 – Be willing to talk, taking into consideration how much they will understand. Be honest, be supportive and it is okay not to know all the answers.

A number of provinces have instituted measures to limit the exposure of residents to COVID-19. In Kabul and Hirat these include '**measured lockdowns**' which have resulted in closures of sections of each city and/or limits on the number of people travelling together. In Hirat, the Government has instituted a policy of providing cards for humanitarian vehicles exempting passengers from the movement restrictions. On 31 March, reports were received that the Government is also closing entry and exit to Kabul for the coming 20 days. In line with previous letters by the Ministry of Economy showing exemptions for movement of humanitarian personnel and goods, discussions suggest that the UN and NGOs will still be able to move outside of Kabul city, but the process for clearing such movement is not yet clear.

Throughout the week of 29 March, partial lock-down measures were put in place across other parts of the country. These are changing every day but have so far included prohibition of or advice against public gatherings for weddings and in public spaces including hotels and markets. Some provincial authorities have since instituted tighter restrictions in selected areas. For example, in the north of the country (Balkh province including Mazar-e-Sharif city), Government authorities are planning to implement quarantine measures in two phases – a partial lockdown from 1 to 3 April, followed by a complete lockdown from 4 April through to the end of the month. During this complete lockdown time, it is expected that residents will be required to remain in their homes, except for procuring essential food items and medical emergencies. Staff working in the Department of Public Health, health centres and hospitals or for government security forces will be exempt from these travel restrictions. Humanitarian partners are especially concerned about the closure of other Government departments given the ongoing need to maintain life-saving humanitarian assistance for needs identified before the COVID-19 pandemic, that will likely be aggravated due to this crisis.

The Government's Emergency Committee for Prevention of COVID-19, which meets every two-days, met again on 31 March and has indicated that any interruptions to UN and NGO operations related to COVID-19 movement restrictions would be resolved soon. Humanitarian partners urge the Government to employ a national approach to these issues so that individual negotiations are not required on a case-by-case basis. Humanitarian partners ask the Government to waive restrictions of movement for all essential and critical items, especially humanitarian and health cargo.

### **Response:** UPDATED

After a meeting with Provincial Governors held on 28 March, the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, announced a series of measures taken to allow Governors to take the lead of the response to COVID-19 in their provinces. This includes simplified procurement procedures and decentralised decision-making on resource allocation towards the response to facilitate a rapid mobilisation of response activities. A dedicated committee will, however, monitor and oversee appropriate use of resources. To support operations, the Government will keep its customs clearance operations functional for 24 hours each day. The President called for provinces to strengthen preparations even if they have not yet had confirmed cases in their jurisdiction. Each Province will be developing a 3 to 6-month plan of current and anticipated needs brought upon by COVID-19 and existing need aggravated by the spread of the pandemic. Province-level economic stimulus plans are also planned.

Provincial Governors were urged to put in place emergency preparedness activities for worse case scenarios, including considering schools and other government infrastructure as de facto health service provision spaces. President Ghani noted that the families of healthcare staff who lose their lives while fighting COVID-19 are eligible to compensation benefits equivalent to what is allowed for defence forces in the country. The President stressed that mobilising religious leaders is vital to save lives and to preventing mosques and funeral ceremonies becoming places for transmission of the virus. The same message was shared by the Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs on 31 March that issued a religious statement saying that people should hold their prayers at home in the areas where movements are restricted due to the spread of COVID-19. Overarching awareness raising messages will be designed in Kabul but these will be contextualised for each Province. In addition to classes being provided via TV and Radio to reduce interruptions to education, the Government plans to reduce the cost of internet to facilitate online learning, although many children in Afghanistan remain without access to computers.

Coordination of emergency response and disaster management on the Government's side comes under the portfolio of First Vice President and through the Emergency Committee for Prevention of COVID-19. The humanitarian community's overall efforts towards the response are coordinated under the Humanitarian Country Team and the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team at the national level and via Humanitarian Regional Teams at the sub-national level.

On the delivery side, the overall focus of the **health response** is on preparedness, containment and mitigation. WHO and a number of international organisations are working to provide reliable modelling on the evolution of the virus in the specific context of Afghanistan with its unique vulnerabilities. A **COVID-19 Multi-Sector Humanitarian Country Plan for Afghanistan** has been finalised requiring US\$108.1m to reach 6.1m people with life-saving assistance across all clusters. The plan outlines initial preparedness and response efforts for the next three months and highlights the potential effects of the outbreak on ongoing humanitarian response and spells out mitigation measures being employed to reduce interruptions to life-saving services.

In addition to an urgent allocation of \$1.5m towards urgently required COVID-19 preparedness and response health capacity made on 26 February, OCHA's Humanitarian Financing Unit is supporting the Humanitarian Coordinator to make further allocations to support the response.

The World Bank met with a group of humanitarian partners on 31 March to share information on planned programmes to support COVID-19, particularly those focused on food transfer and labour-intensive public works. The aim was to identify opportunities to align and coordinate efforts given the World Bank's ongoing dialogue with the Government on supporting urban and rural communities through ongoing operations such as Citizens Charter, the CASA Community Support Project, EZ-Kar and the Cities Investment Project. Initial discussions were held on the procurement of food packages and options for coordination. As a next step the Bank will review the overlap between the districts prioritised by the humanitarian community for immediate assistance and possible Bank support.

The recently established **COVID-19 Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) Working Group**, led by WHO and NRC, has started its work to tailor global COVID-19 guidance on risk communication activities to Afghanistan's unique context. The Working Group is presently undertaking a mapping of ongoing awareness raising activities in country, as well as the availability of different mechanisms to distribute information – UN/NGO staff, religious leaders, community radio, social media, etc. The group plans to develop a collective, inter-agency risk communications and community engagement approach to ensure that messaging is harmonised and community feedback is systematically collected in line with a risk communication and community engagement strategy for Afghanistan. Special attention will be given to preventing social stigma and to prioritise groups vulnerable to exposure.

The COVID-19 outbreak comes against the backdrop of the Spring flood season which is complicating the response and depleting in-country supplies. According to [OCHA's natural disaster tracking dashboard](#), more than 14,000 people have been affected by floods, landslides and avalanches in more than 12 provinces. Humanitarian partners are mobilising a rapid response to meet the needs of affected families. The ES-NFI Cluster reports that so far, 480 families affected by floods have been provided with emergency shelter and household items in Hirat, Farah, Badakhshan, Takhar, Ghazni and Hilmand provinces. Further assessments in the country's east and south east are still ongoing and are expected to be completed by end of this week. In line with weather forecasts, high rainfall and intermittent flooding is being experienced in different parts of the country. ES-NFI partners are prioritising cash assistance for those affected given the current context and operating constraints. While partners experienced temporary challenges because of the closure of financial service providers amid COVID-19-related movement restrictions, such issues have now been resolved – in line with the commitments outlined in the meeting between the President and Provincial Governors in the country.

### **Cross Border Concerns: UPDATED**

As of 1 April, Johns Hopkins University reports that there are 44,605 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in **Iran**. All flights to and from Iran are suspended. However, the Islam Qala-Dogharoon land border crossings (Hirat) remain open on both sides for both individuals and commercial traffic. The Milak crossing (Nimroz) is formally open only to commercial traffic and documented Afghans. Despite a formal notice on the policy at this crossing, undocumented returnees are still crossing into Afghanistan. Up to 21 March, IOM reported a surge in spontaneous returns of undocumented Afghans from Iran with 115,410 undocumented returnees over a 2-week period – the highest return on record. The scale of returns has since subsided, notably during and after the Nawroz-Persian New Year holidays in Iran and Afghanistan. As of 30 March, flooding affected the Islam Qala border crossing. While it remains open, the number of returns registered on 1 April has been low compared to past days (793 via Islam Qala and 366 via Milak crossings). Due to heavy rains and resulting floods, the road leading from the crossing into Afghanistan remains partly closed. As the road quality is poor in many parts of Afghanistan, floods are likely to affect movement of humanitarian goods and personnel across the country. Some food security and agriculture partners have had to temporarily delay their activities – as they wait for waters to recede from roads – in some of the western provinces that are experiencing localised flooding.

As of 1 April, according to Johns Hopkins University there are 2,042 people confirmed to have COVID-19 in **Pakistan**. The country's border with Afghanistan is officially closed through until 9 April, however there have been several brief openings during which a limited number of commercial trucks have been allowed to cross the at the Chaman-Spin Boldak border point to ensure continued supplies of goods in Afghanistan. Local [news reports](#) on 31 March have since quoted the Afghanistan Ambassador to Pakistan outlining plans to allow entry of food and medicine supplies into Afghanistan as early as next week. Although this seems to be indicative and there have not been any formal confirmations from Pakistan authorities. On movement of humanitarian supplies, partners encourage the Government of Afghanistan to further engage with Pakistan authorities to enable smooth and speedy movement of humanitarian cargo.

On 30 March, reports indicated that safe passage may be allowed for a few thousand citizens of Afghanistan (exact number is TBC) who are currently stuck in Pakistan as a result of border closures and who want to return. Returns are expected to be done via the Torkham crossing point and, given the volume of people, it is anticipated that this operation might take several days. Discussions are underway to scale-up humanitarian staffing at the border to respond to the influx. Nangarhar Provincial authorities have indicated they may introduce quarantine measures for these returnees in

the border area. The humanitarian community does not support the establishment of camps or camp-like quarantine sites for people returning in large numbers. Keeping people in confined spaces in a pandemic situation is not best practice and the experience in other countries has demonstrated that this increases the risk of the virus spreading.

In early March, Afghanistan's other neighbours – **Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan** – announced the closure of their borders, with some exemptions, and suspended flights to and from Afghanistan. Commercial traffic and return of citizens of Afghanistan continues according to the Afghan Border Police.

As international borders close and commercial flights continue to be disrupted, humanitarian partners urge the Government to assure that its borders are open for commercial, humanitarian and health cargo. Market shortages can put additional pressure on humanitarian cargo and contribute to social tensions.

### **Operational Response Capacity: UPDATED**

With the above-mentioned movement restrictions and isolation measures announced for different parts of the country, the UN and humanitarian partners are working to clarify implications for their activities. The closure of government institutions may create new coordination challenges for humanitarian agencies. Some NGOs have reduced their international footprint in country and many staff are now working remotely. Others are scaling-up to respond to the COVID-19 risk and ensure continuity of existing services in the areas where they operate. UN offices remain open and staff are working to ensure life-saving assistance continues to vulnerable people. Virtual meetings are being held as much as possible to protect staff from the virus.

Commercial flight suspensions to Afghanistan are now in force and the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) is urgently investigating options for a possible international airbridge. Further to the announcement that Jalalabad airfield will stop operating, UNHAS will start a helicopter service between Jalalabad and Kabul to ensure critical humanitarian operations are not disrupted. On 31 March, it was further noted that the Hirat international airport would be closed for all commercial flights until 30 April. While humanitarian air services – UNHAS and PACTEC – are exempt from this provision, humanitarian partners are concerned that these small-scale air operations would not be able to meet partners' recurrent demand to scale. The cost of partners' operations is also expected to increase with higher flight costs.

### **More Information: UPDATED**

#### WHO

- WHO's latest information on COVID-19: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>
- Q&A on COVID-19: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>
- Global research on COVID-19: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/global-research-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>
- Disability considerations during the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://www.who.int/internal-publications-detail/disability-considerations-during-the-covid-19-outbreak>
- IEC material (in English, Dari and Pashtun): <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/health/documents/publication-date/2020?search=COVID-19%20Poster>

#### UN

- UNFPA technical brief on COVID-19 (A Gender Lens): [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf)
- IOM dashboard on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on human: <https://migration.iom.int/>

#### Inter-Agency Standing Committee

- IASC-endorsed COVID-19 guidance – new materials available: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/covid-19-outbreak-readiness-and-response>
- IASC Interim Guidance: Gender Alert for COVID-19 Outbreak: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/interim-guidance-gender-alert-covid-19-outbreak-developed-iasc-reference-group-gender-humanitarian>
- Interim Technical Note: Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) during COVID-19 Response: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/interim-technical-note-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-psea-during-covid-19-response>

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