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Report – Book Launch

“The Covid Challenge: Impact on the Middle East & Africa”

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) had the official launch of its first edited book titled, ‘The Covid Challenge: Impact on Middle East & Africa’ on April 12, 2021. The Keynote address was delivered by Dr. Sania Nishtar, Special Assistant of Pakistan’s Prime Minister and Federal Minister, Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Ministry. The Chief Guest on the occasion was Mr. Shafqat Mahmood, Federal Minister for Education. Other distinguished discussants included: Dr. Khalid Hussain Memon, Special Secretary Middle East, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan; Mr. Ali Javed, Additional Secretary Africa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan and Ambassador Rizwan- ul-Haq Mahmood, Former Pakistani Diplomat to Muscat, Abu Dhabi & Jeddah. The launch was attended by former ambassadors, members of the diplomatic corps, academics, students and media personnel.

While introducing the book Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA said that when the Coronavirus pandemic took the world by storm in 2020, everyday life came to a standstill. While the pandemic has become the ‘new normal’, it has increased our yearning to return to normalcy. As editor of the book, I have been fortunate to receive diverse views and analyses on this very important subject that brings forth relevant and well-rounded discourse on the topic in question. She highlighted that, this book is CAMEA’s humble attempt to make sense of this collective quandary gripping humanity all over the world. While the future remains fairly uncertain still, valuable lessons have been learnt, such as the necessity of working together, not taking things for granted and understanding that no matter how meticulously we prepare, some challenges will still blindside us. In short, we should not let the pandemic rob us of our sense of humanity.

She also introduced the authors and stated that through fifteen descriptive chapters, ‘The Covid Challenge: Impact on the Middle East & Africa’ seeks to cover the complex interplay of geopolitics, healthcare, regional power dynamics, economy and conflicts under the broader theme of Covid-19.

In his welcome remarks, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, congratulated CAMEA and outlined how ISSI has created a vision of which the edited books are a part of. He said that subject of this book is most topical; it is a public health issue with different dimensions of its impact on economy, public health system, conflict zones, refugee situation and

food security. He highlighted that this book is a diverse read and provides a silver lining for a world that is now rediscovering the importance of cooperating with each other and also world needs to be better connected and must come together to better deal with future pandemics of this sort

During her remarks, Dr. Sania Nishtar congratulated ISSI and CAMEA for a job well done. She outlined the importance of pursuing intellectual pursuits. While talking about the Pakistan's response to Covid she stated that there were four kind of the responses to the pandemic which includes health, economic, social protection and response of international community.

She was of the view that we are well equipped to deal with the third wave of pandemic as we have dealt with other two layers in past. Health system in Pakistan has been improved and testing capacity has been enlarged. She also mentioned that how her organization has helped the poor and needy people through these testing times. She highlighted that the digital intervention system as well as biometric payments have played a major role in this regard. She further stated that the pandemic has helped cement the bond between ordinary citizens. Dr Nishtar said that she was proud to be a part of a government which has helped provide relief to the masses.

The Chief Guest, Mr. Shafqat Mahmood appreciated ISSI for the publishing of this book which he called a consolidated effort. He was of the opinion that book has brought out some of the real issues that we have faced during the pandemic. Some of which are about how different fault lines within a state whether or political social have come into the force. Moreover, how issues related to repatriation of the Pakistani workers have been dealt during this time.

He highlighted how Pakistan has been coping with the Covid situation and lauded Dr. Sania Nishtar's efforts regarding Pakistan's social protection programme. He went on to emphasize the importance of social media and how the Pakistan Government faced a very challenging situation in the education sector because things were not clear initially. Outlining the efforts of his ministry he spoke about the collective decisions from all provinces to set a proper formula for examination and about the special initiatives undertaken in this regard such as the tele-school and radio school. He also earmarked the chapters which he thought were relevant to Pakistan. These included a chapter on fake news and refugees.

Dr. Khalid Hussain Memon outlined how the Middle East and African region require dedicated focus particularly because of its geostrategic importance. He said that this book documents and brings together the devastation caused by Covid in different aspects such as health and economy. It delves into the complexities posed by the pandemic, and assembles the socio-economic impact of this virus with deep insight and relevant statistics. In his view point CAMEA's book provides an in-depth analysis on the various aspects of the Covid challenges being faced by the Middle Eastern and African Communities and it also presents holistic understanding of the region and purports the necessity of the international community to act.

Mr. Ali Javed elucidated how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan has been working tirelessly to bring back Pakistanis stranded in the Middle East and African region. Given the destruction caused by Covid, the world should now be cognizant of whether the right systems are in place to tackle any future pandemic. Regarding research, he said it is important that Pakistan's perspective must be part of everything. The Covid19 pandemic has also brought forth the fact that Pakistan has yet to establish any bilateral relations with any of the eight regional blocs in Africa.

He highlighted that book rightly points out the execution of Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which brings together 54 nations of Africa. But in order to understand the mechanisms under which AfCFTA will work in-depth knowledge and understanding is required. He stressed that in past we lack closer ties with African nations particularly with the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) which are working under the African Union but now Pakistan is actively pursuing the partnership with these Regional Economic blocks. He said that for this purpose we are working with our friends in the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa and with AfCFTA headquartered in Accra and other important economic blocks such as ECOWAS in West Africa. He concluded by saying that more unity and strength is required to deal with the humanitarian aspect of the pandemic.

Ambassador Rizwan- ul-Haq said that the Covid19 has created a global crisis. The shock of the worldwide economic situation has had a hard impact on the world at large. It has some universal elements which are common to all nations. The Covid19 has had two clearly marked effects on our lives. Some internationally recognized changes include realignment of health and monetary

policies to combat this menace and diverting medical research focus to find a cure of Covid19. While talking about the book he pointed out that this book will be great help0 for the policy makers to assess the gravity of the pandemic and impact on the lives of people. Through this book they certainly be able to take tactical steps to contain and eliminate worst effects of Covid-19 to save their nations. He was of the view that, the world has found new ways and means towards digitalization. It has also brought forth the realisation that affluent countries and international financial institutions must inject more funds to enable these countries to counter Covid19.

At the conclusion of the event, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI presented the Institute's shields to the distinguished guests.