

Health workers must have personal protective equipment

Govt must ensure the basics to combat COVID-19

WITH the first COVID-19 related death confirmed by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), the level of panic amongst the citizens now seems to have intensified severely. With the global death toll on the rise, safety for one's life is more meaningful than ever before. Another cause for concern is how ill-equipped our healthcare workers are in terms of safety gear. A recent report by *The Daily Star* reveals the frantic situation at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH). Nearly 200 interns had decided to halt their services until the hospital provides them with protective gear. They pointed out that patients with fever and cough come on a daily basis and some of them could be affected by COVID-19, which exposes all health workers if they are not safeguarded with the personal protective equipment (PPE). Although the interns resumed their work later, this situation only goes to show our lack of preparedness for such a crisis.

Needless to say, as the global pandemic is being contended with, the safety of medical staff is a priority and most countries have been able to provide the necessary safety gear at the hospitals treating the patients. And it is during such times that the RMCH authorities have allowed such a careless condition to prevail on their premises.

Another report by this daily sheds light on the lackadaisical attitude displayed by the authorities who are reluctant for tackling the virus. From January 21 up until Wednesday, a staggering 631,538 passengers—most of whom are returnees from the virus-hit regions—entered the country, and many were surprisingly allowed to go home on condition of self-quarantine. Where does the assurance lie in such a decision?

We cannot help but wonder whether the nation is fully equipped to prevent an outbreak and treat those who are infected. The failure to enforce home quarantine of the suspected cases across the country, along with the lack of testing facilities and kits, have further confounded the situation. Despite having time to prepare, we have failed to learn from and replicate the best practices from the countries that are hardest hit by the pandemic. The authorities have provided quite a few hotline numbers for the public to call in if they feel they have symptoms of the virus. But many people have complained that they have not been able to get through to any of these hotlines. This will only serve to cause more panic and unnecessary rush to the hospitals, depriving those who may genuinely need their services.

We believe drastic measures need to be taken on an urgent basis. Enough treatment facilities need to be readied across the country, and all medical staff need to be trained accurately and provided with the PPE. There must be strict supervision regarding the quarantine process. Time is of the essence here. So without wasting any more precious

Coronavirus testing kits by Gonoshasthaya

Govt should extend full support to producing and marketing them

WHILE the government has been grappling with the coronavirus testing kit crisis with more and more COVID-19 cases being detected every day, the news of a testing kit developed by the Gonoshasthaya Kendra has made us very hopeful. According to the organisation, the kit is affordable for the general public (it will take Tk 300-350 to get tested for the virus) and can detect novel coronavirus infection in just 15 minutes.

Although the DGHS has said that it needs at least one lakh testing kits, at present the government has only around 1,500. The huge global demand in the wake of this pandemic has made it quite difficult for the government to procure the testing kits and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) from other countries in time. Also, the government's slow response to this emerging health crisis has already put the lives of people at great risk. Thus, it should now act wisely to tackle the situation.

Since there is no alternative to testing as many suspected cases as possible to contain the spread, we will immediately need a massive number of testing kits at an affordable price. And Gonoshasthaya Kendra claims that they can do it.

It's good to know that the government has given Gonoshasthaya Kendra the approval for going into large-scale production of the kits. It should now extend its full support to the organisation, including providing financial support, for it to be successful in its endeavour. Since the chemical reagents to conduct the tests are expensive and those will have to be imported from other countries, the government can definitely help Gonoshasthaya in this regard. In addition, it should allow all the credible government and private organisations and hospitals to test suspected patients for COVID-19.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Coronavirus awareness in rural areas urgent

I left my dormitory and returned to my hometown after Dhaka University closed down following the threat of a COVID-19 outbreak. I was surprised to see that people in my village are still unaware of this virus. They are gathering at the local markets, conducting religious *mahfils*, playing on the grounds and going about their usual lives without any precautions.

Local authorities as well as the Union Parishad Chairman or Members did not take any measures to inform the people in my village about this pandemic. I feel that it is imperative they act fast and spread awareness on this global crisis through whatever means necessary. This will help people prepare for the challenges that lie ahead.

Md Jamal Hossain, Hajiganj, Chandpur

How much power is too much?



SHUPROVA TASNEM

BY now, we have all heard of the harrowing story of Bangla Tribune correspondent Ariful Islam, who was beaten, blindfolded and dragged from his home in the middle of the night in Kurigram on March 14. He later recounted how he begged for mercy, telling his abductors—Senior Assistant Commissioner (RDC) Nazim Uddin, two magistrates as well as police and Ansar men—that he had children in the house. He was taken to the DC office, where he was once again beaten, only this time he was stripped and filmed. All of this was part of the “operations” of a mobile court, which then sentenced him to one year in prison on charges of “possessing” drugs.

By now, it has also become clear that Ariful's criticism of the Kurigram Deputy Commissioner (DC) Sultana Pervin, which included her intention to name a government pond after herself, had something to do with this “operation”. A writ petition has been filed with the High Court, asking for the conviction to be declared illegal. The DC, RDC and the two magistrates have all been withdrawn from their duties, and it has been more or less roundly acknowledged that what happened to Ariful was a gross misuse of power and an attempt to choke press freedom and prevent a journalist from reporting on local corruption.

However, we must also acknowledge that all this was made possible because Ariful is a member of the press, and the persons involved have all been withdrawn after wide media coverage. But the media is fickle, and once we have moved on to the next topic (e.g. the pandemic that is about to hit us like a ton of bricks has already taken up most of the spotlight), what will happen next?

The case against Ariful is rife with irregularities. A mobile court only has the authority to sentence a crime, not to knock your door down at midnight and drag you to the police station to be tortured—that is usually the remit of our law enforcement authorities. It also needs to go through a number of protocols for such a raid to be authorised, but to this date, no one seems to be able to say who exactly was in charge of it. According to news reports, Abu Zafar, assistant director of the Department of Narcotics Control's Kurigram office, said he was busy in Lalmonirhat and did not authorise any raid. Reports also quoted another

source from within the department, who confirmed that the raid was organised by the district administration; however, no letter was given from the DC office, in accordance with the procedure that is meant to be followed when organising a mobile team or taskforce. Kurigram municipality mayor Abdul Jalil also told reporters that permission was not taken from the mayor to organise this mobile team, and called it an “illegal raid”.

Even if a mobile court has the authority to break down someone's door and drag them away—which it doesn't—it is clear that granting such judicial powers to deputy commissioners makes it frighteningly easy for them to abuse that. It effectively allows them to create a parallel judiciary and crown themselves judge, jury and executioner of the person on trial, with no outside authority to hold them to account—something that is in direct conflict with our constitution, which provides for the separation of powers. This was made clear in May 2017, when the High Court issued a 62-page ruling that said the running of mobile courts by executive and district magistrates is “a frontal attack on the independence of the judiciary and is violative of the theory of separation of powers”. However, this ruling is still stuck



Journalist Ariful Islam. PHOTO: COLLECTED

in the Appellate Division, and many legal experts have argued that mobile courts do have their benefits, especially when it comes to providing speedy justice for those with little access to the judicial system.

What they are most definitely not meant to do is terrorise the people who need them the most. In Ariful's own words, “I thought they were taking me somewhere to kill me. I broke down in tears.” They told him, “You will be put

in a crossfire. Your time is up. Recite the *kalima*.”

The fear that gripped him in this moment is not surprising, given how common extrajudicial killings have become in Bangladesh. But Ariful's case doesn't just show us the very real fear of crossfire, but also the equally real fear of being picked up in the middle of the night and unlawfully detained and sentenced. The fact that Ariful was a

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journalist, picked up for doing his job, has brought him a lot of attention and opened up the door to a safe return to his family. Others have not been so lucky.

Even in this particular case, the man directly involved with assaulting Ariful has quite the reputation for abusing power. This was not the first time he had decided to take the law into his own hands. Dhaka Tribune reported on how he terrorised two local fishermen, Bishwanath Nama Das and Khalequzzaman Maznu, and sentenced them to 11 months in jail last month on behalf of DC Sultana Pervin. Again, when investigated further, it was found that the local police had no knowledge of a mobile court drive that night. Maznu told reporters that Nazim Uddin also picked him up in the middle of the night and threatened him, before demanding Tk 200,000. Bishwanath's wife, at a press conference in Kurigram, said not only was her husband assaulted, but Nazim kicked her and their children as well. Their crime? Filing a writ at the High Court regarding their use of a local *beel* for their livelihoods, which was being blocked by the DC's office. The two fishermen, who are uneducated and live from day to day, are not even aware of what crime they have been charged with. Their stories of unlawful arrest and imprisonment didn't

Is Bangladesh ready to manage the risk of a coronavirus outbreak?



MD. NAZMUL HUDA

AS of March 19, Bangladesh has confirmed 18 cases of the novel coronavirus, called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) which causes the disease COVID-19. The infected had reportedly either returned from other countries or come in contact with infected returnees. This may indicate that a wider person-to-person transmission of the coronavirus is inevitable in Bangladesh. This puts the country at high risk, and as such, experts have expressed concerns that an outbreak of COVID-19 will be extremely damaging for Bangladesh which already has a questionable reputation for managing outbreaks (recall the 2019 dengue outbreak).

So how prepared is Bangladesh to tackle a coronavirus epidemic? This question can be answered in light of our handling of the dengue outbreak in 2019, the risk factors for a COVID-19 outbreak, and the existing preparedness, measures, and gaps.

What can we learn from how Bangladesh handled the dengue outbreak in 2019?

Bangladesh's capacity to deal with an epidemic can be assumed from its handling of the dengue outbreak in 2019. According to the US-based Johns Hopkins University, in terms of tackling the outbreak of a disease, Bangladesh ranked the worst among South Asian countries in the 2019 Global Health Security Index. The report added that Bangladesh's ability to combat the outbreak of the disease was zero (*Prothom Alo*, November 2, 2019). The lack of coordination, accountability, clear descriptions of roles and activities of government bodies, healthy decision-making and command protocols, the poor monetary support, irregularities, inadequate preparedness in the health sector, as well as poor health infrastructure together compounded the dengue situation in Bangladesh.

As a result, according to an estimate, dengue took 104 lives and infected some 85,000 people across the country in 2019 alone. Bangladesh's poor record in the fight against the dengue outbreak may question its capacity to resist the threat and potential outbreak of another infectious disease in the country.

Risk factors for COVID-19 outbreak Bangladesh has all the potential for a fast spread of COVID-19. Its close economic and educational ties with some key affected countries such as China, India, South Korea, and Italy, the huge population size, low-quality healthcare infrastructure, insufficient laboratory testing facilities, rural-urban difference in access to healthcare facilities, insufficient personal protective equipment, inefficiency of healthcare workers with regard to managing laboratory specimens taken from patients, as well as inadequate surveillance and contact-tracing facilities—all these



A health official at the Kamalapur Railway Station dispenses hand sanitiser to a passenger and her child as part of measures to contain the spread of coronavirus, on March 18, 2020.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

factors, together with a general lack of knowledge and awareness, can fuel a change from the current limited number of confirmed COVID-19 cases to a sudden outburst in the country.

Scientists warn that the number of COVID-19 cases may double about every one week. It is predicted that if one percent of the total population becomes infected with SARS-CoV-2, Bangladesh will see approximately 1.7 million people infected, including doctors and healthcare workers, which may increase twofold within seven days. This burden of COVID-19 will undoubtedly collapse and overwhelm the capacity of the current healthcare system in Bangladesh.

Existing preparedness, measures and gaps

The Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) claimed

that Bangladesh is ready to tackle an outbreak of COVID-19. Recently, the country has undertaken a four-level emergency plan to prevent the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, public health experts worry about Bangladesh's present preparedness, measures and healthcare facilities for its people. They are questioning whether Bangladesh can cope with the potential outbreak of the coronavirus. According to the IEDCR, Bangladesh has undertaken various safety measures including temporarily cancelling visa-on-arrival services for passengers from Mainland China and most European countries. However, the

country has not yet entirely banned travellers from the heavily infected countries including Italy, Spain, Iran, and South Korea. Additionally, the actions of the government range from setting up thermal scanners and screening facilities in airports, the provision of health declaration forms containing information about passengers' recent travel history, whether they have symptoms of COVID-19, and self-isolation for 14 days, free testing facilities and follow-ups, multiple hotline services for passengers, and mass campaigns for the prevention of coronavirus. IEDCR has also claimed that it has taken necessary preparations for setting up thermal scanners at all land ports and isolation units at public hospitals of all districts in order to halt the deadly coronavirus.

However, concerns prevail since measures to screen all passengers entering Bangladesh are not scientific and adequate. More importantly, steps are yet to be taken to establish thermal scanners at all seaports in the country. Furthermore, while all public hospitals at the district level are, according to IEDCR, preparing isolation units to quarantine patients for 14 days, so far the government has only prepared two hundred beds at the Kuwait-Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital and established two isolation units at Kurmitola General Hospital and the Dhaka Infectious Disease Hospital. However, the government has not involved any private hospital in this battle against the virus.

quite capture the media's attention in the same way. Yet maybe these are the people who needed it the most.

Before he was posted to Kurigram, Nazim Uddin was stand-released from his duties as Land Commissioner of Cox's Bazar Sadar upazila for similar acts of corruption and violence. One video that went viral on social media shows him physically assaulting an elderly man named Naku Majhi. This begs the question: why was Nazim never punished but instead simply transferred to another office? Why, even after his withdrawal, did he have the audacity to pick up Bishwanath on March 17 and threaten him once again with “crossfire”? Why did DC Pervin, even after being withdrawn, have the audacity to call Ariful and make light of a night where he was tortured, humiliated and put in fear of his life, and assure him that she will withdraw the case and that he should “let the matter go” and “look at it positively”?

The answer is simple. It's something that we have been discussing, without really going anywhere with it, for a long time—the culture of impunity that allows the growing misuse and abuse of power and is rotting our governance system from within. We cannot continue to have a system where the law applies to some but not to others. The sanctity of the judiciary and the legal process is something we must all uphold. Even the most hardened cynic, who believes a certain level of corruption and abuse of power is part and parcel of a South Asian democracy, can understand that once the judiciary loses its power to punish the criminal, the executive also loses its power to implement law and order. It is one thing to struggle to hold to account those with massive levels of wealth and influence in their hands, but it is really quite another thing to “punish” corrupt and violent government officials simply by making them OSD (Officers on Special Duty), which blocks their promotions but allows them to continue to draw salaries paid for by taxpayer money.

Is there really any excuse to not hold to account the people who, in the larger scale of things, engage in such “small” crimes but, in a way, end up doing the most terrible harm (since their abuse of power hurts those who do not have the power to speak out against injustice)? How many more fishermen from villages will have to be harassed and locked up by the Nazis of our system until they, too, can hope for some justice?

Shuprova Tasneem is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is @ShuprovaTasneem.

Importantly, the testing facility for the coronavirus is still centralised and available only at the IEDCR laboratory. And, it may take more than two days to collect specimens from rural patients, send those to Dhaka for testing, and prepare the testing results. The situation may become worse due to the inequitable healthcare system in Bangladesh, which often favours the wealthy and discriminates against the poor. As such, concerns remain that many poor and disadvantaged patients may go undetected and unattended if an epidemic happens in Bangladesh. This discriminatory nature of the healthcare system, characterised by the questionable process of conducting tests combined with a lack of screening, comprehensive testing and treatment facilities, is suited to the spread of coronavirus infections which can grow exponentially and double in every seven days, even without showing any symptoms.

What all these suggest is that Bangladesh's response to the threat of the coronavirus is inadequate. And, the country is not fully ready to tackle an impending epidemic. Therefore, the government should strengthen its preparations for screening, testing, isolation, and treatment of people infected and affected by the coronavirus. Also, Bangladesh should allocate special funds to reduce the many associated risks of an outbreak. Otherwise, the new coronavirus may potentially inflict much more damage than the dengue outbreak did in 2019.

Md. Nazmul Huda is a PhD candidate and an academic in the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at the University of New South Wales, Australia. Email: nazmulsoc2008@gmail.com