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FOUNDER EDITOR
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We need more tests

Community transmission is highly possible

WE are baffled at the claim of the authorities that there is no community transmission (when the source of infection is not known) of Covid-19 in the country on the basis of only a handful of tests that can hardly give any conclusive picture for a population as large as ours. Experts are insisting that too few tests have been conducted and this may lead to the situation being “misevaluated”. While it is no help to be alarmist and create panic among the people, it is foolhardy to be complacent about a crisis that is almost certain to get worse before it gets better. The concerns of the experts come from the frightening trends of infection and deaths in many parts of the world where community transmission has taken place. Even the UK and US are experiencing increases in infections from community transmissions. So how can our authorities be so sure that this is not the case in Bangladesh?

According to the IEDCR officials, a total of 33 cases have been confirmed with only 365 people tested so far. This can hardly give a picture of the entire country, especially with a large number of people from Italy—an epicentre of the virus—as well as from other affected countries, entering Bangladesh and going to different parts of the country without going through the necessary quarantine. It has been reported that these people have been socialising in their hometowns, apart from all the contact with people before that, which significantly increases the probability of community transmissions. So far, three deaths due to Covid-19 have been confirmed, but IEDCR is yet to find out how the second person who died got infected.

The government must now pay heed to the virologists who are saying that many more tests have to be conducted. The IEDCR, which is the only centre where tests are conducted, have only 44 epidemiologists to collect samples, do the tests and research, and conduct contract tracing. This capacity has to be increased on an urgent basis with testing centres all over the country. Hospitals that have the testing facilities can help to increase this capacity. As experts have pointed out, the government needs to estimate how many people may get infected, how many need hospital care, and ensure ICU and other interventions, as well as protective gear for healthcare professionals, on an emergency basis.

Food prices can be kept stable

Make sure inflation fears don't become a self-fulfilling prophecy

A senior member of the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization warned that a worldwide food inflation could happen if the coronavirus pandemic leads to lockdowns and panic food buying. The good news is that supply is not a problem. There are ample supplies of staple grains and oilseeds in key exporting nations. But a change in the behavioural pattern of consumers, who might fear prices will rise and supply will fall short in future due to the effects of the pandemic and hoard food items, could push prices up.

We have already seen people forming long queues at supermarkets in some countries such as Singapore and the United States in recent weeks. But the panicked buying, where it has happened, has only led to unnecessary shortages and inflation—leading to more panicked buying followed by a repeat of the same cycle. As the number of people infected with the coronavirus in Bangladesh goes up, something like that could happen here also. To prevent that, the government has to reassure people that supply is not a problem and ask people not to hoard necessities. That is what the prime minister has done, and we welcome it.

However, the government must ensure prices remain stable from this moment on, also through effective management, coordination and monitoring. Should prices start to go up a little, it could become increasingly difficult to prevent panicked buying, therefore, the government cannot be late to this game as it has been on other instances. Suppliers must not be allowed to create artificial shortages, and the government must coordinate among domestic and international supply centres to deliver items where and when necessary.

In a crisis situation like we are in, logistics is a big factor. And so is preventing actions instigated by panic. The government's role in both cases will be crucial, but other stakeholders such as NGOs and international agencies must also get involved and support people and governments to avoid any inflationary cycle.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Deadly misconceptions during Covid-19

Some months ago, my uncle was treated for dysphagia (swallowing difficulties), and as a result, a ring was put in his throat for him to be able to eat. Unfortunately, the ring is not helping at all and he is unable to breathe, while his condition is deteriorating each day. But his sufferings come at such a time, that it has been wrongly assumed as a symptom of the deadly Covid-19.

I know for a fact that it is impossible because he has had trouble breathing months before coronavirus became a pandemic and due to his dire condition, my uncle has not even been able to get out of the house, meaning he came into minimum contact with outsiders. It is heart wrenching that none of the hospitals are now willing to take him in, fearing that he might be infected, just by visually observing his breathing difficulties. How can they claim this without even testing him? It is absurd. My uncle's days are numbered and I feel so hopeless because without proper medical attention, he may not live for long.

Taimur Anan, by email

Covid-19: Together we can save workers



RMG NOTES
MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

DURING the course of the last few weeks, some of the world's largest apparel retailers have announced the temporarily closure of stores across Europe, the USA, and beyond, due to the onset of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. Many have put a timeframe of two weeks on these closures but, in reality, the available evidence suggests they are likely to be closed for much longer. Nobody knows just how long Covid-19 will be around, but estimates suggest it could be anything between June of this year or up to the next 18 months.

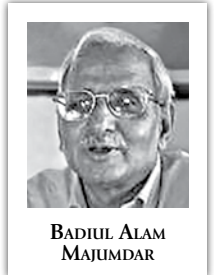
Consumers are remaining at home, in many cases under the instructions of their nation's government which, in turn, is having a dramatic impact on the retail sales of brands and stores. Covid-19 is inflicting the biggest crisis yet seen by the apparel industry, which is already reeling from declining sales over the last few years, further exacerbating the financial strain on the sector. Retailers continue to have to pay the rents on their stores, the salaries of their employees, business rates and insurance, whereas there is no turnover as the stores are closed. Covid-19, for some struggling retailers, could be the last nail in their coffin.

Against this backdrop, brands and retailers are postponing the delivery of completed garments from the current orders that have already been produced by apparel factories. Furthermore, customers are telling the manufacturers not to cut fabrics and process other raw materials, which the manufacturer has already imported or stored for current orders placed by their clients.

Most factories are trying to cope with this situation the best they can but are facing production shortfalls and run the risk of having to suspend production lines. The situation gives rise to the real risk that, in order to reduce immediate costs, manufacturers may start by reducing the number of workers they employ. At best, if they do not reduce the worker numbers, they may start reducing the hours of the workers' shifts. There is a real danger of this short-term approach being taken and both of these scenarios would result in a loss of income for the workforce.

This is where my major concern lies. Many of the four million workers employed in the apparel sector of Bangladesh, as we know, have families to support, and secure work in the industry is their lifeline upon which they and their dependents rely. Who will support them during these challenging times? Millions of RMG worker are facing an extremely uncertain future.

Whilst I fully appreciate that during this critical time both retailers and manufacturers are faced with huge challenges, I also think that now, more than ever, is the time for us, as an industry, to be working together. There is now a desperate need for supportive measures that can be enacted in these



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although there is uncertainty about the numbers as many of those infected may not show symptoms. Also, many countries are not testing aggressively and may be hiding the real figures. Nevertheless, coronavirus infections have been increasing worldwide, doubling in some countries overnight, although China and South Korea claim to have arrested its spread.

Panic appears to be engulfing humanity, especially since this is a new type of virus against which we are not immune and which cannot be treated with antibiotics. More importantly, there are no working vaccines against coronavirus yet, although scientists are frantically at work on one. While leading scientists have said it will take up to 18 months for clinical trials and safety approvals, arresting the spread of the virus will require vaccinating 45 to 70 percent of the world's population, which may take several years. Thus, we cannot expect that the coronavirus crisis will go away soon.

Another reason for the panic is the way coronavirus works. The virus enters the body through the eyes, mouth and nose, infecting and hijacking the cells your body is made of. While for a lot of people the infection will not become serious and manifest as mild respiratory problems, the fact that it is highly contagious has created mass panic across the world. In the worst case situations, people with severe respiratory problems are being put on ventilators, without which they will die.

However, the tendency to deny the seriousness of the virus' spread, which we have seen globally, is probably the

greatest danger we are facing now. Even when its spread turned serious and a dead body was seen lying on the street of China's Wuhan province in late January, we felt that the problem belonged to a distant land and would not affect us.

When the virus started spreading in our neighbouring countries, we were also in denial. That is the reason why the Italian authorities and the US President took no serious actions against the spread of coronavirus, rather claiming that everything was under control.

But the situation has started to take a turn for the worse. Experts are now predicting that 40 to 60 percent of Americans may get infected. A study by the Imperial College in UK found that the spread of coronavirus, if not contained, could kill as many as 2.2 million Americans and over 500,000 Britons.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that 70 percent of Germans will be infected by the coronavirus. Such spread could cause a worldwide humanitarian disaster of unprecedented proportions.

Bangladesh is under greater risk. The reasons include our high population density, the return of our expatriate workers from countries where coronavirus has already spread, our relatively poor health infrastructure (limited hospital beds, ventilators, ICUs etc.), limited supply of diagnostic kits and protective gear for health professionals, and widespread lack of awareness about the virus and how it is spread. We can see the result in the negligent treatment this week of a 24-year old college student who recently returned from Canada. She died due to neglect and prejudice, even though she was not infected by coronavirus. In addition, only a handful of the many Bangladeshis who recently returned from abroad are under quarantine.

Coronavirus is not only threatening lives, but also the livelihoods of millions of people worldwide. Global stock markets and shares have plunged and

governments has to be to contain the virus wherever possible, surely there is also a balance to be struck. To a certain extent, the world must go on, and that means business and commerce. We have to remind ourselves that this disease brings only mild symptoms in the overwhelming majority of cases. Those that have perished so far have been the elderly, often with underlying health conditions. I do not wish to understate the seriousness of this illness; rather, to point out that life cannot stop completely as, if it were allowed to do so, this would bring its own, very serious problems.

We have to consider that poverty is a huge killer too. In its own way, poverty kills many more people and destroys more lives than Covid-19. I reiterate that I am deeply concerned about job losses in the Bangladesh RMG industry. All of that said, there is a precedent

immediate use and effect of these vaccines as the virus is likely to mutate and change its genetic makeup.

The point I am making is that, when Covid-19 has been defeated—and I use that word because I believe that this is a war we are facing—buyers will need their suppliers in Bangladesh more than ever. There is talk of a “bounce” in sales at some point in the future, with people making up for purchasing that they have deferred in the past. When this bounce comes, brands and retailers will need Bangladesh. That is why they can't afford to let factories go bust. It is in all our interests, right through the supply chain, to work together, collaborate and support each other at the present time.

There is a broader point to be made. While I accept that we must take Covid-19 extremely seriously, and I understand that the response from



FILE PHOTO: STAR

to withstand this unprecedented situation. International financial organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank should come forward, take measures and formulate policies for the survival of economies, especially those of the Least Developed Countries which would be the worst economic victims of this pandemic. Donors and development partners should extend their support to the affected people, as their aid at this critical time could save more lives than ever. Viable business concerns should not be allowed to collapse due to a problem that can be defeated. Now is the time for us all to work together and tackle this problem head on.

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Complacency, not panic, is the real danger

leading economists have spoken of how the coronavirus crisis is pushing the world economy into a deep recession. In the meantime, the activities of many service sector industries—including airlines, hotels and restaurants—have come to a standstill.

All rich countries have already taken important steps to prevent their economies from nosediving. France, for example, has gone on a war-footing to

All our economic indicators, except for remittances, are already on a downward trend. With the return of many overseas workers because of the worldwide economic decline, this will not only accelerate corona related deaths, but may also trigger a disastrous decline in remittances.

combat the emergency created by the unprecedented spread of coronavirus. The US government is contemplating a package of assistance amounting to over a billion US dollars to assist its citizens and bailout businesses. The British government has also planned to spend 330 billion pounds in similar assistance. Other countries, rich and poor, are trying to mobilise resources for similar aid packages.

In Bangladesh, we are at serious risk, but our preparations appear to

here. During the 2008 financial crisis, many of the world's banks were, effectively, bankrupt. But they survived, and the reason they survived was that governments around the world realised the banking institutions were too important to be allowed to fail. Their failure would have been catastrophic, and so they were supported by national governments.

Indeed, real partnership between retailers and manufacturers is now more important than ever, for both sides to support the other and to collaborate to find solutions. This is also the time that governments can prove their commitment to the apparel sector to avoid a complete crash of the economy.

The apparel industry at present needs to be supported, both by the governments of the buyers and the governments of the manufacturers,

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