

**Lockdown measures: 'Sindh govt to work along with Centre'**

KARACHI: Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah declared that the Sindh government will work alongside the Centre to implement the new lockdown measures for the mitigation of the coronavirus outbreak.

"We will implement the federal government's lockdown decisions to the extent of 99pc if not 100pc," he said.

The chief minister said that businesses will be allowed to operate five days a week and will remain closed on Saturdays and Sundays, with the exception of those granted exemptions such as grocery stores and pharmacies.

Shah then elaborated on the new lockdown standard operating procedures (SOPs) for businesses. He said that the province will follow to a tee, the timings allowed for businesses to operate — from Sehri to 5pm. The chief minister said that areas classified as dehs (a demarcation of land inhabited by farming communities) will be able to keep shops open as they are less populated.

He also said that small shops located in residential areas will be permitted to operate. Shah, while acknowledging that small business owners are facing "extreme hardships", requested the federal government to devise a scheme whereby they be provided loans on easy payback terms. "Let me clarify to traders, restrictions are not being imposed by us (Sindh)," he said.

"It was the federal government's decision to keep the large markets closed," he said, adding that keeping shopping malls closed was a unanimous decision taken by all the governments.

He said that a committee comprising the Karachi Mayor Waseem Akhtar, Education Minister Saeed Ghani, Information Minister Nasir Hussain Shah and law adviser Murtaza Wahab will meet with the traders to engage with them on their concerns and reservations which will be forwarded to the Centre.

He went on to say that all industries that were shut down before May will remain closed. Similarly, public venues where large gatherings can occur such as wedding halls and cinemas will also remain shut. "We have not forbidden weddings, but large gatherings will not be allowed."

He said that keeping in with the spirit of the Supreme Court directives, which had called for a uniform plan to be implemented countrywide, the Sindh government had agreed to support the Centre in its decisions. Shah said that there will be a complete ban on political rallies. But hospital out patient departments (OPDs) will now be open.

The chief minister said that it will always be a point of regret that the provincial government was unable to effectively undertake distribution of food supplies "due to a lack of data".

"Sindh not competing with anyone." He said that "having thousands gather for distribution of money was also inappropriate", in reference to the federal government's Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme which gave out Rs12,000 to millions of families across the country at distribution centres.

Shah said that Sindh's ratio of increase in the number of infections was lower than the other provinces. "We will have to be very careful in the coming days. If you hold your lives dear, please exercise caution," he said.

He said that the Sindh government is not competing with anyone. "God bears witness to whatever it is I am doing." The chief minister said that after the April 1 lockdown, Sindh had made all decisions in line with the federal government directives. "If some other province is not following the SOPs laid down by the federal government, I cannot be faulted for that."

Speaking of Dr Furqan's death in Karachi, he expressed regret and said that those who were responsible have been identified. "Our health system is better than the other three provinces." Shah said that the coronavirus usually affects those already suffering from various health ailments faster. Speaking of the deceased doctor's case, he said that Dr Furqan fell prey to the virus on May 1 and died within 36 hours. "In many cases, the death occurs before we get back results of the coronavirus test."

He reiterated that Sindh "has no beef with anyone". "If I make a mistake, do inform me and I will rectify it," he said. "This is not a war between the People's Party, PTI or MQM — we will have to be one to fight this [pandemic]," said the chief minister.

Also, the chief minister said that some media channels were giving the impression that the lockdown was going to end on Monday, which was totally wrong. Shah said that "we are entering phase-II under which stricter controls at hotspots are being initiated." However, minor exemptions would be given to some sectors such as construction and stand-alone shops in residential neighbourhoods would be allowed to operate under SOPs issued by the government. He categorically added that air, train and public transport would continue to remain closed.

"Our lockdown is linked to our data," he said and added that the available provincial health capacity was currently at 20 per cent. "We would consistently adjust our protective measures according to our capacity."

The chief minister once again reiterated his stance of ensuring food security in the country under which the federal government had to start spray against desert locust, otherwise the next crop would not be saved from locust swarm attacks.