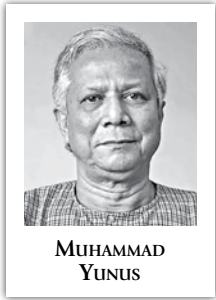


Coronavirus pandemic: time is running out



this crisis that we are going through is vital to our fight against it. But it appears we are failing to convey the full horror of the situation to the citizens, which would help us grasp the reality—that this is an attack on life itself and there is no opportunity for surrender. We need to fight back with everything we have at our disposal.

It is really flabbergasting how fast the novel coronavirus has spread. China informed the Beijing office of the World Health Organization (WHO) about an unidentified disease on December 31. Today is March 24. That means, some 84 days have passed since then. In these 84 days, this virus has raged through the entire world and brought it to a standstill, leaving entire populations housebound. To fight this threat, armies are now being called in. Governments have announced trillions of dollars of emergency funding. Government heads are putting daily briefings on live TV, explaining their every move to the people. In parliaments, rival parties are coming together to pass laws and declare states of emergency. The whole world is glued to the “scoreboard” on coronavirus, like in a game of cricket. Such widespread panic and uncertainty, and in so many countries at once, was not seen even during a World War before. And all this happened in just 84 days.

We are fortunate that we got this invaluable experience of 84 days through other countries. If we don’t use this experience to our benefit, we can’t really blame our luck for what is about to happen. We will have only our own stupidity, our burying-heads-in-the-sand-to-escape-a-problem mentality to blame.

We get a clear picture of the possible infection rates for a population after the coronavirus enters a country from the speech of the German chancellor. At a time when the Germans were still relatively unfamiliar with the threat of the virus, Angela Merkel informed her nation that it would soon infect 70 percent of German citizens. What a courageous, clearly articulated message! The governor of California, in a speech on March 20, said that the number of the infected in California would reach two and a half crores—or 56 percent of the population—in the next two months. The first coronavirus case in California was detected on January 22. That was two months ago, and in another two months the number is expected to be two and a half crores. Just imagine the speed and sheer scale of its transmission. This is the nature of the virus, and no one has yet found a way to change its course. Our challenge then is to get ourselves away from its path of destruction—how successfully we do that will determine how affected we will be.

So far, the countries that have been most successful in doing that are all Asian. China, where this disease originated 84 days ago, has all but curbed the spread of the epidemic. Then there are South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The successful countries had only one formula: identify and isolate whoever is infected, so that others are spared. Preventing infections is the key to containing the outbreak. If one person infects just two others, the consequences will be dire. According to one estimate, if one person infects 2.5 individuals every five days, then that person alone will have infected 406 individuals in 30 days. Therefore, the successful countries spent all their

energy and resources on identifying and isolating the infected, thereby preventing many more people from getting infected. Countries that have suffered because of their negligence in this regard are the US, the UK, and Switzerland, among others.

Which group do we belong with? If the nation does not commit all its governmental, non-governmental, social and international clout to this fight right away, or procrastinates for any reason, then it cannot stem the tide of this world-engulfing virus. Everything that stands in its way will be washed away.

Is the “Great Tide” imminent? Certainly. It’s almost at our doorstep. We have been rather slow to respond. There is no room for procrastination anymore.

The most important way to fight this tide is: test, test, and test—test as many people as we can. The WHO has been telling us that all along: test, test, and test. Identify. Isolate. Identify. Isolate.

This is simple math, really. We have learned this lesson from the story of the shoe invention a long time ago: that to save your feet from the dust and

to curb this disease that came from abroad. But the genie is out of the bottle now.

We know how to fight it but the *urge* to fight is apparently not there yet. We have yet to internalise our knowledge. We say that “physical distancing” is the only way to save ourselves and others from this virus. But in reality, we don’t hesitate to make a spectacle out of it by disclosing that information through a public gathering. There is clearly a discrepancy between what we say and what we’re doing about it. What is missing here is an awareness of the very real possibility that we—through our behaviour—can cause the death of our own parents, spouses, grandparents, uncles or friends in just a couple of months. Many of those in responsible positions are giving self-care advice and tips but there are no concerns over whether they or others are following that advice. The kind of dedicated and tireless efforts that were expected given the enormity of the danger are still not seen. The Great Tide is coming, and the barrage that can hold back the tidal flow is yet to be reinforced.

By now, we have a clear idea of what

expose themselves to the dangers of infections but everyone else, too.

The closure of educational institutions was a step in the right direction. This should give the students an opportunity to dedicate themselves to the service of their community. Their only objective now should be to save other people. As the situation further deteriorates with each passing day, it’s the youth who can give the people some much-needed comfort and courage. They can begin by uniting and organising themselves through platforms, creating to-do lists and taking preparations to respond to all sorts of emergencies. Once the groundwork is laid, they should first inspire all people in their neighbourhoods to stay at home, and if possible, find solutions to their problems. They should discourage them to gather in groups, and prepare them for any emergency. They should also be committed to strictly adhering to all crisis-time rules and regulations. They should make an example of following rules so that people are inspired to do the same. They can also build and

microcredit programmes, cover the whole country through their networks. The beneficiaries of microcredit programmes are trained to tackle and respond to all kinds of disasters in an organised manner. Their discipline and expertise can be a valuable addition in this fight. We can formulate a new guideline for them, which will include instructions on how they can stay housebound and save themselves, their families and their villages from getting infected. There will also be clear instructions on what they will do should the coronavirus spread in a house in their locality. They should be told about how they can inspire their husbands and children to stay at home, the scale of the “great tide”, how long it may last, the main tools to be used against it, and who to meet for guidance and medical support, etc. They should be told that with courage and discipline, they can face any crisis. This particular crisis, however dangerous or widespread it might be, will too pass.

Apart from the NGOs, there are many other organisations—public, private and social—that have



An aerial view of the newly completed Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan, which was built last month in 10 days to treat coronavirus patients.

PHOTO: CHINA DAILY VIA REUTERS

dirt, you can either dust off the entire country, or you can cover your feet with shoes. In other words, to stave off the infection, we can either keep the infected away from all other people, or we can all stay away from the infected. Of the two choices, the first is easier, when the infected are only a few, and those at the risk of infections number crores. Isolating the few can save the crores.

If there is a dearth of testing equipment, we can begin with what we have. We have to keep the infected in isolation and inform the public of the number of people to test positive for coronavirus every day. People will be inspired by this clarity and be careful of the infected. The testing kits that we have now should be used fully, and people should be kept abreast of any further development. They should know when and how many new testing kits are being expected. Even if we can identify and isolate one infected person, we can save a thousand others in the process. So, there is no alternative to testing.

Unfortunately, had we responded more swiftly, it would have been easier

we must do: keep a safe distance from all people, and wash hands frequently. Failure to do so will mean we are either reluctant to save ourselves and our loved ones, or we are disregarding all warnings as “fake news” in a misguided attempt to find solace in our ignorance.

I hope the young generation of the country will come forward in this time of great crisis. I hope they will organise and create their own platforms to save the people, just like they always did in times of natural calamity. This time, this is not a disaster that affects just a region. It affects the whole country, the whole world. It affects all of humanity.

The youth can go door to door to inspire people to stay indoors. They can create networks using modern communications technology to make sure everyone is housebound and their neighbourhood is rid of the infections. They can reach out and seek help from the affluent to provide food to those whose livelihood will be adversely affected. They should make the former realise that if the poor come out to work and in search of food, then they will not just

strengthen their networks through social media to connect with and inspire each other. Together with the students, or separately if needed, the youth, the NGOs, and other social and commercial organisations can all have their own initiatives.

The important thing to understand is that we are going through a very critical and exceptional time in history. It will most likely devastate life as we know it. Even if the effects of the coronavirus are not felt as severely here as in other countries, maximum caution is advisable. There is no alternative to that.

Another thing that I would like to draw attention to is that: just like in a war where the battle is fought across a country and certain places are then declared “enemy-free”, we can do the same in this fight too. We can strive to create “corona-free” zones, be it a locality, a village, or a bigger region. Those who can help create such zones, through their concerted efforts, will have the sincere gratitude of the people not just from those affected areas but the entire nation as well.

The NGOs, especially those with

nationwide networks with grassroots activists. They can also bring their clout and networks to fight this crisis.

But what happens afterwards (once the danger is over)? There should be a contingency plan for that too. How will the battered people survive then? Will they be able to rise again? What will happen to our already struggling economy? We should start thinking about that from now on. After the coronavirus is over, the world will rise again. But it will not be the same world we know. We need to think what Bangladesh’s position will be in that new world. As I already said, the coronavirus genie is out of the bottle now. Will this genie devour our world? Will it return to the bottle on its own? Or will we be able to force it to go back? Whatever happens, and however, we need to prepare for any eventuality.

The world is in great flux. And we need to determine our future in that motion. We don’t have much time.

Dr Muhammad Yunus is Nobel Peace Prize Winner; Founder, Grameen Bank and Chairman, Yunus Centre.

The article has been translated from Bangla by Badiuzzaman Bay.

QUOTABLE Quote

ZIG ZIGLAR
(1926-2012)
American motivational speaker.
When obstacles arise, you change your direction to reach your goal; you do not change your decision to get there.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Annul
7 Carpet type
11 Brother of Artemis
12 Andean nation
13 Dangers
14 Risqué
15 Eschewed food
17 Looking fit
20 Conference site of 1945
23 Lennon's love
24 Contempt
26 Carnival city
27 Commotion
28 Catch
29 Hassock's kin
31 Word on a bill
32 India's first prime minister
33 Nile serpents

34 To some extent

37 Bruins' sch.

39 Prison worker

43 Shaker stuff

44 Baltimore player

45 Different

46 Break away

DOWN
1 Upper limit
2 Big galoot
3 Neither follower
4 Steep drop-off
5 First name in scat
6 Red-ink amount
7 Butter or jam
8 Promontories
9 Rainbow shape
10 Fellow
16 Boxer Mike
17 The fifth element

18 Bring together

19 Region at the base of a mountain range

21 Keep busy

22 Pays to play

24 Block

25 Lupino of film

30 Highly decorative

33 Top story

35 Writer Oz

36 Steak choice

37 Try out

38 Baseball's Ripken

40 Fish eggs

42 Outmoded

44 Maiden name label

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

A	H	E	A	D		G	A	T	O	R
S	A	M	E	B	A		A	R	O	M
I	R	I	S	H	S	E	T	T	E	R
A	P	T			L	I	L		O	N
A	T	R	I	A		C	H	A	S	E
F	E	A	T				O	P	E	N
T	A	T	E	R		T	W	E	E	D
			R	E	R	A	N			
A	T	L		D	O	C		A	B	C
I	R	I	S	H	C	O	F	F	E	E
R	O	M	E	O		M	O	R	E	L
S	T	P	A	T		A	P	O	R	T

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott