

Deployment of the military to assist Covid-19 fight

People's cooperation indispensable for success

THE government's decision to deploy the military to assist the civil administration in combatting the onslaught of the virus has come not a day too soon. The Army, Navy and Air Force have gone into operation from yesterday with manifold purposes. What the world is facing today is nothing short of a war that has pulverised the international system. And most countries, particularly the ones severely affected by it, have pressed the services and the resources of the military into the state's efforts to mitigate the effects of the disease.

The spread and the spike in incidences of the virus affected people has caught everyone off guard, overwhelming medical resources, and although Bangladesh has not been affected on the scale that some of the Asian and European countries have been, only a strict regimen in our lifestyle can prevent the spread of the virus in the country.

As we understand, the primary function of the military personnel is to remain *in situ* up to the district headquarters level to help the civil administrations to ensure social distancing and bolster the coronavirus preventive measures to prevent the novel coronavirus from spreading further. But apart from that, the armed forces will, in coordination with the district administration, evaluate treatment of infected patients and the quarantine system of suspected patients in every district and divisional town.

While the deployment of the military is very well and good, the efforts of the government will not succeed without the full cooperation of the people. As the medical experts have suggested, the immediate task in the anti Covid-19 strategy is to prevent the spread of the virus, and people, being the principle vectors, should play the leading part in this regard. The ten-day holiday will help in mitigating the effect only if people, of their own volition, refrain from socialising and gathering and follow government instructions religiously. Only then can we hope to be spared the wrath of Covid-19.

It's not a PR war—it's a war for survival

Minister's assurance about Covid-19 preparedness is misleading

THESE has been a crisis of leadership in Bangladesh ever since the threat of an outbreak of the coronavirus loomed large on our horizon. That crisis, unfortunately, has only deepened in the ensuing days. Even now, when fears about an undetected communal spread are growing, the authorities appear ill-prepared. They have failed to adequately respond to concerns about the scarcity of testing kits, lack of resources and personal protective equipment (PPE) for doctors and nurses, lack of ICUs and isolation units, lack of a decentralised laboratory testing mechanism, as well as lack of enforcement of emergency measures and guidelines. The health minister's comment on Monday—that "we are well-prepared" and that the country's situation was still better than many others—is thus misleading and unrealistic. If it is aimed at boosting public morale, it has the opposite effect since the public would like nothing more than clarity in these times of confusion. It also smacks of complacency which, as experts warn, may end up hurting us more.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a public relations war going on in the country, with the focus more on whitewashing our shortcomings and less on addressing them in a manner befitting the urgency of the situation. There's no shame in admitting that the healthcare sector in Bangladesh is in a shambles. There's no shame in admitting that health professionals, even in developed countries like Italy and the US, are struggling with the lack of PPEs and other essential items. Such admissions, if made with an honest intent to remedy the problem, are rather welcome. But our response to the coronavirus is still reactive rather than pre-emptive, trapped in a "will do" mentality. In a country of 160 million, only 620 samples have been tested so far. With such poor testing records, we don't even know the real extent of the outbreak. How well-prepared can we be, really?

If the devastations left by the virus in other countries are any indication, the government needs to do more, much more, to be able to address the crisis with any measure of success. It needs to expedite local testing kit production so that more kits are prepared to identify the infected, foreign or domestic. It needs to make testing and treatment opportunities available in every division, and every district if possible. It can partner with private hospitals to prepare more beds, ventilators and additional staff for this purpose. Equally importantly, it should put the wellbeing of health professionals, who are at the highest risk of infections, front and centre. It should also strictly enforce the emergency protocol so that the virus doesn't spread far and wide. The list of things to do is long, none less urgent than others. There is no room for procrastination anymore.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Prevent dengue on time

According to a recent study of the DGHS, dengue patients admitted up to March 16, 2020 are four times higher than that of 2019, even though the rainy season won't start for another two months at least. Last year, the country witnessed the worst ever dengue situation. We are currently fighting against coronavirus, and it will be horrific if we also have to battle a dengue epidemic. We have already dealt with dengue before and if proper steps are taken, we can minimise the damage this year. People's involvement in cleaning water bodies and destroying larvae are important to control the spread of dengue. Awareness programmes should also be taken in all the zones under the jurisdiction of local government bodies.

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POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE Covid-19 pandemic is still making its way around the world and it will be some time before it is over. Nevertheless, even at this early stage, there are some lessons that can be drawn on regarding how best to be prepared to deal with the much bigger problem of climate change impacts which will be coming soon after.

It is important to point out that the Covid-19 virus outbreak has more to do with how we have neglected biodiversity and ecosystems rather than because of human induced climate change. However, with regard to the problems we are facing, both at the personal as well as the national and even global levels, there are a significant number of parallels between the viral pandemic and climate change.

The first lesson is about when to take actions when faced with an upcoming problem. The tendency of leaders is to wait for the problem to occur before taking action, despite being warned earlier by scientists about the imminence of the problem. Even at this early stage, it is clear that early actions to be better prepared for the problem before it occurs is much more effective. However, it does mean a scenario where our leaders accept what the scientists tell them and are then prepared to institute policies which may seem like too much to their people, especially if these steps are taken even before the problem arises. But as we know now, it is better to overreact before the problem arises so that the problem is controlled, than to have to scramble to act once the problem becomes a crisis. Waiting for the problem to manifest itself before taking actions has led to many lives unnecessarily being lost. This is what is now playing out in Italy and Spain and may well also be the case in the United States and the United Kingdom. Let us hope this isn't the case in Bangladesh.

The second lesson we must now accept is that we cannot shut our borders to the problem. Of course we can try to do so, and perhaps it may even delay the problem somewhat, but it cannot prevent the problem from occurring over time. This is equally true at the personal and household level where we can only try to protect ourselves, but if others are being affected around us then we will also become affected sooner or

later. Hence, the overwhelming lesson is that we need to, both as individuals as well as countries, cooperate with each other, before, during and after the events. The evidence of the success in tackling the pandemic in Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea have all shown how collective action from everyone in the country, together with proactive leaders, was the key to overcoming the challenges they faced.

The third lesson is one of scale. Even though the Covid-19 pandemic seems a truly globally devastating one now,

change that is yet to come. Time is of the essence, as delayed action is almost as bad as no action.

The fourth lesson, for now, is to look at the economic costs and behavioural changes that are required. Here, there are indeed a couple of positive lessons, where it has been shown that almost all the people in an entire country are prepared to change their behaviour quite drastically if they have to. This is a hopeful sign going forward. Also, the need to work from home in many cases is demonstrating that the amount of

inevitable economic chaos and recession that is starting to happen already and will get a lot worse before it gets better. Bangladesh, with its globally linked economy, is likely to see significant negative impacts on manufacturing, exports and possibly even our own food production going forward. Hence, even though the worst is yet to come, we must prepare for the immediate economic downturn as well as think about the future path to recovery once the worst is over.

This applies both to the Bangladesh economy as well as the global economy



Waves crash against a wall at the Patenga Beach in Chattogram in May 2019.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

its impacts will pale in comparison with the potential impacts of climate change, which are still to come. Hence the lessons of early action at preventing the worst impacts, including adaptation as well as mitigation, must be ramped up very considerably by all people and all countries if we hope to minimise the adverse impacts and the loss and damage that will inevitably follow.

Every action by individuals, households, companies, cities, provinces and countries will count towards reducing the inevitable damage from climate

travel we had been doing could indeed be reduced in future.

On the economic front, there has already been widespread disruption of the global economy, but some unintended benefits include a significant reduction in air pollution as well as greenhouse gases. While such economic disruption is not desirable and hopefully we will recover from it, it is worth thinking about whether the recovery can also be made in a much more environment friendly manner.

The final lesson has to do with the

and the silver lining in this Covid-19 pandemic, which is most relevant for tackling climate change, is the opportunity to rebuild the post-pandemic economy as an environment friendly green economy that doesn't simply repeat the destruction of nature and the spewing of greenhouse gases that the old economy used to do. Let us hope that both our national as well as global leaders are up to the challenge.

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Prelude to an order for genocide

In this article published in the Guardian, Manchester on June 5, 1971 Prof Rehman Sobhan, who was Professor of Economics at Dacca University and an Adviser to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, describes the background to the Yahya-Mujib talks

AS President Yahya flew out of Dacca on the night of March 25, he took with him the last hopes of a united Pakistan. For the final two days, he had been holed up in the Dacca cantonment with the junta of generals who rule Pakistan, putting the finishing touches to Operation Genocide.

The contingency battle plan had been worked out over the last two years when the army had been given a glimpse of the true force of Bengali nationalism during the movement against Ayub. The strength of the army in this time had been raised from one understrength division to three divisions and an armoured brigade. But the decision to put the plan into action was probably taken some time between March 1 and March 6 and was symbolised by the replacement of Lieutenant General Yakub on March 7 by Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, regarded as the fiercest of the Punjabi hawks.

During this time, they must have gauged the overwhelming support behind Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangla Desh. Sheikh Mujib's call for peaceful non-cooperation, protesting against Yahya's postponement of the Assembly, had, in less than a week, not only destroyed the authority of the Yahya government in the East wing: traditional instruments of Central power in Bangla Desh, such as the civil service and police, had positively pledged allegiance to Mujib.

Yahya's decision to postpone the Assembly was seen as a collective conspiracy with Mr. Bhutto to frustrate the democratic process at the expense of the Bengali majority. The fact that Yahya's close associate, Lieutenant General Umer, was reported by other West Wing leaders to have put pressure on them to join Bhutto's boycott of the Assembly was seen as evidence of this collusion.

Similarly, the decision to postpone the assembly was seen as an attempt to save Bhutto's position when this strategy failed to win support in the West. Many Bengalis at that stage felt that self-rule for Bengal could be attained only outside the framework of one Pakistan.

Confronted with this mood, Mujib staked his political life, first in his public meeting on March 3, then before a million people on March 7, when he deflected the demand for independence towards a negotiated

demand for full autonomy. On March 7, the army in Dacca was prepared for unleashing a bloodbath if Mujib declared independence. Heavy machine gun emplacement had been prepared on the cantonment perimeter. Tanks were ready and the air force was alerted.

Denied an open provocation by Mujib, and faced with a complete erosion of Central authority in the East wing, Yahya appeared to opt for compromise in talks with Mujib. He flew to Dacca on March 15 with a clutch of generals, several of whom secreted themselves in the cantonment to finalise their battle plan for March 25.

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Troops were being flown in daily in plain clothes on PIA commercial flights, and by March 25 a full division, with support-equipment, had reinforced the existing force. A fleet had been mobilised to send more troops and heavier equipment in case the existing force proved inadequate. A special plain clothes commando unit had been infiltrated into selected urban areas to create trouble as a cover for military action.

The need for this sort of synthetic provocation was becoming more necessary as Yahya saw the extent to which Mujib's Awami League volunteers had established law and order throughout the East Wing. Apart from an ugly communal riot in Chittagong on March 2 and 3, when the army was responsible for law and order, the province had been extraordinarily peaceful.

In this background, the Mujib-Yahya talks progressed with surprising ease. At an early stage, Yahya agreed to Mujib's demand for an end to martial law and a

transfer of power to civilian rule. Mujib accommodated Yahya by agreeing to let him stay as an interim civilian President at the Centre until the new constitution emerged. He further accepted Yahya's demand for separate session in the National Assembly. This, contrary to Yahya's subsequent posture, was designed to accommodate Mr. Bhutto who feared that in a joint session of the Assembly, Mujib might join hands with the Pathan and Baluch and some of the smaller anti-Bhutto parties in Punjab to neutralise Bhutto and even impose the Six Points on West Pakistan.

Yahya demanded a free hand for

for conceding Mujib's demands. Mujib played into his hands in his desperation to get the army out and in so doing alienated his support in the West wing. When Bizenjo, the Baluch leader, Wali Khan, the Pathan leader, and Daultana, flew back on March 24, they had been sacrificed on the altar of a Bhutto-Mujib entente and should look to their own defences at home.

Once Yahya and Mujib had reached an agreement in principle, and Bhutto's interests had been adequately safeguarded by Yahya, the task of working out the details of the proclamation to transfer power was left to the experts. MM Ahmed, chief economic adviser to Yahya, had been brought in to advise on economics, and had readily conceded that most of the autonomy demands could be accepted even in the interim phase.

Some debate over the basis for transferring power was resolved when the leading constitutional lawyer of Pakistan,

AK Brohi, gave an opinion that the Indian Independence Act gave a precedent for transfer of power by presidential proclamation. While some semantic as opposed to substantive, points remained, Yahya's team never indicated that there was a point beyond which they could not accommodate the Awami League.

As a result, there was no question of any breakdown in the talks because Yahya and his team never issued any ultimatum, or their minimum basis for a settlement. Having conceded a free hand to Bhutto in the West and power to Yahya in the Centre at least in the interim phase, it was felt that Yahya could come to terms with the de facto authority exercised by Mujib in the East.

The Awami League team waited for the final drafting session of the proclamation on March 25 but the expected call from Lieutenant General Peerzada never came. Instead, MM Ahmed flew to Karachi without waiting to see the Awami League response to his amendments, indicating the junta had other plans as a substitute for talks.

It is now clear that Yahya was using the talks as a cover for reinforcements to his troops as much as for an opportunity to alienate Mujib from potential support in the West. No one knows what the terms were for transferring power to the civilians, since Yahya's cryptic commitment to the integrity of Pakistan continues to mean all things to all men.

Certainly, Yahya never indicated that the Six Points were inimical to the concept of one Pakistan. Any question of Mujib's modifying his demands never arose with Yahya because no such demand was ever made of him.

It was unfortunate for Yahya that Mujib, in spite of provocation, kept law and order under control while Yahya sat in Dacca. Yahya had to act in cold blood when he left orders with Tikka Khan to launch Operation Genocide.

Yahya must have known that he was destroying the last hope of a united Pakistan. On the night of March 25, Mujib told a West Pakistani visitor that he had done his best to hold Pakistan together but that Yahya was set on a military solution and that this was the end of Pakistan. He felt he might be killed, but that an independent Bangla Desh would be built on his grave.