

Make coronavirus testing a high priority

Lack of proper initiatives puts public health at risk

IN a manner befitting the urgency of the situation, the World Health Organization (WHO) director has urged all countries to ramp up their testing programmes as the best way to arrest the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. "We have a simple message to all countries: test, test, test," he said. We cannot agree more. The director's message comes at a time when the global coronavirus situation is rapidly deteriorating, with at least 7,175 deaths from over 183,000 confirmed cases so far. It's also particularly relevant for Bangladesh, which is at high risk of infection because of its population density, poor healthcare system, generally poor hygiene practices among the people and the continued arrival of people from countries with high coronavirus incidences, despite a travel ban. Since there is no cure for the disease, testing can be the difference between life and death.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh's response has not been consistent with the enormity of the danger, leaving much to be desired. According to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), 10 persons have been infected in the country so far, although experts say the actual number could be much higher. IEDCR, the only institution to have the testing authority, has so far tested about 268 people. It says it has 1,732 more test kits left to identify people with infections. Both the number of people tested and the number of test kits left are appalling, not to mention, extremely dangerous from a public healthcare perspective. While the WHO is expected to supply more test kits and personal protective equipment (PPE) soon, supply shortages are only part of the problem. From the very beginning, the government appeared to be ill-prepared to contain a threat of this magnitude. There are reports of disruption and mismanagement in the procedures involving the testing of suspected cases, institutional quarantine and self-isolation. The urgency of testing potential virus carriers from abroad hasn't been met with proper action.

We think the government should take more drastic measures in the coming days. We need strict monitoring to ensure proper quarantine. There should also be arrangements to test and treat people at different health facilities. We should even be prepared to consider a countrywide lockdown should the need arise. More importantly for now, we should ramp up our testing initiatives, which also means investigating the suspected rise in recent weeks in pneumonia, one of the most common symptoms of Covid-19.

Dengue knocking at the door

Don't ignore the portents

HARDLY have we started effectively addressing the COVID-19 virus that has taken the form of a pandemic, when we have the distressing news of the onset of dengue in the country. A report in this paper shows that the deadly fever has already started affecting the people. The number of patients admitted in various hospitals in the country with this fever has quadrupled in comparison to the number of dengue affected during the same time last year. Recent data from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) shows that as of March 16, 263 patients have already been admitted to hospitals across the country, compared to last year's March figure of 73. If numbers are the measure of things to come, this bodes very badly for us unless we prepare ourselves well.

Unfortunately, we always prepare for the previous epidemic, the previous crisis, and not the one likely to visit us in future. And it is not quite unusual that this is happening while it is still the dry season. Unfortunately, the authorities fail to see the changes in the pattern of dengue occurrence in the country and wait for the monsoon to take action. In fact, a research shows that during 2015–2017, in the pre-monsoon season, the dengue cases were reported to be more than seven times higher compared to the previous 14 years.

Every year, we are given assurances by the two city corporations and relevant agencies that adequate actions would be taken to prevent the experience of the past. Yet the next is worse than the previous. The majority of cases of dengue last year, which had taken an epidemic form, were in Dhaka city. And the record of the city in fighting the menace was poor, so much so that the pressure came down heavily last year on the city corporations to take effective measures. Experts are calling for early countermeasures to destroy the vector of this disease, the aedes mosquitoes. The anti-dengue drive must be planned and conducted centrally. And among other things, intense participation of the people will be an important element in combating the disease. This must be ensured by the authorities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Hydraulic horns a menace

It is alarming to notice the sound of hydraulic horns severely affecting passengers and pedestrians. This is particularly disturbing for educational institutions, hospitals and residential areas.

A study by BUET shows that the sound level in Dhaka was 45 decibel (dB) in 1985. But by 2013, this had risen to 110 dB. Presently, the average sound level in Dhaka is estimated to be 105 dB. Sound levels of 60 dB and 100 dB can lead to temporary deafness and complete deafness respectively, according to the WHO. While the noise in any busy thoroughfare in Dhaka is estimated to be 60–80 dB, the sound of hydraulic horns reaches 95 dB.

Even though the HC had banned the use of hydraulic horns in Dhaka in August 2017, this directive is not being followed. The traffic police should launch daily operations to catch cars using hydraulic horns. Also, if the city dwellers are made aware about the terms and conditions, it would be helpful to control the noise pollution in Dhaka.

Md Zillur Rahaman, Gandaria, Dhaka

Tough times ahead in the wake of coronavirus

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

flow of remittance and increased public expenditure will counter any possible external shocks, according to the report, which was sent to the Prime Minister's Office. In other words, the Prime Minister will receive a very rosy picture for the rest of the year, so far as the domestic economy is concerned.

However, it appears that this report is premature and out of sync with the cautious forecasts emanating from think tanks in Bangladesh and abroad. It is true, as a news report in *The Daily Star* on February 28 cautions, "The magnitude of the impact on Bangladesh's international as well as overall commerce cannot be ascertained yet," but we already see signs that the months of March and April could yield some sobering statistics. There has been a visible slowdown in the rest of the world and our expats are conserving their resources in anticipation of harder times ahead. Have we seen the worst of the damages of the coronavirus pandemic yet? Not by any stretch of imagination!

The last three months have been indeed very traumatic for the world economy, particularly for the economies of Southeast Asia. China, the largest trading partner of Bangladesh and the primary source of our raw materials, has been under lockdown. While some sectors of Bangladesh will be more affected than others, there is no denying the fact that the economy

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CHINITO SINCE 1995



NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

of the type that inspires free speech, supplemented with coughs and sneezes. The astute Bangladeshi does not take the outside dirt to the inside of his home or workplace. His logic is he pays the municipal corporation, or someone does, to keep the city clean. Therefore, before entering his "clean" premises, he leaves everything behind. With a clamorous ensemble that begins with a deep outward pull of everything lodged in his larynx and further down the oesophagus, he does an encore by ejaculating at your feet the remnants of his last meal laced with cough and saliva. Covid-19 is happy and alive.

Many people do not realise that the containment of the universal coronavirus is proportionate with the hygienic practices of every individual. Yet, we get hooked to hourly news updates, praying and hoping, that the killer disease will bow out without human intervention as meekly as its first appearance at Wuhan.

Yet, there is enough "awareness" to induce widespread panic. Traffic is low. The streets are less populated. The convenient way to empty a busy marketplace or an apartment block is to announce the arrival of corona. The business tactic to empty a mall of a product is to circulate its benefits towards suppressing the virus, or its proven medicinal potency.

We have seen the hero street vendor who was still selling masks, their effectiveness to protect the healthy, debatable, at BDT 20, and only one piece per buyer. But then

"CORONA-VIRUS can't tame Bangladesh's growth momentum", declared a report issued by the Ministry of Finance of the country. Strong domestic demand fuelled by growth in the

and its citizens will feel the effects of the fallout from this global crisis. There are many scenarios, from marginal to major, depending on how severely we get hit, but we must always hope for the best and prepare for the worst, and take precautionary measures to avert any disaster.

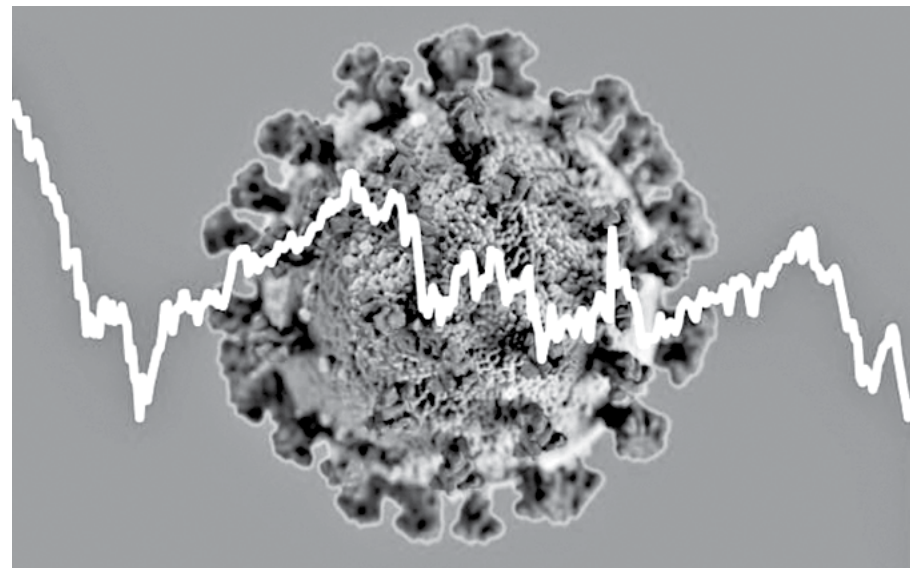
There are also many vulnerable populations living within the perimeters of the capital, Dhaka. Let us take the case of slum dwellers. They are much more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 because of the cramped quarters, the sharing of utensils, and lack of proper sanitation facilities. There are millions of garment workers who live in group quarters or rooming houses where three or four people might be sharing a room or even a bed.

Poor people have underlying medical conditions and lack reliable healthcare, meaning that once infected, they are far more likely to get very sick or die. One study found that 30 percent of the

of people's lives have been turned upside down, and people have lost their jobs, incomes, assets, and mental peace.

Researchers at Harvard and Imperial College London estimate that only one-third of the illnesses exported from China have been observed, since those without symptoms are not counted. Global travel and trade are slowly grinding down. Even in the USA, a country that has so far been spared the worst, stock markets have plummeted and tourism has taken a big hit.

For Bangladesh, fortunately, the fury of this virus has not reached our shores much, nor have any of the Chinese citizens working here been infected. However, this should give us more reason to stay alert and step up all precautionary measures. Since most neighbouring countries have reported more cases of coronavirus infections, Bangladesh is now at risk and the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh has urged all to stay alert, according to a *The Daily Star* online report. The Chinese



population in *basti* areas have chronic diseases. The wealthy and the middle-class, on the other hand, have more resources, or a "deep pocket", to cushion any health, financial, and social ramifications of the illnesses or business turndown in Bangladesh.

Rich nations, international institutions, companies and foundations have committed a paltry USD 8.3 billion, or a little more than USD 1 per capita of the world's population, to fight the pandemic in poorer countries of the globe. This is but a drop in the bucket of what will be needed to slow down the spread of the virus. Infections have been recorded in more than 110 countries and even a country with a highly advanced healthcare system like Italy finds itself struggling to deal with COVID-19. By whatever name you call it, coronavirus, novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, its global impact cannot be denied or contained. Tens of millions

Ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jiming, was critical of the protocol in place to contain the contagion—calling it "unscientific"—and urged the government to step up the measures to keep the virus out. According to various reports, almost 95 percent of new cases of coronavirus are being detected outside China, yet the Bangladesh government had been, until recently, only screening passengers coming from China at the airports. The government should have taken our screening process one step further and monitored all incoming passengers, the airports and other entry points. However, the passengers who recently returned from Italy were not all tested or quarantined successfully.

It is time for the various government ministries, particularly the Ministry of Finance and Health, to make contingency plans. The International Monetary Fund chief Kristalina Georgieva on Wednesday called for an all-out, "no regrets" response

to the new coronavirus epidemic, which poses a "serious threat" to the global economy.

"At a time of uncertainty... it is better to do more than to do not enough," she said, warning that the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak will slow growth in the world economy to below the 2.9 percent posted last year.

One of the biggest dilemmas that officials and politicians in low-income countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan face is the cost of preparing for an impending disaster. There are many scenarios, and the probabilities inherent in these, including the speed of dissemination, can influence the actions that governments take. Also, even though communication with mobile phones and the spread of internet is much faster, the downside is the propagation of false information.

Lessons from the SARS epidemic in 2003 show that the economic impact of coronavirus can be broken down into two segments: direct and indirect. The direct impact will be felt if the country is hit—and that might mean a single death—since the panic will start and gradually transmit to the rest of the country. Bangladesh could possibly avoid this and with a little bit of planning, propaganda, and precaution, limit the damage from the curtailment of economic activities similar to what China, Italy or Iran has seen. Most importantly, conflicting messages from the government, public perception of a lack of preparedness, and uncertainty and suspicion among the masses could lead to widespread panic, rumour-mongering, and economic slowdown.

The indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt by every country since it has already slowed down global economic recovery. The coronavirus onslaught will weigh in on the global economy and will last even after the epidemic has been brought under control, and "it won't end with a sudden burst of blue skies". "The shape of the economy as it absorbs and eventually recovers from the coronavirus epidemic is more likely to be U-shaped than V-shaped—with a prolonged bottom", according to Justin Lahart of the *Wall Street Journal*. On the positive side, lower oil prices and some possible uptick in world demand for our products as supply chains are rejiggered away from China—in the form of trade diversion—could benefit us in the intermediate term. However, the better prepared the country is to fight any sudden outbreak or global lockdown, the faster it can contain and slow down the negative and accentuate the positive that will inevitably follow in the coming months.

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#COVID-19

The rigorous and (oops!) the negligent sides

AT five feet four, most people's mouth is where my nose is. In a democracy, they can do all the loud talking at a distance from me, but their flurry of drenched words requires my close proximity. My nose is again

there were the rich and notorious traders who were selling the same at ten times their cost. Some on social media have called for the slapping of the unscrupulous businesspeople if they were to take undue advantage of a calamitous situation where people are desperate to rid themselves of the deadly germs.

Parts of the Western world, however, have emerged as "uneducated", going by their fright of the unpredictable and responding by hoarding foodstuff lopsidedly. The customers arriving after them will find empty shelves at shops and supermarkets. There will be more panic.

The use of hand gloves to handle food has increased, albeit on a minuscule scale, but the same gloved hand also handles money. One research in this country found human faeces in Bangladeshi money. "Taka notes and coins contain bacteria like E. Coli and faecal coliform which are very harmful to health," revealed the research conducted by Nishat Tasnim, a final-year student of the Environmental Science discipline at Khulna University.

The situation could be worse elsewhere. Do we really think we are having *fuchka* and sugarcane syrup, only?

In jest or in all seriousness, people are avoiding shaking hands. Hugging has indeed taken a dip in this country of growing huggers in the face of selective reluctance. Touching of elbows, toe shakes with footwear on, fluttering of the eyes without sunglasses, and even bumper to bumper kisses have taken over. The predicament and worry is that free mixing will help spread the sickness. There lies its aggressiveness and danger.

2,749 Italy-based patients have recovered among the 27,980 coronavirus cases, the country has suffered 2,158 deaths, the highest outside China.

Letting the Italy returnees go home in Bangladesh for self-quarantine (and there have been reports of violations at individual levels) was wrong. Not showing live symptoms does not mean a person is not a carrier. This was known to all early on, when the catastrophe first struck. Letting the expats mix with their local relatives and friends could spell escalation and growth. We are not ready for that.

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Last Saturday, there was a protest by returnees from Italy at their designated quarantine camp at Ashkona, and simultaneous lack of preparedness by the concerned authorities. After daylong chaos, they were allowed to go home. What?

Italy has at least, 23,073 active coronavirus cases, 1,851 of whom are in serious or critical condition. Although

be frightening and demoralising for the returnees.

It betrays confusion and belies logic. The same protocol handled well the large number of returnees—312—who returned on February 1 from China's Wuhan, the epicentre of the Covid-19, after the outbreak and deaths there. They went into compulsory 14-day quarantine at the Ashkona Hajj Camp, and left for home in healthy conditions. No questions asked, no protests, but total cooperation. Perhaps because they were all students.

Our fear is that severe complacency has set in among the field workers, doctors and all. The China-returnee success and not finding any indication of the virus among other returnees has helped to tilt the decision in favour of letting the Italy returnees go home. But why? Who is monitoring them?

It will help to remember that the five confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Bangladesh are connected to overseas persons. On March 8, Bangladesh confirmed its first three cases—two of them were Bangladeshis arriving from Italy, while the third was their family member living in Dhaka. About a week later, two patients arriving recently, respectively from Italy and Germany, were quarantined.

In some countries, refusing quarantine is now a punishable offence. Was it then such a wise decision to let the Italian returnees, in spite of their raucous protests, leave the designated quarantine areas to be at home with their relatives? And friends? Of the first three cases, one was a relative.

Concerned ministries and agencies should have made the situation conducive at Ashkona Hajj Camp by adequate planning and logistics so that those arriving from Italy would have favoured voluntary isolation. Call it compulsory. Fund is not a factor.

Not ready were also the Ashkona administration. This has to be an inter-ministerial responsibility. One complaint was that doctors were not in attendance even after five hours had gone by. There was no food available to buy or on offer for the returnees, some of who were children. One can guess that sleeping arrangements were equally unready. Most importantly, there seemed no person/s of authority in charge. After a long flight, add a few more hours for airport travel, formalities and wait—the situation can

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