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Report – Public Talk

“China-Pakistan COVID-19 Cooperation”

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China-Pakistan Study Centre (CPSC) at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a Public Talk by Major General Dr. Aamer Ikram, Executive Director National Institute of Health (ED NIH) on April 1, 2021. Members of the audience included policy makers, diplomats, academics and students.

Dr. Talat Shabbir, Director CPSC welcomed the distinguished speaker and the guests. In his remarks he said that as the “coronavirus pandemic kept spreading; countries realized that it is an extremely serious threat and cooperation was required to contain it”. He noted that, many countries have benefitted from Chinese experience in combating the coronavirus. He underscored China’s support to Pakistan in the fight against pandemic and noted it has solidified the bond between the two countries. An example of this, Dr. Shabbir highlighted was continued “development activities under CPEC, despite difficult circumstances.”

Dr. Shabbir, then handed over the floor to distinguished speaker, Major General Dr. Aamer Ikram and invited him to deliver his talk.

Major General Ikram thanked ISSI for organizing the talk. He commenced by highlighting the challenges times confronting humanity. He said, almost in every century there has been a pandemic and last one was influenza pandemic in 1918. In recent decades, scientists have been talking again of an impending pandemic despite all scientific and medical advancements. He then traced a timeline of evolution of COVID-19 from December 31, 2019 when China alerted World Health Organisation (WHO) of several cases of pneumonia with no known cause in Wuhan before its spread all across the world in March 2020, when WHO declared a worldwide pandemic.

Major General Dr. Ikram then moved to Pakistan’s current situation in combating coronavirus pandemic. He noted that Pakistan and its people had fought first and second waves of COVID-19 in a very formidable manner. He remained hopeful that as time progressed, Pakistan will be able to defeat the present third wave.

Next, ED-NIH highlighted salient features of China’s role in assisting Pakistan in its national efforts against spread of coronavirus. He underlined that China has been helping Pakistan in all scientific and technical fields. For him, China’s on-going support truly signified the depth of

bilateral relationship. He noted that NIH with the assistance of Chinese government and health administration established an emergency operations center. This Center is fully computerized, fitted with mandatory equipment to meet international standards and WHO guidelines.

To support Pakistan's efforts, Chinese government made available PCR testing kits as it sent first batch in February, 2020. This early and timely support from China enabled Pakistan to respond to emerging cases of COVID-19 in an effective manner. He shared that NIH was actively engaged with several Chinese firms to produce COVID-19 diagnostic kits in Pakistan, and this he emphasized will go a long-way towards boosting Pakistan's fight against the coronavirus.

ED-NIH highlighted active role being played by NIH in combating pandemic. From early on, in February 2020, NIH developed Screening and Testing guidelines for countrywide health departments. NIH prepared a National Action Plan to combat COVID. NIH teams were sent to all points of entry into Pakistan for ensuring testing and establishment of quarantine facilities. He underscored that NIH, along with other national stakeholders, followed a structured approach in responding to the pandemic. For instance, initially, Pakistan was conducting 300 tests a day. Now there are nearly 190 labs performing PCR tests in Pakistan, and NIH is providing quality assured test.

At the same time, NIH engaged Chinese Health authorities on exchange of information and experience sharing. This was manifested in arrival of Chinese medical experts' team from Xingjiang in end-March 2020. This team visited hospitals in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi and a military hospital in Rawalpindi. It shared experiences and gave trainings on prevention, detection and management of COVID cases. In May, 2020, another Chinese delegation visited Pakistan for extensive consultations and exchange of experiences. This delegation also included doctors who had dealt with coronavirus cases in Wuhan city.

At the same time, NIH along with Frontier Works Organisation and National Disaster Management Authority, with Chinese support built an infectious disease 250-bed hospital in record 40 days.

Later in 2020, Pakistan-China COVID cooperation took a practical and future shape with NIH coordinating Phase-III clinical trials of SARS-CoV-2 vaccine jointly developed by CanSino

Biologics Inc. and Beijing Institute of Biotechnology. NIH was Pakistan's country coordinator for trials conducted in three hospitals based in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi.

Speaking on Pakistan's cooperation with China in procuring vaccines, Major General Dr. Ikram underscored that till now, China is the only country to provide Pakistan with almost 1.5 doses of vaccines. And all of these have been donations, so far. He highlighted that given NIH had cooperated with CanSino in running Phase-III trials in Pakistan, hence, NIH is expecting 10 million more doses from CanSino.

Major General Dr. Ikram also apprised audience about the history and important work being undertaken by the NIH. He noted that since its inception in 1967, NIH is providing public health services. NIH comprises of five divisions i.e., Public Health Laboratories, Biological Production Division, Nutrition division, Drugs Control and Traditional Medicines Division, Field Epidemiology and Disease Surveillance Division. Meanwhile, NIH has established provincial labs all across the country. Healthcare workers and scientists at NIH have gone beyond the call of duty to support national effort against the COVID-19 pandemic. He also highlighted the active financial support being provided by the federal government to crucial work of NIH. Besides, NIH is also engaged with international agencies and donors on several projects.

Besides, ED-NIH also commented on popular myths and theories about the spread of COVID-19. He underscored that coronavirus is still a mutating virus being an RNA virus. Scientists at NIH are closely monitoring strains being detected across Pakistan, and so far, NIH has not detected the Brazilian and South African variant.

Talking about future plans, he shared that NIH plans to produce coronavirus vaccines in Pakistan. NIH is in the process of establishing an international standard ISO certified serum production facility to ensure availability and affordability of vaccines to people of Pakistan. At present, he noted, 90 percent of vaccines have been booked by richer and developed countries. For ensuring production of vaccines in Pakistan, NIH is continuously engaged with Chinese counterparts. He apprised that NIH has developed a dedicated channel to communicate regularly with Chinese Center for Disease Control (CDC). This will make cooperation between two countries more robust by synergizing efforts.

Major General Dr. Aamer Ikram's talk was followed by a question and answer session. Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director-General ISSI, moderated this session.

In the end, Ambassador Khalid Mehmood, Chairman Board of Governors ISSI, present a memento to the distinguished guest.