

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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## Scaling up contact tracing can save lives

*It is the most urgent task ahead*

IT is a frustrating thought that the outbreak of COVID-19 in Bangladesh that is inevitable from the data from all over the world, could have been brought under some control if we had been stricter about screening at the airport and quarantining people coming from regions hard hit by this virus. But this has been how some countries have been able to contain the pandemic and slow down its virulent spread. These countries have been using the method of contact tracing which is a front-line public-health strategy that involves identifying a suspected case and following up with that person as well as all the people who may have come into contact with that person and quarantining them. And this is what experts are insisting the government must expedite to contain the virus and break the transmission channels.

So far it is not clear how rigorously this method has been adopted. The release without the 14-day quarantine, of at least 142 Bangladeshis coming in from Italy and other virus hit countries was a big blunder in terms of containing the virus. But now that these travellers have spread out to various regions of the country, did the authorities meticulously investigate and find out those people who had been in contact with these people who may or may not be carrying the virus? With extremely limited facilities to test for the coronavirus available, the government must rely on reducing the risks of the virus from spreading through contact tracing and then putting all those people identified into quarantine. Which brings us to the question of developing the facilities to keep people in quarantine.

The deadliest mistakes governments can make when dealing with a crisis is to procrastinate taking immediate and effective action at the right time. Unfortunately for Bangladesh the first and most important opportunity of keeping the virus within a smaller area, has been lost. Thanks to delay in having proper screening at airports, not having enough testing kits and awareness campaigns at the right time, failing to strictly quarantine passengers and ensuring instructions of self-isolation are followed—the next best thing is contact tracing. Obviously with the long-time lapse this will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. But it is the only way the vicious cycle of rapid spreading of the virus, can be broken. That along with proper and adequate quarantine and testing can effectively reduce the exponential spread of the virus to the community level. It is also crucial for the government to make people understand the importance of contact tracing so that they are cooperative and voluntarily report themselves if they fall into the risk category.

## We cannot afford to lose 16,000 acres of forestland

*Land ministry should immediately correct its mistake*

WE are surprised to learn from a report by *The Daily Star* that around 16,000 acres of Sal forest in Mymensingh's Bhaluka upazila is at risk because the land ministry recorded it as *khas* and private land by mistake. The inefficiency and negligence on part of the land ministry was so great that they even recorded a national park—Kadigarh National Park—as private property. Because of these mistakes in the land records, it has now become even easier for the local powerful quarters to grab the vast swathe of forestland in the upazila. What is most concerning is the apathy of the land ministry in correcting the land records, as the ministry did not bother to look into the matter despite repeated requests from the forest department.

Amid widespread forest grabbing all across the country, we currently have only 15.58 percent forest coverage which should be increased to 18 percent in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030. Whereas in the past, vast areas of Kumilla, Gazipur, Mymensingh and Tangail were covered with Sal forest, at present only a few patches of the forest are left. According to Forest Department sources, around 65 percent of forestland in Mymensingh district—25,070 acres out of 38,858—has been encroached since independence. From the reports published in this daily we also came to know about the amount of forest we have lost to various government agencies over the years. According to sources in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, so far almost 1.6 lakh acres of forestland have been handed over to different government agencies and establishments, or used for development projects.

Therefore, the government needs to stop using or leasing out forestland for any purpose and recover the forests that have either been grabbed by powerful individuals or by well-known organisations. In addition, it should take well-thought-out measures from now on to increase our forest coverage, by increasing the number of reserve forests, creating coastal forests that can act as natural barriers to tidal surges, cyclones, and floods, as well as by protecting the remaining forest areas.

We cannot just lose 16,000 acres of forestland in Mymensingh's Bhaluka due to some senseless mistakes. We hope whatever mistakes have been made by the land ministry, can be corrected through taking proper steps. And if need be, the Land Record and Survey Department should conduct a fresh survey in the conflicting areas of Bhaluka to reclaim the forestland we are about to lose.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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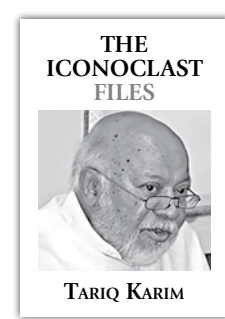
### Why we are more vulnerable

We are extremely lucky that the number of people infected with the coronavirus has not climbed up massively in Bangladesh. Dhaka has all the worst characteristics for a city trying to battle a pandemic. It is overcrowded, badly managed and unclean.

This should serve as a lesson to those entrusted to manage the country, that continuing to develop Bangladesh and its major cities in the current, unsustainable manner, has its consequences.

Quamrul Hasan, Dhaka

# Implications of coronavirus for regional and global cooperation



TARIQ KARIM

As the coronavirus pandemic continues marauding the globe, flattening developed and undeveloped, urban and rural, national and regional landscapes, blithely jumping across oceans and continents, one may be forgiven for thinking, somewhat desperately: is this the advent of Armageddon in our times? Being of fairly advanced years and acutely conscious of my own high vulnerability, my mind lapses into fantasising. Several hundred years or more from now, if homo sapiens survives that long, our progeny may probably recall today's time and events in a mythical legend, of the union between a Serpent and a Bat that spawned a hybrid creature of such malevolent nature that it threatened to wipe out, almost, all humanity before forcing saner and wiser elements among their ancestors to come together to combat and overcome this monster—at least, that is how I would fervently hope that yet-to-be-born legend to conclude, unless this scourge succeeds in its rampage of annihilation so completely that there will be no legend at all. However, enough of this morbid fantasising.

The novel coronavirus that causes the ailment COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease 2019) has brought the mighty to their knees. Official statistics on the numbers of people afflicted, in varying stages of treatment or quarantine, or dead are coming in on a daily, even hourly basis. Teams of scientists are said to be working, across the globe, to decipher the genetic composition of this virus and find an effective antidote against it. This virus is thought to mutate rapidly, adapting to new circumstances and hosts, almost as if the creature thinks and anticipates defensive reactions to it. It afflicts people of all ages, but people 60 years or older are the most vulnerable. It is difficult to detect in early stages, multiplies exponentially, and spreads both horizontally and vertically.

This pestilence has already had a devastating effect on the global economy. China's hitherto robust economy, the second largest globally and very powerful (in the sense of giving political heft to its international relations and ambitions that aspire to match that of the United States'), practically came to a grinding halt, disrupting supply chains on which manufacturing in other parts of China and countries across the world were dependent for essential components. China's GDP, according to some initial estimates, will have lost around 4 percent, a most palpable hit. Imagine how that will translate to the global economy of which it is a highly important and integral part.

The advent of COVID-19 on the global scenario at this juncture also has had some telling political impacts and will likely have more consequential effect on many countries, domestically and beyond. Let me focus here primarily on our own region. For Bangladesh, its

rearing its head at this time immediately had two consequences: on the downside, it forced the government and the people to drastically scale down or almost cancel many of the festivities and gala events planned to celebrate Bangabandhu's birth centenary on the very eve, so to say, of their commencement; on the "positive" side, it also saved the government from a very embarrassing political situation vis-à-vis India—it enabled putting off the impending visit of Indian Prime Minister Modi against which quite a widespread and vociferous opposition had been rumbling under the surface. It enabled both sides time to stabilise and reset relations on a happier and more palpably productive note at a more opportune time. For Mr Modi and his government, it provided a huge and most timely distraction from his festering domestic problems, economic and political, and gave him an opportunity of repositioning himself in a regional leadership position. In short, the appearance of COVID-19 on our regional shores did something which

head of state or government or high representative was assisted by a full accompanying delegation. The summit was commendable, displaying a hitherto unseen unanimity on several counts: that this crisis affected all equally and had to be challenged collectively, collaboratively; and that a body under the Saarc Secretariat's ambit should be convened immediately to discuss all aspects of the crisis and suggest measures to the member states. It was significant that Mr Modi, declared immediate unilateral contribution by his country of USD 10 million for undertaking mitigation measures required by any member state, no exceptions.

I have long argued, since the mid-90s, that what had held back Saarc from engaging in meaningful collaboration had been principally the sub-continent's tragic legacy of internalising the enemy within the region, the newly emerged entities regarding each other as enemies. It has been my conviction that the only way of moving the huge beast of Saarc forward

these regional institutions would have to be the establishment of an umbrella body with supra-national jurisdiction and mandated pooled authority, which I called the South Asian Regional Ecological & Environmental Security Authority (SAREESA), under which would be six sectoral cells to deal with food security, water security, energy security, employment security, health security, and environmental protection and security against wildcard events like devastating tsunamis, earthquakes, pandemics, etc., respectively. My concept of SAREESA is somewhat like Saarc in composition; but there the comparison ends. It is much more than Saarc, dynamic, with pooled sovereignty and real authority to make and enforce decisions for the collective good. But perhaps here too, like in Saarc, we may have to get one leg of this envisaged beast to engage in locomotion first, creating the logic for moving towards the other areas, step by step.

There is nothing like a good common existential threat to all of us to make us focus on that threat, to collectively and in concert endeavour to combat, contain and overcome it decisively. Voila, suddenly, entirely unexpectedly, we now have that external enemy, the COVID-19, which has already most tellingly demonstrated, in its most insidious way, its perilous propensity for replicating, mutating, propagating and attacking, making no distinction whatever among race, class, caste, religion, gender, nationality and geo-spatial location. We are all today confronted with a very dangerous pandemic that could pose an existential threat to governments, regimes and peoples across the region in yet unimagined ways.

The virtual video-summit of March 15 and its yet tentative, but nevertheless very important, decisions may yet prove to ourselves, convincingly, that cooperating together we can overcome all such NTS threats. The question is, will the suggestions accepted by consensus induce us now to move forward proactively, quickly? Or shall our peoples have to face near annihilation and a regression to a devastated Hobbesian state like Europe at the end of World War II, to realise the unimaginable costs of non-cooperation? I certainly think, not. In fact, perhaps the appearance of COVID-19 already seems to have spurred the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea (all states and peoples with not exactly always the most cordial relationship with each other) to hold a similar videoconference to discuss how to collaboratively tackle this malevolent crisis urgently. Mr Trump now may also be induced sufficiently in coming days to pedal back on belligerence, domestically and internationally, to focus more on making love, not war!

But let me not get ahead of myself here. I shall be content if only we South Asians can demonstrate that we can, indeed, turn a new leaf and embark on a new chapter of collaboration. Let us commence, now, by working together against this first major NTS threat. It just might open our eyes to discover that there is more that binds us together than what divides and sets us apart.

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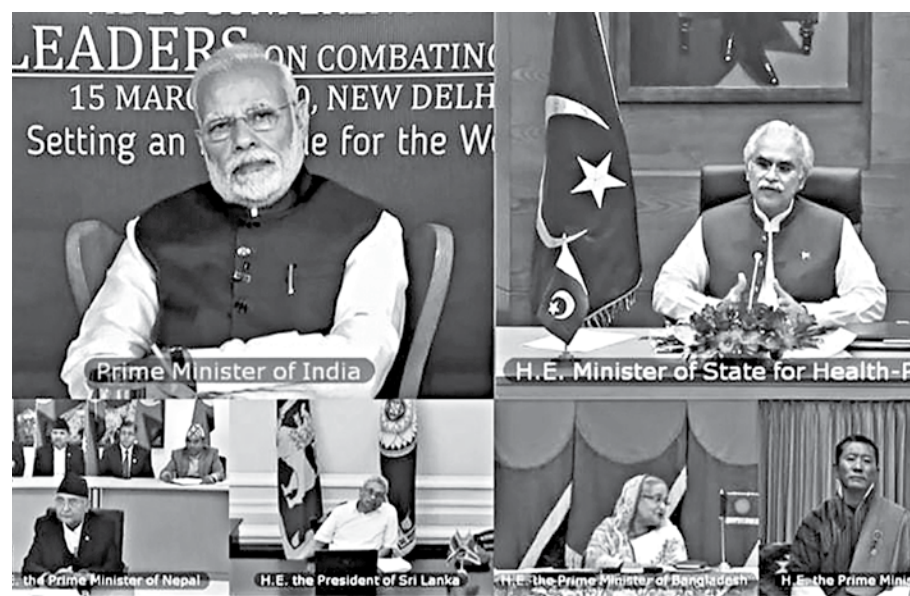


PHOTO: TWITTER

Saarc leaders participate in a videoconference to discuss the coronavirus pandemic.

is nothing short of startling—but hugely to be welcomed.

Keep in mind how India, since the advent of the Modi government in 2014, has been steadily upping the ante in proclaiming the death of Saarc as a viable vehicle for regional cooperation. Beginning to realise, if not entirely perhaps but certainly to sufficient extent, that this novel coronavirus respected no man-made borders or human relationships, he had the gumption and sagacity to call for a Saarc heads of states and governments meeting urgently to discuss ways and means to tackle the challenge effectively. It was startling because it was Mr Modi who had led the move to oppose the summit in Pakistan scheduled for November 2016 after the Pakistani inspired attacks on Indian army camps in the Kashmir region; and it was now Mr Modi himself calling for such a summit, albeit a virtual one through video-conferencing. Pakistan participated, although with its PM's Special Assistant for Health Mr Zafar Mirza representing the Pakistani PM. Even though this was a virtual videoconferencing summit, taking place on the Ides of March, each

was to try and prod one of its legs to move forward first; that might induce the other legs to also move—in other words, try and get sub-regional cooperation going as the first step, starting with the BBIN configuration.

Exactly a decade ago in 2010, at a conference in Colombo on a futures exercise on what nontraditional security (NTS) threats the South Asian region was likely to encounter in 2025, I had posited that obsessed as we all had been on fending against traditional security threats, real or imagined, from each other, we had overlooked that at the turn of the twentieth century numerous NTS threats had emerged that far outweighed any traditional security threat. I had identified these as being overall ecological and environmental security, food security, water security, energy security, employment security, health security, and security against unexpected wildcard events such as disasters from natural phenomena or disease pandemics. I had also asserted that all governments would have to collectively evolve regional mechanisms for meeting these challenges. Foremost among

## In South Asia, the road safety battle can be won



HARTWIG SCHAEFER

EVERY time I cross the jammed roads in South Asia, I am reminded how dangerous and even deadly they are for hundreds of thousands of people in the region. With just 10 percent of the world's vehicles, the region accounts for more than a quarter of global traffic deaths. Many crash victims are pedestrians, cyclists, or motorcyclists, and road crash deaths and injuries disproportionately affect the poor and most vulnerable, including children and youth.

This is simply too many lives lost, too many homes and dreams broken, and the cost of inaction is just too high.

In late February, I joined the 3rd Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety in Stockholm that wrapped up with a declaration calling for stronger political will, international cooperation, and partnerships across society to halve the number of road crash deaths over the next decade.

Taking stock of 10 years of global road safety action, the event gathered some 80 ministers and delegations from around the world, who rightfully acknowledged the inroads made in raising the visibility of road safety globally.

Not least of which, the road safety agenda is now part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, elevating

the issue to the same level as other critical areas such as good health, quality education, and clean water.

But despite this progress, the conference stands as a stark reminder that the last decade did not achieve the target of halving the number of road crash fatalities and we need to step up our game to stop the global road safety crisis that is taking an enormous human and economic toll. A visceral visualisation of which was the thousands of shoes piled up in Stockholm's Central Railway station, each pair representing yet another road crash victim.

To end the scourge of road crash fatalities, countries in South Asia must invest more strategically to manage road safety. They must look at ways to design safer vehicles and roads. They must improve emergency response systems, share data on road crashes, and increase awareness about road fatalities and how to prevent them.

Every year, 1.35 million people lose their lives on the road across the world; millions more are seriously injured, and many are left permanently disabled as a result. Globally, annual crash-related costs in developing countries are estimated at 2 to 5 percent of national Gross Domestic Product.

In South Asia, years of rapid economic growth, followed by an exponential rise in vehicle ownership, have resulted in rising traffic deaths and lost economic opportunities.

A new World Bank report shows that it will take a combined investment of USD 118 billion in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India,

and Nepal to halve road crash deaths by 2030.

This is undoubtedly a hefty sum, but it is also a vital, long-term investment that will save countless lives and contribute USD 1.2 trillion in estimated benefits to South Asian economies over a decade—the equivalent to 3.75 percent of regional GDP.

In this effort, countries in South Asia must take a two-pronged approach—working to enact and enforce laws to improve the safety of their roads while simultaneously working with their regional neighbours to enhance data collection and boost coordination between police and other state agencies.

At the World Bank, we have significantly changed our approach to road safety, ensuring that any infrastructure project we support has a mandatory road safety component. We are also currently designing a stand-alone road safety project in India. World Bank Group support to road safety has increased fourfold since 2006, averaging USD 223 million per year.

Furthermore, grant funding for road safety is provided through the Global Road Safety Facility, which is supported by contributions from UK Aid, CITA, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and Total Foundation.

We are also working in close collaboration with the UN Road Safety Trust Fund, the UN Special Envoy for Road Safety, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile, and other multilateral agencies like the Asian Development Bank.

The newly created Asia-Pacific Road Safety Observatory, which includes

committed South Asian members such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, will be of great value to harmonise road safety data, develop local centres of excellence on road safety, support policies, and improve regional performance on road safety.

Significant initiatives are also underway around the region.

India just amended its Motor Vehicles Act and is now focusing its activities at the national level on data collection, enforcement, and building robust road safety audit requirements. Bangladesh has considerable potential to improve its road safety performance over the coming decade and signs of progress are emerging: the new Road Transport Act 2018 and the updated National Road Safety Strategic Action are positive steps toward better road safety.

All these actions contribute to achieving the Stockholm Resolution of halving road crashes by 2030. But on their own, they are not enough.

Above all, it will take the collective action of governments, in coordination with the international donor community, the private sector, civil society, and all stakeholders to move a needle of this magnitude.

Fortunately, we have the data, the skills, and a roadmap in place. All we need now is resolute political action. To win the road safety battle and save millions of lives, the World Bank stands ready to support its South Asian client countries every mile of the way.

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