



CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF COVID – 19 ON SAARC MEMBER COUNTRIES (Steps to Strengthen Regional Cooperation in an Emergency Situation)

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ABSTRACT

The virus that turns on localize shock to China is now delivering a salient shock globally. The noble coronavirus has made the whole environment around the world unstable for the people. The virus has stopped many economic activities due to its contagious effect and till date, no cured has discovered to fight against the coronavirus. The coronavirus has hit the SAARC member countries so badly that it has been revealed by World Bank that these nations have been facing worst economic performance in more than 40 years. This coronavirus has impacted the economy of the SAARC member countries so badly that it has been predicted that these nations can even go into recession in the upcoming future years.

Government of these member countries have developed and adopted various policies to combat the effect of the coronavirus pandemic among which the most common were social distancing and country- wide lockdown.

This study simulates the potential impact of COVID - 19 on the economy of SAARC member countries. It covers the impact on gross domestic product and trade, international trade costs, international travels, etc. The research also studies the outbreak of coronavirus on the countries from the very first case to the number of cases till 30th June 2020. It covers the measure or policies taken by different nations for regional cooperation and at the individual level to fight the battle of coronavirus pandemic. It was found that the economies were already in the parlous state before the COVID – 19 crises. The prolonging of country-wide lockdown has shown a global economic downturn and also disrupted the demand and supply chains due to which economies are facing a period of slowdown.

In this paper, we describe the potential impact of coronavirus pandemic on various segments of the economy, analyse the policies that have been announced by SAARC member countries individually

and for the regional cooperation and the future prospect of SAARC after COVID – 19.

KEYWORDS: coronavirus (COVID – 19), Lockdown effect, SAARC, economic impact, pandemic, contagious disease, international trade

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) is a virulent disease caused by a newly discovered and highly contagious Coronavirus. It has been stated that the virus was originated in the month of December in 2019 in Wuhan a district of China. Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV).

The common symptoms of this communicable disease include fever, dry cough, breathlessness, breathing difficulties, fatigue and also include respiratory symptoms. The coronavirus more severe cases can cause an infection like pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death. To prevent infection of the coronavirus pandemic World Health Organisation has given some standard recommendations to be followed by each and every individual across the nations which include regular washing of hands, covering mouth and nose while coughing and sneezing, thoroughly cooking meat and eggs. It also suggests avoiding close contact with the people having any symptoms of respiratory illness like coughing and sneezing.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Coronavirus as a pandemic after it had been dispersed in more than 100 countries with a huge number of positive cases as well as deaths by 11th of March 2020. The spread of coronavirus in SAARC member countries was initially not as serious but by the middle of March 2020, it was assumed as a serious concern as till March each nation was affected by it. The spread has increased among the countries due to human migration. With the increase in a number of cases, most of the SAARC nations had to introduce lockdown to counter the spread of COVID-19. All the member countries started spreading social awareness and simple measures like maintaining the social distance between people, washing hands on a regular basis etc. In order to counter the spread, the nations have also limited their economic activities, put restrictions on international trade and international travels.

Due to unavailability of cure of the coronavirus, the government of SAARC member countries started adopting various policies to contain this pandemic. In the absence of drugs and vaccine for this disease, the only way to limit or reduce the person to person transmissions of COVID - 19 is social distancing. So to maintain social distancing and for reducing the transmissions countries went for curfews, lockdown and quarantines.

COVID – 19

On 31 December 2019, China informed the World Health Organisation (WHO) about cases of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan, China. On 7th January 2020, this pneumonia was identified

as novel coronavirus by Chinese authorities and was temporarily named “2019-nCoV”. This novel coronavirus (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been found before in humans. Later the new virus was named as “COVID-19 virus”.

It was found that due to human migration there has been a rapid increase in the number of cases caused by coronavirus outside China. This led WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on 11th March 2020 to announce that the coronavirus outbreak over various nations can be characterized as a pandemic. Till that date WHO reported the confirmed number of cases across the globe was reached 1,18,000 with 4291 deaths.

By mid-March 2020, it was reported that over 40% of the globally confirmed cases were from the WHO European Region. By that time the European Region had become the centre point of the epidemic. As of 28th April 2020, it was seen that 63% of the global mortality from the COVID - 19 was from the European Region. This region was hit badly by this coronavirus pandemic. Since the very first cases were reported, WHO has started working day & night to support countries to prepare and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the words of Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, “Through transparent knowledge-sharing, tailored support on the ground, and steadfast solidarity, we will beat COVID-19.

OBJECTIVES

Through this paper, it is aimed to thoroughly study the present scenario of COVID – 19 in SAARC countries. The main purpose of this paper is to study the impact of coronavirus on SAARC nations and it also aims to study the challenges that the SAARC member countries are facing in order to fight against the COVID -19 situations. This paper also aims to cover the outbreak of coronavirus in all the SAARC member countries and its rapid growth. The paper also tries to describe the policies and steps taken together by all SAARC members to fight against this coronavirus pandemic situation. This coronavirus has made all the SAARC countries to come together for the regional cooperation in this emergency situation which had happened many years and this has brought a good prospect for all the countries for further trade and other exchanges of things.

The paper also aims to study the measures taken by individual SAARC member countries to counter the spread of transmission of coronavirus to the whole nation.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established by signing SAARC Charter on December 8, 1985, by the Heads of State or Government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka at the First Summit meeting in Dhaka. It is the regional intergovernmental and geopolitical union of states in South Asia. The idea of regional cooperation in South Asia was first raised in November 1980. After consultations, the foreign secretaries of the seven founding countries— Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—met for

the first time in Colombo in April 1981.

- Afghanistan was admitted as the eighth member of the SAARC during the Fourteenth Summit held in New Delhi on 3-4 April 2007.
- The Headquarter and secretariat of SAARC are at Kathmandu, Nepal.

PURPOSES

The purpose of this organisation is to promote economic development and regional integration. The SAARC seeks to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia, strengthen collective self-reliance, promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in various fields, and cooperate with international and regional organizations.

OBJECTIVES

1. To promote the welfare of the peoples of SOUTH ASIA and to improve their quality of life.
2. To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals with the opportunity to live in dignity and to realise their full potentials.
3. To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of SOUTHASIA.
4. To contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another are problems.
5. To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields.
6. To strengthen cooperation with other developing countries.
7. To strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests.
8. To cooperate with international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes.

PRINCIPLES

- Cooperation within the framework of the SAARC shall be based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and mutual benefit.
 - Such cooperation shall not be a substitute for bilateral and multilateral cooperation but shall complement them.
 - Such cooperation shall not be inconsistent with bilateral and multilateral obligations.

Members of SAARC

SAARC comprises of eight member states:

- Afghanistan
- Bangladesh
- Bhutan
- India
- Maldives
- Nepal
- Pakistan
- Sri Lanka

The association also have certain states with observer status which includes:

(i) Australia; (ii) China; (iii) European Union; (iv) Iran; (v) Japan; (vi) Mauritius; (vii) Myanmar; (viii) South Korea (ix) United States

PRINCIPAL ORGANS

Meetings of the Head of State or Government

The Heads of State or Government shall meet once a year or more often as and when considered necessary by the Member States.

Council of Ministers

A Council of Ministers consisting of the Foreign Ministers of the Member States shall be established with the following functions:

- a) formulation of the policies of the ASSOCIATION;
- b) review of the progress of cooperation under the ASSOCIATION;
- c) decision on new areas of cooperation;
- d) establishment of the additional mechanism under the ASSOCIATION as
- e) decision on other matters of general interest to the ASSOCIATION.

The Council of Ministers shall meet twice a year. An extraordinary session of the Council may be held by agreement among the Member States.

- Standing Committee

- The Standing Committee comprising the Foreign Secretaries shall have the following functions:
 - a) Overall monitoring and coordination of programme of cooperation;
 - b) Approval of projects and programmes, and the modalities of their financing;
 - c) Determination of inter-sectorial priorities;
 - d) Mobilization of regional and external resources;
 - e) Identification of new areas of cooperation based on appropriate studies.

- Secretariat

The SAARC Secretariat was established in Kathmandu on 16 January 1987. Its role is to coordinate and monitor the implementation of SAARC activities, service the meetings of the association and serve as a channel of communication between SAARC and other international organizations.

The Secretariat comprises the secretary-general, seven directors, and the general services staff.

The secretary-general is appointed by the Council of Ministers on the principle of rotation, for a non-renewable tenure of three years.

SAARC Specialized Bodies

- SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO)

It is an inter-governmental body mandated to provide a legal framework/forum within the region for fair and efficient settlement of commercial, industrial, trade, banking, investment, and such other disputes, as may be referred to it by the member states and their people.

- SAARC Development Fund (SDF)

The primary objective of SDF is to promote the welfare of the people of the SAARC region, improve their quality of life, and accelerate economic growth, social progress and poverty alleviation in the region.

- South Asian University it is an International University sponsored by the eight Member States of the SAARC.

The degrees of the university is recognised by all the member nations of the SAARC according to an inter-governmental agreement signed by the foreign ministers of the eight SAARC member states.

South Asian Regional Standards Organisation (SARSO) was established to achieve and enhance coordination and cooperation among SAARC member states in the fields of standardization and conformity assessment and is aimed to develop harmonized standards for the region to facilitate intra-regional trade and to have access in the global market.

SAARC Regional Centres

The SAARC Secretariat is supported by following Regional Centres established in the Member States to promote regional co-operation. These Centres are managed by Governing Boards comprising representatives from all the Member States, SAARC Secretary-General and the Ministry of Foreign/External Affairs of the Host Government.

- SAARC Agricultural Centre (SAC)
- SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC)
- SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre (STAC)
- SAARC Energy Centre
- SAARC Cultural Centre COVID – 19 in SAARC Nations

In SAARC nations Nepal was the first country to report a confirmed case on 24th January 2020, to a man who had returned from China on 5th January 2020. As of 18th June 2020, every country of the SAARC Region had reported at least one case of COVID-19. As per World Health Organisation (WHO) report till 2nd July 2020, Afghanistan has 32,022 confirmed number of cases with 807 deaths, Bangladesh has reported 1,53,277 confirmed cases with 1,343 deaths, Bhutan has confirmed 77 positive cases with no death, India has reported 6,27,168 confirmed cases and 12,280 deaths, the Maldives has confirmed 2,400 cases with 10 deaths, Nepal has reported 14,519 confirmed cases and 31 deaths, Pakistan has reported 2,22,896 confirmed cases with 4,551 deaths and Sri Lanka has reported 2,066 confirmed cases with 11 deaths. Till date, India has a maximum number of cases with the highest mortality rate. To break the chain of person to person transmissions Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Maldives have implemented lockdowns, while India and Nepal have declared a country-wide lockdown and Sri Lanka has adopted quarantine curfews. Countries have also adopted various levels of restrictions on international travels; even some countries have completely sealed off their land borders and grounded most international flights. To reduce the effect of coronavirus pandemic governments are attempting to coordinate through the regional organization, SAARC, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation.

This pandemic has united the SAARC countries. They have adopted many strict actions together so that the effect of coronaviruses can be reduced. They have banned international travel, enforced strict lockdowns, announced special emergency fund, and banned all religious gatherings to battle this pandemic.

“All governments in South Asia have responded rapidly to the crisis, but their task is daunting. Governments have imposed social-distancing measures, introduced relief packages to secure access to food and provided for delays in payments on taxes, rent, utilities and debt service,” said a study published by the World Bank this week.

AFGHANISTAN

The spread of Coronavirus in Afghanistan was confirmed in February 2020. The first case was

confirmed on 24th February 2020. As of 27th June 2020, the total number of confirmed cases was 30,616 with 10,694 recoveries and 703 deaths across all the 34 provinces of Afghanistan. The highest number of cases i.e. 12,546 was found in Kabul province followed by Herat with 4,719 cases.

On 14th March total positive cases reported were 10. On 22nd March 10 new cases were reported, a total of positive cases reached 34. The first death from COVID – 19 was announced on 22nd March. By the end of March 2020, the number of confirmed cases in Afghanistan reached 196. On 16th April Ministry of Health announced a total of 99 recoveries with 906 confirmed cases. The number of cases reached to 2,469 with 179 new cases on 1st May. On 19th May 492 new positive cases were found making the total number of cases to 8,145. In this way, a day-by-day number of cases got increased.

BANGLADESH

The spread of Coronavirus in Bangladesh was confirmed in March 2020. The first three cases were reported on 8th March 2020. Transmissions of COVID -19 were low till March but the steep rise was seen in April. At the end of the second week of April, new cases grew by 1,155% the highest in Asia. On June 13th 2020 the country outbreak again, a number of cases in Bangladesh exceeded the number of cases in China. As of 29th June, 2020, the total number of confirmed cases was 1,41,801 with 57,780 recoveries and 1,783 deaths.

The spread of Coronavirus in Bangladesh was from the persons came back from Italy on 8th March 2020. On 18th March first death from coronavirus was reported in Bangladesh. By the end of March Bangladesh reported 51 confirmed cases and 5 deaths. From then till the present date, there has been a steep rise in cases day-on-day increase in cases has exceeded 20%. On 6th April 2020, Bangladesh crossed the figure of hundred and by 14th April it crossed 1000.

BHUTAN

The spread of Coronavirus in Bhutan was confirmed to reach on 6th March 2020 by an American tourist who has travelled from India. As of 29th June, the total number of confirmed cases in Bhutan was 76 with zero death.

Around 90 people were traced and quarantined along with the partner, driver and guide of the first patient of COVID – 19. On 1st April 5th case was detected and on 2nd April two were recovered. On 22nd May it was announced that the total number of the case till that date was 23 out of which 6 have been recovered. All the cases in Bhutan have been imported from another country, there is no community transmission till now.

INDIA

The first case of COVID-19 in India was reported on 30th January 2020 which has been originated from China. As of 28 June 2020, a total number of confirmed cases is 5, 28,859, recoveries 3, 09,712 and deaths 16,095 reported by Ministry Of Health and Family Welfare of India. India has currently the

largest number of confirmed cases in Asia and the fourth-highest number of confirmed cases in the World.

India's case fatality rate is relatively lower i.e. 2.80% in comparison to global rate i.e. 6.13% as of 3rd June 2020. The total number of confirmed cases breached 1, 00,000 mark on 19th May 2020 and 2, 00,000 on 3rd June 2020. On 10th June 2020, India's recoveries exceed the active cases for the first time reducing 49% of total infections.

After the first case in India, three more cases rose by 3rd February 2020, all these cases were to students returning from Wuhan. Apart from these, no rise in transmissions was observed in February. On 4th March, 22 new cases were found out of which 14 cases were to the members of an Italian tourist group. In March the transmissions grew, it was found in the people who have travelled from other country and also to the people in their contacts were found positive. On 12th March, a 76-year-old man became the first person to die from COVID – 19 in India, having travel history to Saudi Arabia.

The main outbreak in March was due to a Sikh Preacher who turned to be 'Super Spreader' with travelled history to Italy and Germany had attended a Sikh festival in Anandpur Sahib during 10-120 March. 27 cases were found tracked backed to him. Around 40,000 were quarantined in 20 villages in Punjab to break the chain of transmissions. Another outbreak was due to Tablighi Jamaat, a religious congregation held in Delhi, which emerged as a new virus super spreader after many cases across the country were traced back to it. On 18th April, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare announced 4,291 cases that were directly linked to this event. In this way due to many events instead of strict actions taken by government the transmissions of the virus has not to stop till today.

Total confirmed cases Active Cases Recoveries Deaths

MALDIVES

The spread of coronavirus in the Maldives was confirmed on 7th March 2020 by an Italian tourist who returned to Italy after spending holidays in Kuredu Resort & Spa. On 9th March two more cases were found to the employees of the same resort as confirmed by the Health Protection Agency of the Maldives. As of 30th June, 202, 0, the total number of confirmed cases was 2,361 with 1944 recoveries and 9 deaths. The spread of the COVID-19 spiked in the country due to the migrant worker. 572 foreigners were tested positive out of which 416 were Bangladeshi migrant worker. Due to this their wise steep ride in a number of cases.

NEPAL

The first case of coronavirus in Nepal was confirmed on 23rd January 2020 when a student had returned back to Kathmandu from Wuhan tested positive. It is also the first case of COVID – 19 recorded in SAARC Nations. The second case in Nepal was confirmed on 23rd March in Kathmandu. The first case of local transmission of coronavirus in Nepal was reported on 4th April. The first death due to COVID – 19 in Nepal occurred on 14th May 2020. As of 30th June the total number of

confirmed cases was 13,564 with 3,194 recoveries and 29 deaths.

It is found that there have been more numbers of cases among Nepalese living abroad than at home, the total confirmed cases 17,792 as of 30th June with over 1000 recoveries and 127 deaths globally.

PAKISTAN

The coronavirus was confirmed to reach Pakistan was on 26 February 2020, by a student returning from Iran tested positive. By 18th March, cases were found in all four provinces of Pakistan. As of 29th June 2020, a total number of confirmed cases is 2,06,000 with 92,600 recoveries and 4,120 death. Most numbers of cases were recorded in Sindh other 78,300 while a number of death was reported in Punjab over 1,673.

On 26 February 2020, Pakistan Prime Minister tweeted the confirmation of first two cases of coronavirus in Pakistan. Within a week of the first case, three more cases were confirmed. On 6th March, Murtaza Wahab that first patient from coronavirus had been fully recovered and was discharged from the hospital. From 11-19 arch 159 new cases were reported, with a total number of cases 461.

The first fatality due to COVID – 19 in Pakistan was on 20th March. On 31st March, 174 new cases were tested positive, with a total number of cases increased to 2,039. Total 82 recoveries were announced with 26 deaths till 31st March.

On 22 April, a total number of cases surged above 10,000 in the country. A report realised, stated that 27% of the total positive cases were directly linked to the religious congregation of Tablighi Jammāt. On 21st May the number of positive cases crossed 48,000 with 14,155 recoveries and 1,017 deaths.

On 13th June a Pakistani Cricketer Shahid Afridi was tested positive. On 17th June it was found that every single district in the four provinces of Pakistan has at least one confirmed case.

SRI LANKA

The first case of coronavirus in Sri Lanka was confirmed on 27th January 2020. Till 15th June 2020, 1905 confirmed cases have been reported with 11 deaths. The first case of coronavirus to a Sri Lankan outside Sri Lanka was reported on 3rd March 2020 in Italy. As of 30th June, the total number of confirmed cases was 2,037 with 1,661 recoveries and 11 deaths.

On 10th March the first local transmission case was reported in Sri Lanka. On 27th March first Sri Lankan died due to coronavirus in Switzerland and on 28th March first coronavirus patient died in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka was named as 16th highest risk country which is prone to this COVID – 19 pandemic as of 16th April 2020. Meanwhile now Sri Lanka has been ranked as the 9th best country in the world which

has shown successful immediate response in tackling the coronavirus pandemic.

CHALLENGES

SAARC comprises 3% of the world's area, 21% of the world's population and 4.21% (US\$3.67 trillion) of the global economy, as of 2019. South Asia is one of the most populous and underdeveloped or developing regions and is considered to be highly susceptible by any large scale outbreak due to infectious disease. The rampant coronavirus pandemic could affect more than 1.9 billion people of the South Asia countries which is almost a quarter of the world's population. We have been seeing that the effect of COVID – 19 is increasing day by day. So it has become a serious challenge for SAARC nations to save their country from this pandemic. All of these countries are either underdeveloped or developing and to fight against this pandemic strict action as lockdowns for the entire nation was done for certain days which have made the economy go down. All these countries heads or governments are facing problem in handling their country budget.

The World Bank recently revealed that South Asia is facing its worst economic performances in 40 years due to deadly coronavirus. This coronavirus pandemic at once has brought different crisis as a public health crisis, economic crisis, and humanitarian crisis.

SAARC nations already have weak national health care systems so it's a big challenge for them to fight against COVID – 19. It seems they have lost the fight against the virus before it has begun this is due to the weak condition of the health system in every SAARC countries.

The pandemic has made the situation worst as the countries were already in its bad situation and COVID

-19 has made it worst. Due to this, economic damage has increased the level of poverty and inequality among people. The health care systems of SAARC countries are already weak, underfinanced and poorly equipped. Among the SAARC nation, Sri Lanka spends the most on health that is about 4 per cent of its GDP. In contrast to it, India has invested only 1.28 per cent of its GDP in public health care system 2018-19. India has only 7 beds per 1,000 persons, Bangladesh has 8, Pakistan has 6, China has 42 and United States has 29. This figure shows how weak is the health system of the SAARC countries.

Every country at present is facing the challenge of unavailability of respiratory equipment, adequate protective equipment for health professionals, essential drugs etc. The modern medical facilities are mainly available in urban areas and the remote area does not have these facilities.

The low numbers of cases reported in March – April were mainly due to lack of testing capacity of these countries. At that time only 162 tests per million inhabitants were carried in Bangladesh, 291 in India, 302 in Sri Lanka and 506 in Pakistan. But at present, the test per million has increase and this has also increased the number of confirmed cases. India has become the 4th largest nation to be affected by the coronavirus in terms of a number of cases as of 30th June 2020.

These nations have greater economic consequences of the COVID -19 as some these of SAARC nations as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh were already in the midst of an economic downturn before the crisis. Now COVID – 19 has accelerated the pace of their crisis.

The pandemic is hitting the poorer population group in particular in all the countries. People are unable to get two-time meals due to strict country-wide lockdown. The unemployment rates have been increasing, poverty is also increasing and there is a shortage of supply of goods. All the countries are facing a similar dilemma.

All governments are responsible for deciding whether people will die of coronavirus or the measures taken to control it. As the biggest measure taken was country-wide lockdown which has affected many daily wagers, seasonal or migrant workers who are unable to earn for their livelihood.

Measures were taken by SAARC Nations

The unpredictable deadly COVID – 19 pandemic has brought all the SAARC member countries together in tackling this pandemic. After 2014 it was the first time that the entire SAARC nations came together joining hands to mitigate the risk of the virus as much as possible. A meeting was called by Prime Minister of India, who takes lead for the regional cooperation in this pandemic situation. It was the first high-level meeting of SAARC nations after 2014. This meeting proposed coronavirus Emergency Fund wherein Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi takes initiative to contribute \$10 million for this fund.

SAARC Emergency Fund is the first initiative in order to handle this pandemic. Every country has come forward to contribute to the fund as per their wealth. The leaders have also suggested collective ways to combat the pandemic. This has opened an opportunity to come together and remove all the tariffs on medical devices, protective gear, disinfectants and soaps.

The countries have started to supply PPE kits, mask and essential drugs among them. Every country suggested in their own way like Afghanistan suggested that SAARC should adopt telemedicine framework so that proper health care can be provided to the remote areas. Maldives leader said for closer cooperation among national health emergency agencies and also called for a plan to be made for the long term economic recovery in the region. Pakistan suggested enhancing cooperation and also establishing a working group of national authorities to exchange informational and real-time data. Sri Lanka came with the idea of creating social awareness, working together and also said that SAARC should have one central depository to disseminate information.

In this way, every country came forward for the regional cooperation and suggestions to combat the pandemic. Despite all these measures and suggestions to handle the pandemic, every nation has also taken different strict actions as country-wide lockdown, restrictions on an international flight, curfews, etc.

SAARC Emergency Fund

On March 15, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a video conference of the SAARC member countries Heads of States or Government takes leads to propose an Emergency Fund to mitigate the risk of coronavirus in SAARC nations. This emergency fund was set up in response to the global coronavirus pandemic. The initiative seeks to mitigate the risks associated with the coronavirus pandemic in the South Asian region. The other SAARC members also expressed their support to Narendra Modi and give their acceptance for the proposal of coronavirus emergency fund to fight together against this coronavirus pandemic.

Narendra Modi announced that India would be donating \$10 million as its initial contribution to support the initiative. Narendra Modi stated that any contributions for the SAARC Emergency Fund by member countries would be voluntary. As of 10 April 2020, the emergency fund had accumulated a sum of US\$21.8 million with the pool of contributions from seven member countries.

On March 21, 2020, Maldives announced it would contribute \$200,000, and Bhutan announced it would contribute \$100,000. On March 22, Bangladesh announced that it would donate \$1.5 million as its initial contributions. Nepal and Afghanistan announced that they would voluntarily contribute \$1 million to the fund. On March 23, Sri Lanka announced it would contribute \$5 million. On April 9, Pakistan announced that they contributed \$3 million.

List of amount donated Country Amount (millions US\$)

India	10
Sri Lanka	5
Pakistan	3
Bangladesh	1.5
Nepal	1
Afghanistan	1
Maldives	0.2
Bhutan	0.1

Every SAARC member countries are trying to control the spread of transmission at their level. All of them have applied different measures to cope with this emergency situation. Let's see what measures have been applied by different members:

AFGHANISTAN

Lockdown Measures

To control the spread of transmission of coronavirus, Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani on 14th March told the public to avoid large public gatherings and strictly adhere to hygiene to prevent the spread of the virus. During a press conference in Kabul on 22nd March, Public Health Minister urged the government to order lockdown in the city of Herat. In many provinces local authorities placed strict measures, limiting the movement of citizens till 1st April. Praying in mosques in Herat was also suspended to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

On 27th March it was announced that the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul would undergo complete lockdown from 28th March for three weeks. The lockdown will ensure that people don't go out of home except for any valid reason. All the restaurants, hotels, salons, parks, gyms, stadiums, cafes and other stores will remain closed for three weeks except groceries, medicine and banks. It was also announced that all the public gatherings places will remain closed until the duration of lockdown in Kabul. Carrying more than 5 passengers in public transport will be banned during the lockdown period. Large educational institution and wedding halls were converted into isolation centres to quarantine people returning from Iran for two weeks. On 4th April it was announced that Mazar-i-sharif is also under lockdown being a public place. Due to an increase in the number of confirmed cases the rules of lockdown in Kabul became stricter on 12th April and it was further extended for two weeks. The government announced that violating the lockdown rules will have strict consequences. On 17th April, the lockdown in Kabul was extended for three more weeks till 9th May.

With the increase in recovering the government eased the rules of the lockdown. On 10th May lockdown was eased for Mazar-i-sharif and on 21st May it was for the Kabul also.

International Aid

On 14th March Beijing (China) government announced that they would provide aid to Afghanistan. The World Bank, ADB and WHO announced that they would also help. On 2nd April Afghanistan received medical aid from china after the aid from the United Arab Emirates a day before was received.

Uzbekistan also announced on that day to provide aid to five Northern provinces of Afghanistan. Turkey also sent aid. On 23rd April Afghanistan received the second shipment of medical aid from China.

On 21st March Afghanistan announced to contribute \$1million to SAARC emergency fund to fight against COVID – 19. The World Bank on 3rd April approved \$100.4 million aid. In April, the European Union also announced to help Afghanistan by providing technical aid and €117 million. On 6th May Qatari foundation (Algharrafa Foundation) sent medical equipment of \$2 million. On 8th May \$400 million grant was approved by World Bank.

Due to lockdown, many families were in problem as they lose their jobs or they were unable to work for their livelihood so to help these families government started donating food across the provinces. Many bakeries were giving free bread across Afghanistan.

BANGLADESH

To prevent the spread of coronavirus on 22nd January the authorities of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA), Dhaka has put the airport on alert and started screening of travellers from China.

Bangladesh government on 2nd February decided to suspend on-arrival visas for Chinese visitors. The Chittagong port also adopted precautionary measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus. The port

health officer started examining all the sailors of the ships coming from East Asian countries.

On 14th march government suspended on-arrival visas for all countries and flights were also stopped from European countries except the United Kingdom.

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