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Covid-19 pandemic in Pakistan

# Medics, health workers protest 'non-provision' of PPE in Lahore

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV544 - May 2020 -

Publication date: Saturday 2 May 2020

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### **Lahore: Scores of doctors and nurses under the banner of the Grand Health Alliance on Monday took to the street to press the Punjab government for accepting, what they call, their legitimate demands.**

Particularly, they were protesting against the Punjab Health Minister Prof Dr Yasmin Rashid, holding her primarily responsible for "non-provision" of the personal protective equipment (PPE) to the health professionals fighting coronavirus.

Earlier, a joint meeting of the Young Doctors Association (YDA), Punjab, the Grand Health Alliance (GHA), and the Young Nursing Association was held at the health secretariat where the medics and other employees of Lahore's hospitals had staged a sit-in.

They discussed in the meeting various issues, including "insufficient" provision of PPE to all the health workers, reinstatement of their colleagues suspended or sacked during the previous protest and double salary package for all the employees, without considering whether they are doing duties at coronavirus wards or other sections.

Talking to the media persons after the meeting, GHA chairman Dr Salman Haseeb declared the 100-bed Expo Centre Hospital a "flop project", saying the real purpose of such schemes was to "beg money" from people.

He also lashed out at the Punjab government for relaxing the lockdown. Dr Salman feared that the number of cases might increase manifold in May and June if strict measures were not taken to ensure social distancing.

He criticised the health minister for not ordering preventive measures in January and February last to control virus spread in the province.

Dr Siraj Lodhi and Dr Rizwan, who arrived here from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, told the media persons that the health professionals and the KP government were on the same page against Covid-19. They said the KP health minister was dealing with the health professionals politely and humbly while addressing their legitimate demands.

Dr Arslan of YDA Balochistan asked the Punjab government to give a sympathetic hearing to the protesting medics and address their legitimate demands.

GHA Vice Chairperson Rozina Manzoor strongly criticised the Punjab health minister.

She said Dr Yasmin's "dictatorial mindset" had almost destroyed the health system of the province.

Later, the doctors, nurses and paramedics took out a rally to the Charing Cross on The Mall for acceptance of their demands.

They were carrying placards bearing slogans "we are with our warriors" and "we demand PPE to safeguard front line health workers".

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The lady doctors were particularly demanding complete screening of all the health professionals handling coronavirus patients, besides provision of PPE to them in sufficient numbers.

On the other hand, Punjab Health Secretary Nabeel Awan termed the entire agitation, including the "hunger strike" by the GHA, a drama aimed at misleading the media as well as Punjab higher authorities.

Talking to *Dawn*, he said the protesters wanted to take maximum advantage of the pandemic and get their suspended/terminated colleagues reinstated.

"I am giving you my words that they (protesters) did not ask for the PPE even single time in their official meeting with the health department", Mr Awan said.

They were just asking for reinstatement of their colleagues, who had been suspended/terminated during the previous agitation in 2019 for not joining duties, he added.

He regretted that the doctors' representatives cunningly raised demand for protective kits before the media, but in the meetings with health officials they only put up a list of the suspended medics and nurses for their reinstatement.

"They have double face and are deceiving all of us, including the media, the public and the politicians", Mr Awan alleged.

He said that on Sunday night, the YDA leaders asked for reinstatement of only three of their suspended colleagues, whereas their original list comprised 10 names when they started agitation a week ago.

"The YDA leaders on Sunday night requested me to reinstate Dr Mahmood, Dr Asad Shah and Dr Atif Majeed", Mr Awan said.

Similarly, he said, the nurses leaders sought withdrawal of the show-cause notices issued to leaders of the association, including Ms Rozina and Ms Khadeja.

"The department flatly refused to entertain their requests and asked them to present these demands first before the media", the health secretary said.

*Published in [Dawn](#), 28 April 2020.*

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