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Equipping Health Care Workers in Maldives to Fight COVID-19



As of June 9, 1,900 cases and eight deaths were reported in Maldives.

Photo: Mihaaru

Story Highlights

- *Maldives, a country of 1,200 islands with a densely populated capital city, is fighting the health and economic impacts of COVID-19.*
- *The World Bank has joined the efforts of other development partners to help Maldives respond rapidly to the pandemic.*
- *A \$7.3 million World Bank project aims to help the country prevent, detect and respond to the coronavirus and strengthen the preparedness of its public health system.*

Aishath Inaya, a nurse working at a COVID-19 isolation facility in the island nation of Maldives, knows the vital importance of personal protective equipment (PPE). “Unless we can protect and equip ourselves, we won’t be in a position to help others,” she says. “If we are the foot soldiers, PPE is our armour, and medical equipment and supplies our weapons.”

Her concerns are echoed by Mariyam Niyam, a volunteer nurse in Malé, the capital, who ensures that people needing regular medical treatment are not left out during the pandemic. “Without an adequate supply of PPE and other medical equipment, we can’t win the fight against COVID-19.”

Since the first COVID-19 case was reported in early March and the first cases of community transmission were detected in mid-April, cases have continued to rise in Maldives, with over 1,900 cases and eight deaths reported by June 9. In Malé, one of the world’s most densely populated cities, and its surrounding suburbs, the disease has spread rapidly, threatening over 30 percent of the country’s population of 407,660 and an additional 100,000 migrant workers.

The government took swift initial action – restricting tourist arrivals and shutting down resorts, offices, schools, and mosques. With cases rising, the government is now focusing on containment and treatment, carrying out contact tracing, and expanding quarantine facilities. As the country may be disproportionately affected by a global shortage of supplies, being a small island nation, procuring equipment and supplies for health care workers like Aishath and Mariyam is especially important.

Helping Maldives Address Urgent Pandemic Needs

The World Bank’s [fast track package of \\$7.3 million](#) is helping the country address the urgent health needs, including procuring PPE and other medical supplies, enhancing testing capacity, strengthening intensive care facilities, supporting hospitals to maintain essential services, and training medical staff to manage positive cases. Initiatives to raise public awareness about hand washing, personal hygiene, and social distancing are also being conducted.

The lack of adequately trained health care workers and the dispersed nature of the archipelago’s population make it even more challenging to provide quality health services, especially in the outer atolls and islands.

“This pandemic has once again highlighted the importance of strong health systems. The efforts to strengthen the health care system of Maldives will not only help make the difference between life and death during the crisis but will bolster the country’s health care efforts for years to come,” explained Rifat Hasan, World Bank Senior Health Specialist.



The World Bank is working closely with the government’s recently appointed multi-agency COVID-19 task force from the health, disaster management, tourism, and finance ministries.

Photo: Maldives National Defence Force

Protecting Lives and Supporting Livelihoods

Economically, Maldives is likely to be one of the hardest hit countries in South Asia. The pandemic has virtually dried up tourism, which accounts for two-thirds of the island nation's GDP. High-end resorts and local guesthouses lie empty, impacting a significant chunk of the labor force that is engaged either directly or indirectly in the sector.

To help the country deal with the economic challenges of the crisis, the World Bank has made available a further \$10 million in [emergency funds](#). A [new \\$12.8 million Emergency Income Support Project](#) will help mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19 on poor and vulnerable workers and their families, while increasing the capacity of the country's social protection programs to respond to future emergencies.

The World Bank is working closely with the government's recently appointed multi-agency COVID-19 task force from the health, disaster management, tourism, and finance ministries. The task force brings together development partners in the country including the World Bank, the World Health Organization (WHO), and various UN agencies to devise solutions that are adapted to Maldives' unique situation.

“The rapidly evolving situation caused by the pandemic demands urgent help in more ways than one. Protecting and treating Maldivians and the large migrant worker population will require adequate supplies of medical and protective equipment, while financial support to the most vulnerable will save lives and protect livelihoods,” said **Idah Z. Pswarayi-Riddihough, World Bank Country Director for Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka**. *“The World Bank's fast track support will contribute to stemming the pandemic's impact on the people – a critical objective of the government as it works to control infections.”*