

The different narratives 'out there' on how COVID-19 originated

Does 'the truth' lie among them?

THE OVERTON WINDOW



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IN 1968, one of the United States' top scientists, Dr Gordan JF MacDonald, who was a member of the President's Science Advisory Committee and the President's Council on Environmental Quality, wrote: "By the year 2018, technology will make available to the leaders of the major nations a variety of techniques for conducting secret warfare, of which only a bare minimum of the security forces need be appraised... one nation may attack a competitor covertly by bacteriological means, thoroughly weakening the population."

History shows that the use of biological warfare for various purposes against different peoples and nations has been happening for some time. One such well-known incident occurred in 1763, when the British Empire successfully managed to spread smallpox virus to the Native Americans during the Pontiac Rebellion in Pennsylvania. Another example is of Imperial Japan dropping bombs made of infected fleas, cholera and shigella on Chinese cities killing an estimated 580,000 people before and during the Second World War. Therefore, believing that today's governments could potentially resort to using biological warfare is not far-fetched.

Interestingly, a research paper recently released by two experienced scientists (including a former NSA counterterrorism analyst) concluded that the COVID-19 is man-made. They summarised that: "somebody was entangled with the evolution of 2019-nCoV coronavirus. In addition to origins of natural recombination and intermediate host, the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan." The lab mentioned is a BSL Lab (the first of its kind in China) whose standard is of the highest bio-hazard level and is qualified to handle the "world's most dangerous pathogens"—coincidentally located just 20 miles from where the coronavirus is said to have originated.

In addition, biorxiv.org published a paper (by nine members of Kusuma School of Biological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi) with the findings that the coronavirus was engineered with "key structural proteins" identifying "four inserts of amino acid sequences homologous to amino acid sequences in HIV 1." This, again, suggests that the virus was man-made, although the publisher warned that its conclusions should not be regarded as "conclusive".

In another coincidence, two months before the outbreak of the coronavirus in the Chinese

city of Wuhan, a group of experts conducted the pandemic simulation "Event 201", which was organised by John Hopkins University in the US. The goal was to test how governments and authorities would behave in the event of a global pandemic with "potentially catastrophic consequences". The virus used to do this was called CAPS: Coronavirus Associated Pulmonary Syndrome.

Just recently, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lijian Zhao peculiarly demanded on Twitter that US authorities reveal what they were hiding about the origins of the COVID-19, suggesting that the coronavirus may have been brought to China by the US military during the 2019 Military World Games in Wuhan on October 19. Zhao made his remarks pointing to a video of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director Robert Redfield, who admitted that the US had several deaths from the virus before they were able to test it. In response, the US State Department summoned the Chinese Ambassador to the US to protest Zhao's comments.

But Zhao is not the only high-profile political figure to voice suspicions about the timing of the introduction of the virus in Wuhan. Matthias Chang, political secretary

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to former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, also offered similar speculation back in January as 300 American military athletes are said to have attended the games and five unnamed athletes were reportedly hospitalised with an unidentified infection during the event.

Going a step further, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard said, "It is possible that



A woman wearing a face mask as protection against the coronavirus infection is seen on a street in downtown Shanghai, China, on February 26, 2020. PHOTO: REUTERS/ALY SONG

this virus is a product of a biological attack by America which initially spread to China and then to Iran and the rest of the World." Similarly, in a speech delivered on March 12, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei all but accused the US of weaponising the virus. Although these accusations may have been inspired by geopolitics, a number of reports does raise some legitimate questions.

For example, a group of medical researchers, after collecting samples of the genome in China, demonstrated that the virus did not originate at the seafood market in Wuhan but had multiple unidentified sources. The study, published on ChinaXiv, is not the first to come to this conclusion. Previously, another report in the *Lancet* argued the same. And according to the *Global Times* (an English-language Chinese newspaper), the study believes that patient(s) zero transmitted the virus to workers or sellers at the market, with the crowded market easily facilitating further transmission.

Chinese medical authorities and "intelligence agencies" then conducted a swift and wide-ranging search for the origin of the virus, collecting nearly 100 samples of genome from 12 different countries on four continents, identifying all the varieties and mutations. During this research, they determined that the virus outbreak had begun much earlier, possibly in November.

In February 2020, the Japanese Asahi news (print and TV), avoiding the questions

of natural vs man-made and accidental vs deliberate, simply stated that the virus outbreak may first have occurred in the US, not in China, and that some of the 14,000 American deaths attributed to influenza may have in fact resulted from it. Presenting scientific documentation for their claims, the network raised the issue that no one would know the cause of death because the US either neglected to test or failed to release the results—as CDC's director Robert Redfield admitted.

The prominent Chinese news website Huanqiu related one such case in the US to the coronavirus. According to it, on February 26, ABC News affiliate KJCT8 News Network reported that a resident in Montrose, Colorado, Almata Stone, said, "They [the medical staff] kept us informed that it was the flu, and when I got the death certificate [of a deceased relative], there was a coronavirus in the cause of death."

Then, on February 27, Taiwan ran a TV news programme that suggested the coronavirus originated in the US using diagrams and flow charts, according to which, the spread of the virus indicates that it could not have originated in China. In the programme, a prominent Taiwanese physician noted that in August 2019, the US had a flurry of lung pneumonias, which the Americans blamed on "vaping" from e-cigarettes, but whose symptoms and conditions could not be explained by e-cigarettes. He said

he wrote to the US officials telling them he suspected those deaths were likely due to the coronavirus, but his warnings were ignored. Immediately prior to that, the CDC totally shut down the US military's main bio-lab at Fort Detrick, Maryland, due to an absence of safeguards against pathogen leakages, issuing a complete "cease and desist" order to the military.

Questions have also been raised because of the US federal government's decision to classify top-level meetings on domestic coronavirus response. As *Reuters* reports, the decision to classify was "an unusual step that has restricted information and hampered the US government's response to the contagion." And the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and his chief of staff had "resisted" the classification order, which was made in mid-January by the National Security Council. *Reuters* further noted that following this order, HHS officials with the appropriate security clearances held meetings on coronavirus response at the department's Sensitive Compartmentalized Information Facility, which are facilities "usually reserved for intelligence and military operations" and—"in HHS' case"—for responses to "biowarfare or chemical attacks."

All of these can be dismissed as mere coincidences. However, the decision by governments—particularly the American and Chinese in this case—to develop bioweapons and their insistence on maintaining the utmost secrecy regarding government activities, will no doubt prompt many to ask further questions as to the origins of the COVID-19.

Attacking each other for political purposes will not help either. At a time when the entire world is facing such a serious threat that is spreading so rapidly, using the crisis to demonise one's geopolitical rival, especially absent any evidence, is unwise and will only give rise to further speculation.

But at the same time, it is also important that the truth comes out. And maybe it will, somewhere down the line. Meanwhile, this crisis, irrespective of where the COVID-19 originated and how, should once again make all governments reconsider the wisdom of continuing the pursuit of developing and acquiring bioweapons that are so dangerous that their release, accidental or intentional, could lead to a worldwide crisis of immeasurable and unpredictable proportions.

Along with stopping the COVID-19 from spreading further, ending the development of potential bioweapons is perhaps another matter over which governments should now seek to collaborate.

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Citizens, not heroes: Recast the role of migrant workers



SHOAB ALAM

EARLY one morning, as two teenagers on holiday, my sister and I were crossing the empty streets of Kuala Lumpur when we had an eerie feeling of being followed. Sensing danger, we stopped in front of a local restaurant

setting up for breakfast and turned to a man in uniform holding what seemed to be a portable bin with wheels. He was collecting garbage from the street.

"Are you Bangladeshi?" I asked.

He was. Hearing Bangla in the shadows of the Petronas, he had followed. Despite our shared nationality, now that we had made contact, the man seemed uncomfortable with the disparity between us. We soon parted ways. Thus ended my first encounter with a Bangladeshi migrant worker abroad.

Since then, such encounters have become a staple of my travels. At airports, I've gotten used to filling out forms for complete strangers. In planes, I translate curt cabin crew instructions into Bangla. In return, one can absorb heart-breaking stories of triumph and torture, of the benevolent manager in Mauritius, the rough Emirati immigration officer, the unhelpful embassy officials in East Asia.

When you listen carefully, what emerges is a tapestry of Bangladeshi narratives of immense human courage and hardship, hope and desperation, a portrait of what it means to be Bangladeshi in the twenty-first century. And as a people, we must reckon with these realities, ideally sooner rather than later, for our own sake.

Though it may seem like a modern phenomenon, labour migration has a long historical precedence in Bangladesh. Our ancestors left home like we do, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes involuntarily as indentured workers. In *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, Sunil S Amrith estimates that between 1840 and 1940, 28 million people crossed the bay bearing our name from cities around it—one of the great mass migrations in human history. Vivek Bald's *Bengali Harlem* hones in on the Bengali traders and sailors who settled in the United States in the early

twentieth century, setting up multicultural communities with African-American and Puerto Rican women. When a migrant worker leaves home today, whether she heads East or West, she's following a well-worn path.

Of course, modern labour migration is a different beast, one subject to turbulent political winds, to stringent immigration control, and the perils of human trafficking. And it is unavoidable. Our young population has ballooned to a whopping 50 million while the same Bay of Bengal, the largest

Escape from Bangladesh still comes with a price: the journey can be deadly. Recently, human traffickers trusted by desperate migrants have increasingly used the coast of Libya for passage into Europe via sea—an often-fatal path. These days our embassy in Libya is imploring workers to reconsider for good reason.

Last year, traffickers crammed 64 workers onto a motorboat meant for half that number to cross the Mediterranean. Two days in, they ran out of fuel and then food. Soon the boat

given the investment and debt, returning home alive is sometimes no longer an option.

But reaching land won't necessarily keep you alive. The deplorable working and living conditions of Bangladeshi workers around the world are well documented in the media. Female workers, in particular, are victims of physical and sexual abuse. Many return in coffins. This past decade, migrant workers sent over USD 130 billion in remittance back to Bangladesh. During this same time, the dead bodies of 32,070 workers arrived at



Whenever the opportunity arises, consider listening to the stories of migrant workers firsthand. FILE PHOTO: STAR

bay in the world, is projected to submerge 17 percent of our land by 2050. On the ground, the job market is unfavourable for youth, the political situation tenuous. When hoards of young people flock to our ports (an estimated 9.4 million have moved abroad seeking employment), they are attempting to escape abject joblessness and hopelessness that blanket our cities and villages. When you look closely at labour migration, you see a grim reality of our nation today.

began to leak. When rescued, no European country would give our workers harbour; the Bangladeshi ambassador met them in the middle of the sea to convince them to return to Bangladesh. In a separate incident, a boat capsized in the Mediterranean, killing 60 hopeful migrants, most of them Bangladeshi. Heartbreakingly, when migrant workers are rescued and they realise they will be deported to Bangladesh, some choose to jump off rescue ships in a final attempt to make it:

our airports. This is also a price we pay as a nation.

Still, we should expect labour migration to continue rising in the near future as an inevitable fact. The question is how to bring the process closer in alignment with who we aspire to be as a people. We must be more vocal in asking for better, safer systems for workers, from pre-departure to return and rehabilitation. From ensuring workers have the right information at home to making sure

they are safe in foreign lands, there is much our government and embassies can—and must—do. As a society, we must also do a much better job of welcoming back and integrating workers who return after years of service abroad. Many bring with them PTSD and physical ailments.

Simultaneously, let us not forget those who remain.

There are real sociocultural implications for Bangladesh from long-term migration at this scale. Think of the millions of families left behind, the aging parents and single-parent households, the children who grow up without one or both parents. Migrants don't just send home remittance; when they return, they bring with them the culture and traditions of their host countries. If you look closely, you will find their impact on our restaurants and places of worship in equal measure. And when migrants choose to settle down in foreign countries, they create fascinating spaces for cross-pollination that will define the Bangladeshi diaspora and our ties with other cultures, reshaping our own culture, society, and security, a reality we continue to discount at our own peril.

Most importantly, perhaps, deep structural changes that make lives better for those who leave and those who remain require an equally profound cultural shift in how we see migrant workers and the act of migration itself. If a migrant worker has jumped off his seat before the seatbelt sign is switched off, remember that people believe in systems (and follow them) when systems have effectively served them in the past. Instead of scoffing, consider that you are in the presence of people who, in making it this far, are already among the most successful in their communities. They didn't get here by sitting back and relaxing. They made it by hustling, experimenting, and taking immense risks. So whenever the opportunity arises, consider listening to the stories of migrant workers firsthand, lend a helping hand, and acknowledge their relentless contribution to the nation.

We often call migrant workers our unsung heroes—beyond such platitudes, it is equally important to acknowledge migrant workers as fellow countrymen, citizens of Bangladesh.

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