Upholding veterinary services as a pillar of one health in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Veterinary service is one of the pillars to restore One Health in Myanmar. In the immediate future, international support provided to Myanmar can relieve food shortage and some humanitarian crises. In the long run, societal trauma from the military coup and violence, infrastructure breakdown, and economic downturn complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic will make recovery of the nation harder. While the building blocks to achieve peace and humanitarianism are long and complicated, part of the interim solution is to restore Myanmar veterinary services. The restoration will ease food scarcity in the short-run, reduce sylvatic and zoonotic infection risks and re-capitalise societal infrastructure building in the long-run. Myanmar society cannot rebuild on its own—it needs international and national support to facilitate peace and humanitarianism.

The current political turmoil in Myanmar precipitated by the recent military coup has captured the world’s attention. In June 2021, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) passed resolution to condemn military junta and called for arms embargo (un.org/pga/75/2021/06/18). The resolution was supported by 119 Member States in aim to halt civil war and suffering. Understanding the local, regional and global implications of the turmoil in Myanmar, the international community has voiced its concerns and began to take steps to restore peace and democratic normalcy in Myanmar. Along the restoration process, it is important to take steps to mitigate multi-faceted adverse impacts of such political turmoil on the country. From the perspective of One Health professionals, it is essential for international and local community to consider the long-term implications of current situation in Myanmar, as the country suffers from a fragmented One Health framework. The political disparity, social disruption and health care system fragmentation have far-reaching consequences. In the current crisis in Myanmar, among the social, economic and political problems, the country will also face problems where increased opportunities will be afforded to microbes and viruses via the breakdown of food, animals and environment sectors. It is crucial to not lose sight of the importance of the Myanmar veterinary services as it plays one of the crucial roles in protecting One Health, that is to control highly contagious diseases and zoonotic infections with significant implications for human health as well as that of livestock.

The Myanmar economy is suffering from “syndemic”, with livelihood adversely affected by COVID-19 pandemic as well as the military coup [1,2,6]. If the political turmoil continues unabated, human suffering which is already at an alarming level, will worsen. Hunger and increased vulnerability to diseases are unavoidable in this case. It is estimated that up to 3.4 million additional people in Myanmar will face hunger in the coming three to six months, on top of nearly three million already suffering food insecurity (UN World Food Programme). Eighty percent of farms in the country of Myanmar are operated by smallholders [4]. When the military coup upended these small-scale farmers by violence and destruction of peace, the conflict removes one of the biggest food security cushion in Myanmar particularly in times of COVID-19 [2]. According to the Myanmar Strategy Support Program Policy Note, it is critical for poultry farms to stay open to provide animal-source food and local employment [3,4]. In this regard, basic veterinary service can support health in food-producing animals. Effective and uninterrupted veterinary services are essential in feeding the population and protecting it from the harms of zoonotic diseases. Like other sectors, veterinary services in Myanmar are disrupted by the coup. As the political turmoil continues, the veterinary services will lose ground in different dimensions—veterinary care on farm and for companion animals, public health endeavours such as animal antimicrobial resistance mitigation, and veterinary training. The loss of veterinary services and training will deepen the crises of food security and food production as sources of income in Myanmar.

In order to protect the well-being of human in Myanmar, it is important to consider human, animals, and environment under the One Health framework. One of the pillar to restore One Health in Myanmar is...
aim to sustain veterinary services in food production. For one, scarcity of food will lead to increased violence and social unrest. In response to the crisis in Myanmar, the United Nations World Food Program has revised its Myanmar Country Strategic Plan (2018–2022) budget by upwards with a US$ 121 million increase. The action taken by the World Food Program is an important step and it should be lauded. But for medium-to long-term planning, it is as important to reinforce farming and agriculture foothold on food security to alleviate pressure on all of Myanmar, especially for the rural populations.

Veterinary and public health services in countries where political instability occurs, such as Iraq and Nigeria [8], often suffer from subsequent breakdown of public health services such as immunization in livestock and susceptible population such as children. Conflict and war have long been recognized as risk factors of sylvatic and infectious diseases [5]. It is highlighted by other authors that current global health governance and international security structures are insufficient to prevent outbreaks of diseases especially where civil conflict occurs [9]. Human resources and governance structure to safeguard livestock holders and farmers should be consolidated and reinforced [7]. As an urgent discussion of preventive veterinary medicine, specific to Myanmar people at the moment and generalizable to global health on a longer timeline, it is critical to commit international support and resources to limit zoonotic transmission opportunities [9]. Myanmar is a low-income country with limited resources to fight against potential One Health crises even in peace time let alone in such dire situation of current political crisis. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that international organisations, especially UN Tripartite World Health Organisation(WHO), World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to commit support and assistance to Myanmar human, animal health and medical communities.

In face of the Myanmar military coup, as veterinarians, we propose increased protection of human and animal health infrastructure by the tripartite organisations. The Organisations can for instance advocate for interim programs to guard smallholder farmers production, veterinary tuberculosis surveillance and rabies vaccination programs. Efforts to sustain measures against zoonotic diseases in Myanmar, such as that of mass vaccination program in Lewei in 2016, should be continued with modification of delivery governance and support from the OIE (www.oie.int. “Joining efforts to combat rabies”). The United Nations Security Council and international community denounce the Myanmar military’s use of violence on the citizen, and impose costs on the military and its leadership. It is as important to continue international assistance to protect and support essential and continuous animal health care services in Myanmar.

Author statement

OSKC and HMT conceptualized the manuscript. OSKC drafted the manuscript. TN and HMT provided inputs regarding local situations. OSKC, TN, and HMT finalized the manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no competing interest to declare.

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