

Editors' Council demands case against Ariful be withdrawn

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Sampadak Parishad (Editors' Council) has demanded withdrawal of a case filed against journalist Ariful Islam, who was arrested from home in the dead of night and jailed for one year.

The council also demanded that the authorities concerned withdraw Kurigram Deputy Commissioner (DC) Sultana Pervin and take departmental action against her, said a statement issued by Sampadak Parishad yesterday.

Condemning the arrest and imprisonment of Ariful, the council expressed deep concern over the incident.

A mobile court under a taskforce of Kurigram district administration sentenced Ariful Islam, Kurigram correspondent of Bangla Tribune, to one-year imprisonment early Saturday after he was arrested from his home on charges of "possessing narcotics".

Sampadak Parishad was shocked over the incident, it said in the statement.

The council also conveyed worries over the disappearance of Dhaka reporter Shafiqul Islam Kajol.

It hoped that the authorities concerned would locate him and hand him over to his family.

Sampadak Parishad condemned the attack on Bangladesh Pratidin journalist Mahbubul Haque and ransacking of his home.

Tourism

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around 800 TOAB members to give details the loss they had incurred.

"We [tourism industry] are the worst victim of the coronavirus fallout," he said, adding they would hold a press conference on the effect of coronavirus on tourism industry today.

The TOAB has decided to postpone the 2020 edition of Bangladesh Travel and Tourism Fair, which was scheduled to take place on April 03-05, to October this year due to the prevailing situation.

Mohibul Haque, senior secretary of the civil aviation and tourism ministry, said the number of domestic tourists fell by 70 percent.

"If the situation prolongs further, the survival of the industry would be difficult," he said.

In Cox's Bazar, one of the most attractive tourist destinations in the country, the number of tourists has fallen down drastically in recent times, reports our correspondent there.

This is the peak season for holidaymakers to travel to Cox's Bazar and Saint Martin's island. Around one lakh tourists visit Cox's Bazar every day during this season.

"But currently, the number of tourists has reduced to half," said Tofael Ahmed, president of Tour Association of Cox's Bazar.

Mahbub Hossain Sumon, managing director at the Touch Creation Ltd, a travel agency, said two inbound tour packages -- one from Germany with 17 people and another from Japan with eight people -- slated for this month have already been cancelled.

Suhrawardy Hossain Sarwar, manager-in-charge (Dhaka office) of Keari Tours and Services Ltd that operates two ships that take tourists from Teknaf to Saint Martin's island, said the coronavirus outbreak hit hard on their business.

"We usually sell 80 to 100 tickets every day during this season while the number dropped to only 15 on Saturday, he said.

"We got 220 bookings for March 26 but more than 30 bookings have been cancelled," Sarwar told this newspaper yesterday.

Suvenker Ghosh Rakesh, managing director of Shyamoli NR Travels, said they have already suspended bus services to India following India's sweeping travel restriction on foreigners to combat the spread of the coronavirus.

In Dhaka, reservation of almost all of the upscale hotels came down sharply.

"The occupancy rate of our hotel has plunged to below 30 per cent. The outbreak has taken a heavy toll on our business," Md Alamgir, managing director of Hotels International, the owning company of Sonargaon hotel, told The Daily Star on Saturday.

The hotel, which has about 278 rooms, witnessed nearly zero events in its ballroom during last one week. Similar scenarios are prevalent at almost every luxury hotel in Dhaka.

Mohibul Haque said they had to cancel 50 flights of Biman Bangladesh Airlines on domestic routes due to a shortage of passengers.

On Saturday, Biman suspended 16 flights on four domestic routes -- Cox's Bazar, Saidpur, Rajshahi and Jashore -- between March 15-19.

In the last three months, Biman cancelled at least 250 flights on different international routes, incurring a loss of about Tk 230 crore.

(Our Cox's Bazar Correspondent Muhammad Ali Jinnat contributed the report)



This image of a screen shows Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a videoconference with government representatives of Saarc countries yesterday evening. The conference was arranged to figure out ways to combat COVID-19.

Saarc unites to combat COVID-19

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cost of immediate actions," Modi said, adding that foreign secretaries of the Saarc countries, through their embassies, can quickly coordinate their efforts to finalise the concept of this fund and its operations.

Joining the videoconference, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called for a strong collaboration among the Saarc nations in devising a collective strategy and mobilising resources in combating coronavirus.

"We need to devise a strong strategy for the region to combat this public health threat and to protect our citizens," she said from the Gono Bhaban.

She suggested that the Saarc Secretariat should coordinate the regional collaboration on fighting coronavirus for the safety and security of the people in the region.

Hasina said Bangladesh is ready to share its capacity and expertise as well as the best practices with other Saarc countries, if required.

She proposed establishing an institution in Bangladesh to prevent and fight public health threats in the region in future.

Hasina thanked Modi for initiating the videoconference and suggested that the regional dialogue should continue involving health ministers, health secretaries and relevant health experts to discuss specific areas of cooperation.

"Southeast Asia regional director of the World Health Organization may be invited to these videoconferences," she said.

Hasina also thanked the Indian PM for bringing 23 Bangladeshi students from China's Wuhan along with Indian students and hosting them during the quarantine period.

The videoconference took place two days after New Delhi proposed developing a common regional strategy. More than 6,000 people died and over 160,000 were infected with the virus across the globe as of yesterday. The WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Saarc couldn't hold any summit

after 2014 due to tussles between India and Pakistan. The last summit, scheduled to take place in Pakistan in 2016, was cancelled as India withdrew from it after the 2016 Pathankot attack in Indian Kashmir. New Delhi accused Islamabad of orchestrating it.

At yesterday's video conference, Modi said the Saarc countries can respond best by coming together, not growing apart; through collaboration, not confusion; preparation, not panic.

He explained that South Asia has so far recorded fewer than 150 cases, but the fact that it is home to nearly one-fifth of all humanity and densely populated, it has significant challenges in terms of access to healthcare facilities.

"Our people-to-people ties are ancient, and our societies are deeply inter-connected. Therefore, we must all prepare together, we must all act together, and we must all succeed together," Modi said at the 90-minute videoconference beginning at 5:30pm.

He said India is also assembling a Rapid Response Team of doctors and specialists in the country, along with testing kits and other equipment, who will be on stand-by, to be placed at the disposal of Saarc countries, if required.

Modi proposed quick arrangement of online training capsules for emergency response teams to raise the capacity of all emergency staff in the region. India could also share its disease surveillance software with Saarc partners to better trace possible virus carriers and the people they contacted.

He also suggested using the existing facilities, like the Saarc Disaster Management Centre, to pool in the best practices among all the countries, and creating a common research platform to coordinate research on controlling epidemics within South Asia.

"We can also ask our experts to brainstorm on the longer-term economic consequences of COVID-19, and how we can insulate our internal trade and our local value

chains from its impact."

The Indian PM said Saarc should develop common Pandemic Protocols which can be applied on all borders as well as within borders to prevent infections from spreading and keep internal movements free.

Welcoming the initiatives suggested by Modi, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani proposed a common framework for tele-medicine to combat the virus.

He also urged all the Saarc nations to keep an eye on the evolving situation.

Pakistan PM's Special Assistant on Health Zafar Mirza said, "No nation can afford to be unresponsive to the situation in wake of coronavirus outbreak."

"We share common regional concerns on COVID-19; while hoping for the best, we have to prepare for the worst," said Mirza.

He further said all restrictions should be lifted in Jammu & Kashmir to deal with the coronavirus threat.

Taking part in the videoconference, Maldivian President Ibrahim Solih welcomed Modi's suggestion for setting up COVID-19 emergency fund.

He backed a coordinated approach to deal with the virus.

Solih also mentioned that the Maldives has already been affected due to a decline in the number of tourists and fall in businesses.

Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa said Saarc leaders should devise a mechanism for the economies in the region to tide over problems posed by coronavirus.

"I propose setting up of Saarc ministerial-level group to deal with issues related to coronavirus."

Joining the videoconference, Nepal PM KP Sharma Oli said, "Our collective efforts will help us devise a sound and robust strategy for the Saarc region to fight coronavirus."

He underlined the importance of effective mobilisation to control the spread of the virus.

Bhutanese PM Lotay Tshering said, "[It is] important for all of us to be on the same page to combat coronavirus."

Farce of quarantine

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from the airport to the Ashkona Hajj camp for the 14-day mandatory quarantine announced only hours before by the health minister himself.

It may be mentioned here that the departure of this group of Bangladeshis from Venice, among the worst-affected areas within Italy, was announced in the social media which, after due verification, was posted on The Daily Star online. So the authorities had ample time to prepare themselves, with necessary medical facilities, to expertly handle the arrival of these expatriate Bangladeshis.

During the whole day's protest, relatives of the returnees were seen to freely mingle with their families without any precautionary measure of any kind. To the best of our knowledge, no effort was made to collect blood samples from any of the returnees. Prof Abul Kalam Azad, director general of the Directorate General of Health Services, told reporters that these returnees were allowed to go because none of them had any symptoms.

What about the 14-day incubation period? Do we have to tell them that symptoms may not appear till later, that meanwhile these people, if infected, will give the virus to many they come into contact with.

While the whole world is trying to isolate those coming from affected areas, identify those infected through tests, quarantine them and then treat them, we are doing the reverse.

These 142 returnees who were already identified as coming from the most affected country were isolated as a group at the airport. But instead of testing them all for possible infection, the authorities have allowed them to mingle with their families and as such have put every one near them at risk.

Let's examine the scene of "self-quarantine". According to the civil surgeon (the chief medical officer of a district) of Manikganj, 221 expatriates were directed to remain in self-quarantine. Our reporter found during a visit last Friday that a returnee from Saudi Arabia was moving around freely. "I don't have any symptoms so I roam around."

Another youth from the same village who returned from one of the Gulf States seven days ago was feeding his cattle and tending to other chores along with his family members. The civil surgeon was not aware that these two young returnees were roaming around. Was he aware of what any of the other 221 expats in his district were doing? Was there any mechanism in place for him to monitor their activities? Does he have enough staff to help him do his job?

There were 81 such cases in Mymensingh. Does the civil surgeon of that district have any idea what these 81 returnees were doing? The same question can be asked about the 2,314 expatriates, according to IEDCR as of yesterday, who have been asked to remain in "self-quarantine".

On monitoring those under self-quarantine, IEDCR Director Dr Meerjady Sabrina Flora told the press that directives were given to "civil surgeons to take help from local administration to force the expatriates to stay in home quarantine properly".

Given our bureaucracy and the speed of its work, nothing is likely to happen soon and meanwhile, if any of these returnees turn out to be actually infected, they will have spread the virus far and wide.

Then again, what does being in self-quarantine actually mean? According

to Prof Muzaherul Huq, former WHO regional adviser for Southeast Asia, a person in self-quarantine must stay inside a room with an attached toilet and must not come closer than six feet to anyone else. People supplying him food must maintain that distance alongside using protective gears. Does it sound like what the "self-quarantined" are doing?

Let us return to the story of the 142 returnees from Italy. During their daylong demonstration, police were seen, in attempting to maintain peace, jostling with them, often touching them, pushing them back and even trying to calm them by embracing them -- all without any protective gears or any apparent awareness that they might themselves become infected. According to reports, some of the returnees actually slipped away and vanished during the demonstration, going who knows where.

We know that the whole world is reeling under the impact of COVID-19 and so are we. We are also aware that all the latest technologies available to fight this virus are not at hand. We can also live with the fact that we may not be able to reach the nook and corner of the country to fight it.

But can we not expect more efficiency at our biggest international airport which is our gateway to the world? Why should a 14-day mandatory quarantine be announced and within hours see its breach and be turned into a farce?

For a country as densely populated as ours, why should we have only one COVID-19 testing centre, whose director, Meerjady Sabrina Flora, urged people yesterday not to come to the centre but telephone them if they suspect coronavirus infection and wait for its team to come to attend.

Isn't the whole world doing the opposite: urging everyone to get tested and to seek medical assistance at the slightest sign of infection instead of urging them to stay home?

Except for "awareness" building, which amounts to some TV, online, newspaper and local loudspeaker messaging, nothing much appears to have happened except proclaiming that we are fully ready. In this mega city of ours, with nearly 20 million inhabitants, we still don't know, except IEDCR, where to go to test for coronavirus. In most hospitals, the doctors and nurses shy away from treating patients they remotely suspect to be so infected.

Meanwhile, our ever present media-friendly communication minister has once again pronounced on shutting down schools (shouldn't the education minister be speaking on this topic?), "Government will take all necessary steps including shutting down schools and colleges if situation arises." Won't it be too late if the "situation" might have already arisen? Shouldn't action precede the "situation"?

What is obvious is that there is tremendous lack of coordination between the various branches of the government and a serious disconnect with the experts. The health directorate, headed by its DG, is virtually helpless in dealing with the parent ministry whose bureaucratic methods are delaying everything. The ministry looks up to the PMO for guidance which further lengthens the process. What is perhaps equally demoralising is the lack of cooperation between the bureaucrats and the professionals and experts who seem to have very little say or impact on the matter.

Need we say more?

Panic, neglect

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intensive care unit immediately. This was very late into the night," said Nazma's Amin Ullah, who added that they could not find a hospital with an ICU bed to spare.

They then took her to DMCH. She was admitted to a ward and given intravenous saline, oxygen support and medication, Amin Ullah said, adding, "Her pain had subsided a little as well."

But then the nurses' shift changed at 8:00am and a new batch of nurses came in.

Around 11:30am, one of the nurses asked Amin what happened to Nazma.

While describing the symptoms, Amin mentioned that the girl recently flew in from Canada.

This simple information turned the situation deadly for Nazma. At the mention of Canada, the nurses began screaming, "She's from Canada! She also has a fever!". They ran to the doctors to announce that the girl has coronavirus.

The whole ward fell into chaos and all the doctors and nurses left the ward or slipped into their offices, refusing to come near the girl.

The Daily Star correspondent visited the ward where the girl breathed her last and spoke to some of the staff members there.

"When the staff heard that a coronavirus patient entered the ward, everyone panicked. I was there too. I felt like my world has come to an end. What if the girl has infected me and I infect my family? So, I ran out of the ward," a ward boy said.

A nurse said, "Look, everyone fears for their lives. Even nurses."

Dr ABM Jamal, professor at the department of surgery that was supervising Nazma, said, "When it was first revealed that the girl was a Canada-returnee, the ward fell into panic." He, however, added that the situation was normalised soon after.

"The staffers did not have protective gear and were concerned that they may have been exposed to a coronavirus patient for hours," said Director of DMCH Brig Gen AKM Nasir Uddin. They also did not have any coronavirus testing kits and could not even ensure whether she had coronavirus or not.

"We had to call representatives from the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research to come in and check if she had coronavirus or not," he said. He added that they dealt with the situation with utmost urgency.

She tested negative for coronavirus, but by then over an hour had gone by with no monitoring and the patient's condition had deteriorated.

Around 12:30pm, a doctor stepped forward, put on gloves, wore a mask, and approached the patient. He had a syringe containing an antibiotic.

It was still too late. Soon after the antibiotic was administered, Nazma died.

Dr ABM Jamal said, "We are suspecting that she had intestinal perforation, meaning there was a rupture somewhere in her intestine."

"When she was admitted, she lost a lot of body fluid and had hypervolemic shock."