



## **Jinnah Sindh Medical University**

### **APPNA Institute of Public Health**

## **Easing Lockdown in Pakistan: Inevitable but Potentially Catastrophic**

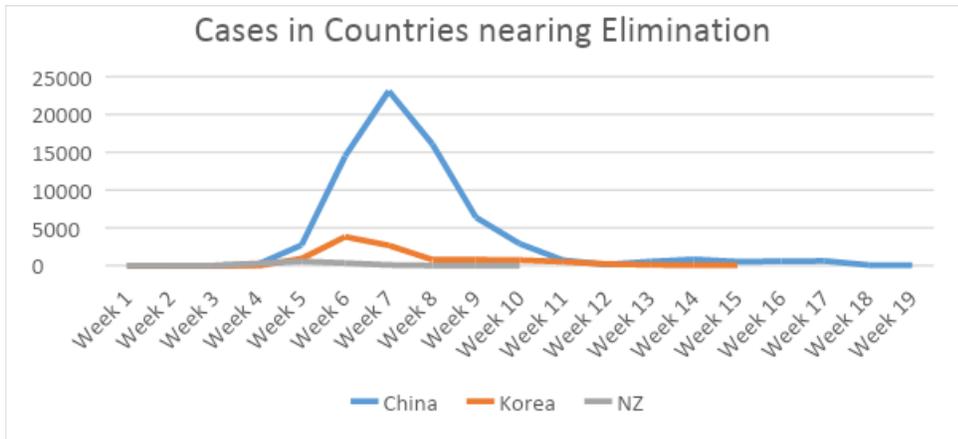
Pakistan is into its 11<sup>th</sup> week of COVID 19 epidemic and the cases and deaths continue to rise at an exponential rate. In the months of April, there was 50% increase in number of cases every week. If the cases continued to rise at present rate, we are looking at 100,000 cases and possible 2000 deaths by the end of month of May. Going by the assumption of 20% requiring admissions in confirmed cases, we may be needing to admit 6,000 patients every week by the end of May of whom 200-250 are going to require critical care. And if things go worse and disease burden doubled every week, we may end up with 200,000 cases, 4000 deaths 20,000 requiring admissions every week of whom 700 are going to require critical care.

At this stage of epidemic, it is imperative to analyze and compare this trend with other countries to learn from countries which have successfully controlled the epidemic and not repeat the mistakes committed by countries facing catastrophic strain on their health systems. The countries can be classified on the basis of their trends in the following way:

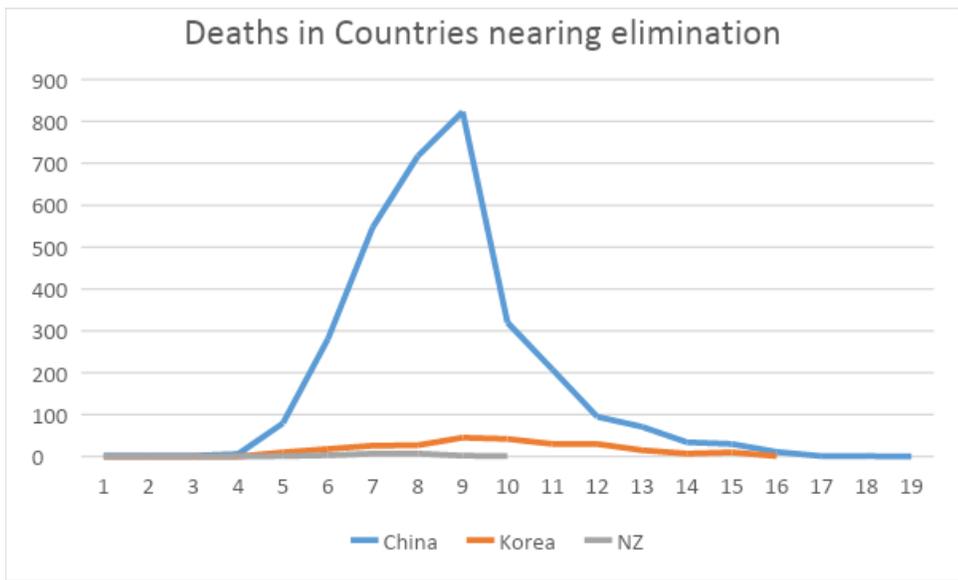
### **Countries that have reversed the trend swiftly and have eliminated or almost eliminated the virus**

The governments of these countries swiftly imposed travel restrictions, introduced strict lockdown and ensured implementation of social distancing practices. Newzealand implemented strict lockdown and travel restrictions after 3 weeks of the reported first case and developed safety protocols to continue essential services. By sixth week, their cases started declining and by 10<sup>th</sup> week they have almost eliminated the virus. Similarly, China where the infection originated reacted within a month to impose strict lockdown and strengthened their health system to fight the virus. The trend of cases started reversing within by 8<sup>th</sup> week and four months down the line they are on close to eliminating the virus in their country. The neighboring countries of China, South Korea and Vietnam have effectively dealt with the virus focusing on binding their populations to strict social distancing practices. People in these countries adopted strict preventive measures while continuing their business and successfully reversed the trends to extremely low levels

### **Figure 1a: Trends in Cases of Countries nearing elimination**



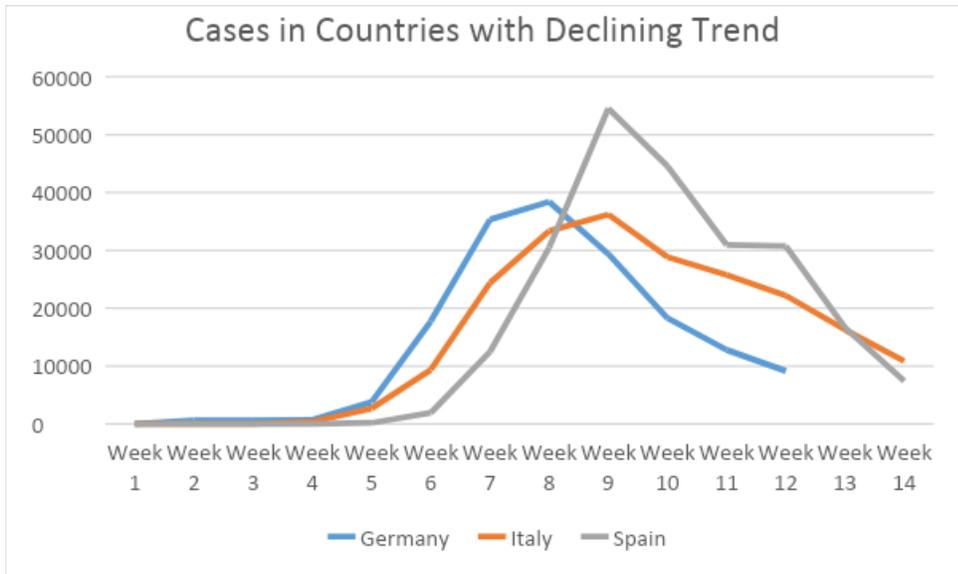
**Figure 1b: Trends in weekly Deaths of Countries nearing elimination**



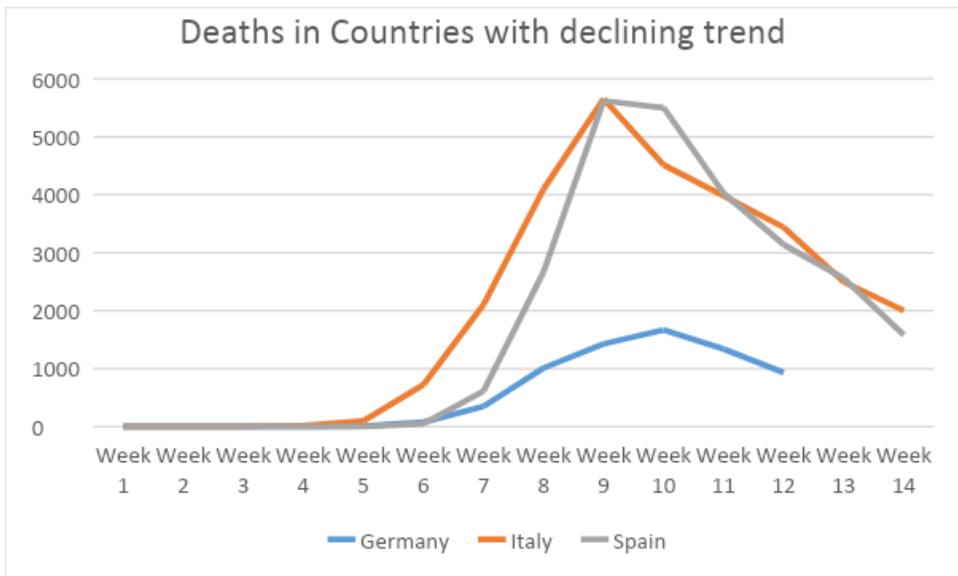
**Countries which have reversed the trend and are showing constantly declining figures**

The governments of these countries were initially reluctant to stop life but when things got out of control, they took strict measures. Germany is a good example falling in this category. Their government introduced strict lockdown after 5 weeks. By ninth week, their cases started declining and are constantly declining to-date. Similarly, Spain and Italy reacted late and enforced lockdown after 8 weeks of the first reported case. After high spikes in these countries which badly strained their health systems, their trend reversed after 3 weeks of lockdowns. These countries are now moving towards easing their lockdown to restore normalcy.

**Figure 2 a: Trends in Cases of Countries with declining trend**



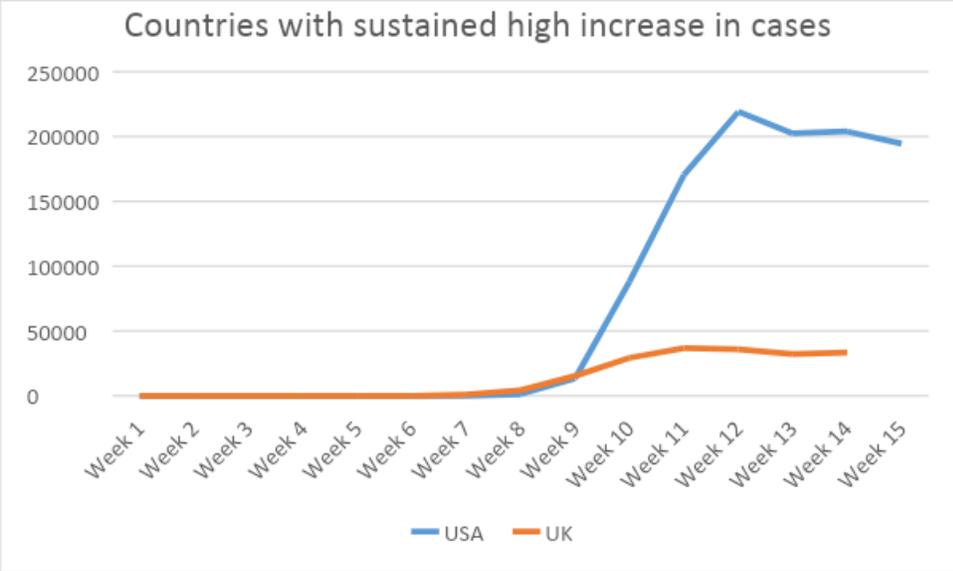
**Figure 2b: Trends in weekly deaths of Countries with declining trend**



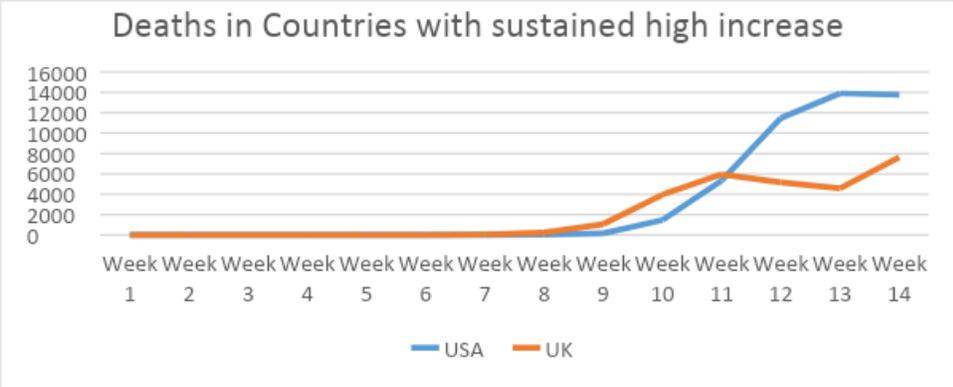
**Countries that continue to show an increasing or persistent trend with extremely high numbers**

USA and UK are good examples of such countries. Their governments have been reluctant to introduce complete shutdowns and have been keen to keep the economy running. The result is that after more than three months of the first case in their countries, they are reporting a sustained high number of cases with thousands of weekly deaths as they are now in the fourth month of their battle with COVID 19.

**Figure 3 a: Trends in Cases of Countries with sustained increasing trend with extremely high numbers**



**Figure 3b: Trends in deaths of Countries with sustained increasing trend with extremely high numbers**

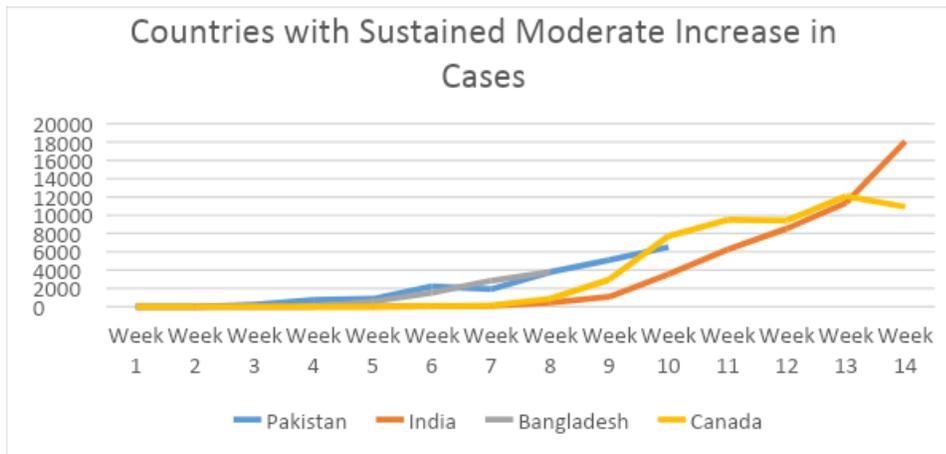


**Countries that continue to show an increasing trend with moderate numbers.**

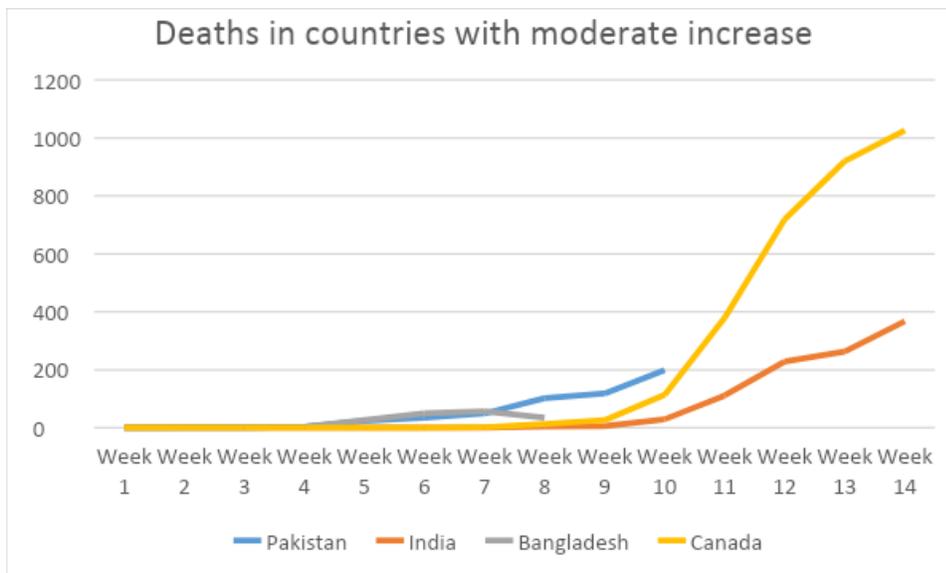
These trends are being observed in South Asian Countries including Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. These countries have also been reluctant on lockdowns and more concerned about their struggling economies and poverty. Surprisingly, the increase in these countries has not been as sharp as USA and UK which have adopted the same approach. At the moment, five to ten thousand cases are being reported weekly with deaths in hundreds. Less number of cases may be explained by lower volumes of testing performed in these countries but constantly low number of deaths indicate that effects of the virus are less explosive in these countries. There are many theories to this phenomena. One theory is that these countries were swifter in banning their mass gatherings including festivals, prayer congregations, malls and sports events. Other theory is that since infection rates of other diseases are higher in these developing parts of the world, therefore, there is a certain amount of natural immunity to infections. Yet another theory is that

the proportion of older population above 60 years is lower due to lower life expectancy, hence, there is less effect of the virus because the population is younger. However, Canada is also showing similar trajectory with persistent moderate numbers after 3 months of the first case. Whatever, the reason of moderately increasing persistent numbers, the threat for explosive late surge remains. What it may also mean is that the virus may stay longer in these communities prolonging the time to recovery.

**Figure 4a: Trends in Cases of Countries with sustained increasing trend with moderate numbers**



**Figure 4b: Trends in weekly deaths of Countries with sustained increasing trend with moderate numbers**



**Missed opportunities and way out for Pakistan**

The lessons are pretty clear. The countries which have been decisive on lockdowns and ensured implementation of social distancing protocols have been able to manage the outbreak effectively. They have taken less time to overcome the challenge and their economic activities are returning to normal gradually. It is also evident that successful countries have eased down lockdowns after sustaining a declining trend for a few weeks.

Pakistan finds itself in no man's land at the moment. Our figures could have been better if we had reached consensus on lockdown at an earlier stage and implemented it more strictly and vigorously. The first missed opportunity was the indecisiveness which led to an ineffective lockdown with constant increase in cases. We can now understand the concern of the government on continuing the lockdown because it is a measure that is economically non-sustainable for poor economies. Prolonged Lockdown is a progressive concept for the educated and salaried class but it is a disaster for daily wage earners and people running small businesses. But what we fail to understand and is extremely worrying is government's approach of transferring complete responsibility towards the people to protect themselves. In the current crisis government has to lead the way in setting the new directions and rules of continuing the normal life. We are left with no choice but to return to normalcy but do we have to return as nothing has happened or nothing will happen. The two month lockdown was an opportunity to develop policy framework for how normalcy has to be restored. The world order has changed and countries have developed social distancing protocols on how they are going to travel and commute, how they are going to go back to work, how they are going to run their businesses, how they are going to start educating their children and youth again and more importantly how they are going to bind people to stick to new rules of this world order. In the new world order, wearing a mask should be like wearing a seat belt and communicating at a distance should be like stopping at a signal, the people who do not comply to it shall be punished because it is a matter of endangering your life and life of others.

The moderate numbers at the moment have encouraged the government to ease the lockdown in phases with reopening of small businesses, factories and industries. However, leaving the people to determine the rules of restoring normalcy could prove fatal if growth in cases and deaths continue at current average growth rate or may be even increase further.

**Data Source: WHO Reports**

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