

# Cleaners left in the lurch

Conservancy workers of two city corporations expose themselves to Covid-19 as they work without protective gear; congested colonies also raise risks

MAHBUBUR RAHMAN KHAN

As Dhaka joins the rest of the world in the fight to contain the spread of novel coronavirus, some of its frontline respondents appear to have been left in the lurch.

While the city is in fast asleep, several thousand conservancy workers of the two city corporations take to the streets to clean up the waste produced in the day, with barely any protection from the virus that may arrive with someone's household waste.

Moreover, they must carry that threat to their congested colonies, where several thousand families are crammed into tiny living spaces.

However, city corporation authorities are apparently indifferent to the safety of the cleaners, one of key groups in the battle towards decontamination.

"A single case of [Covid-19] infection can spread like a wildfire in these colonies," said Nirmol Chandro Das, secretary general of Bangladesh Horijon Oikya Parishad -- an organisation working for the interests of cleaners.

Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) has 5,250 cleaners, while Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) has 4,000.

"Death is inevitable if these colonies are infected. We've not seen any awareness campaign from authorities, let alone effective measures taken by them," he further said, adding, "We've repeatedly requested city corporations to provide gloves, masks and boots to cleaners, to prevent infection not only from coronavirus but also from other respiratory diseases; but no action has been taken."

The rate of death from respiratory diseases is high among cleaners, Nirmol claimed.

Two elderly persons from Mirpur's Tolarbag area died of Covid-19 infection on March 21 and March 22.

Khurshida, a cleaner of Tolarbag area that went under community lockdown following the deaths, told this newspaper on March 23 they are not given any mask or gloves from Dhaka North City Corporation.

"Sometimes I use a scarf, and sometimes my sari to cover my mouth," she said.

Rabeya, a cleaner from Dhanmondi area,



Conservancy workers under Dhaka South City Corporation pick up garbage in a truck, without any gloves or masks. The photo was taken from Motijheel yesterday morning.

comes out of her home at about 3am to sweep roads. "I've heard of corona. Our sirs [higher authority] told us how to clean our hands, but we were not given anything," said Rabeya, adding that she uses a scarf to cover her face while working. Rabeya's family lives with several hundred others at Ganaktuli Sweeper Colony, where they have shared bathrooms, toilets and kitchens. Many also sleep on the corridor adjacent to the staircase of the buildings. "If one of us gets infected, there will be a disaster," said a sweeper leader of the colony, preferring not to be named.

Prof Mahmudur Rahman, a former director of IEDCR, said it is essential for cleaners to use masks and gloves. "Not only to protect them from Covid-19 infection, but also to reduce their exposure to other health hazards."

DSCC Chief Waste Management Officer Air Commodore Md Zahid Hossain told this

newspaper that they had taken measures to provide masks, gloves and boots for cleaners.

"We'll get 5,000 masks tomorrow [Tuesday]," he said on March 23.

DNCC Additional Chief Waste Management Officer SM Shafiqur Rahman said they could arrange gloves and masks for about 60 percent cleaners.

"We have directed them to wash their hands when they return to the station after work every day," he said, adding that they are procuring sets of gloves, masks and boots for 2,700 cleaners.

Asked what measures they have taken for cleaners' colonies, DSCC CEO Shah Md Imdadul Haque said they are busy with ensuring quarantine of returnees to prevent Covid-19 and did not have resources to focus on that.

DNCC Panel Mayor Jamal Mostafa said it is not possible to relocate cleaners, but they are taking measures to raise awareness among them.

# BRTA caught napping!

Regulator issues directives to contain Covid-19, but after govt decides to suspend vehicular movement

TUHN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

It seems like Bangladesh Road Transport Authority's (BRTA) wake-up call has come too late.

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, BRTA headquarters on Tuesday issued a set of directives upon its field offices to ensure cleanliness of public transports and bus stoppages. But that very day, the government decided to close all public transports.

The government transport regulatory body issued the order, six days after the Health Services Division called for taking steps to clean public transports and bus stoppages to contain spread of novel coronavirus.

Bangladesh confirmed the first case of coronavirus infection of March 8, and first death on March 18. Five more people tested positive with coronavirus yesterday, taking the number of the confirmed cases to 44, including five deaths.

On Tuesday, the government announced suspension of all public transport services to slow the spread of novel coronavirus, inching closer to enforcing a lockdown.

Operations of all passenger trains, launches and domestic flights also came to halt on the same day.

In addition, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader, in a video message on Tuesday, declared "lockdown" on all public transport from yesterday.

As a result, buses, minibuses, CNG-run auto-rickshaws and human hauliers were not seen on streets yesterday.

However, freight trains, cargo vessels, trucks and lorries carrying goods, medicine, fuel and perishable items, will operate as usual, according to directives from different ministries.

The measures came a day after the government announced closure of all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4 as part of its efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19.

It also declared general holidays for the period.

But the order, signed by Deputy Director

Masud Alam and issued on assistant directors at metro and district circles, came on Tuesday.

It is now available on the website of BRTA.

It called for taking steps to clean and disinfect all bus stations, ensure use of hand sanitiser and masks, clean and disinfect insides of all public transports and prevent people with fever, cough or cold from travelling.

After the first coronavirus case was confirmed, health authorities on several occasions have asked people to avoid public transports to avoid the infection.

But many people had no choice but to use public transports, including buses, minibuses, human hauliers for communication.

In the given context, Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority and transport owners distributed some hand sanitiser bottles and masks, and set hand-washing facilities at different bus stoppages in Dhaka, although it was quite inadequate for the number of passengers. But the BRTA was not to be found in all this.

In the meantime, the regulatory body however suspended all tests for issuing licence and registration of vehicles, citing coronavirus issue.

"We didn't see any visible steps taken by BRTA, but it should have done something in this regard," said Khondaker Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, yesterday.

Asked about Tuesday's order, he said, "It is too late, and has still remained only on paper."

Contacted, Masud Alam said: "When we received order from the [Road Transport and Bridges] ministry to give those directives, we issued it right away."

Besides, they have already informed transport operators in this regard, he told The Daily Star yesterday.

This correspondent could not reach BRTA's acting chairman Yousub Ali Mollah over phone, for comments about its poor response to the crisis.

# Patients suffer as most doctors stop pvt practice

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

For the last one week, Rumpa Saha, who has been suffering from waist pain, is trying to get appointment of a prominent nephrologist in port city.

But the doctor, who has his chamber on KB Fazlul Quader Road, stopped seeing patients there since March 15. Rumpa, a schoolteacher, asked the staff at the diagnostic centre when she will be able to see the doctor, but they also did not know.

On March 23, she went to the chamber of another nephrologist but found that locked. There was a notice on the door, which said the doctor would not attend chamber for the time being due to unavoidable reasons.

Like Rumpa, many patients in Chattogram have been suffering as most doctors have stopped going to their chambers against the backdrop of coronavirus outbreak in the country.

Meanwhile, Shamsunnahar, a homemaker of Bakalia area, failed to get appointment of a specialist doctor as the physician, who has a chamber in OR Nizam Road area, has stopped tending to patients as well.

The staff members suggested her to go to the emergency of any government hospital. "If it was that simple, no one would have seen doctors at their chambers, spending hefty money," said a frustrated Shamsunnahar.

Admitting the fact, Prof Dr Shahanara Chowdhury, head of gynaecology department at Chattogram Medical College Hospital, told The Daily Star yesterday that many of her colleagues have not been tending to patients at their private chambers for personal safety.

Shahanara, however, said she attended her chamber till Wednesday. "Many doctors

are of old age, they have children and parents at home... considering all these, they have decided not to attend chambers until the [coronavirus] situation improves," she said.

According to Dr Faisal Iqbal Chowdhury, general secretary of Bangladesh Medical Association (Chattogram), number of registered doctors in Chattogram is around 7,000.

Of the registered doctors, over 70 percent usually attend chambers in the city and different upazila headquarters but under the present situation most of them have not been seeing patients at chamber.

Asked about the reason, Dr Faisal said self-protection. "Many doctors who are of old age do not want to take the risk of being contaminated," he said. "Also, most doctors are yet to get personal protective equipment (PPE); as a result they are afraid to treat patients."

"There are around one lakh registered doctors in Bangladesh and the government has supplied 2.85 lakh PPE," he claimed, adding, "Even I have not received any yet... so my question is: where are the PPE?"

"Doctors, for example an eye specialist, have to check patients from a very close range... coronavirus-infected patients do not show symptoms in early days... so, if a doctor is contaminated, he would not only contaminate his family but also several hundred patients," said Dr Faisal.

"The government should provide PPE not only to registered doctors in the city, even to the quacks in rural areas to prevent coronavirus transmission."

Asked, Dr Mujibul Haque Khan, president of BMA Chattogram, said he had been attending his chamber regularly. "I think, most doctors are doing the same except those who are old and have been suffering from respiratory problems," he said.

# Put human rights at the heart of Covid-19 response

Urges Amnesty International

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, Amnesty International yesterday called upon the authorities in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries to put human rights at the heart of their responses.

Issuing a statement on its website, the global rights group urged the region's leaders to intensify efforts to protect marginalised and vulnerable groups at higher risk, including daily wage-earners, displaced people, health workers and prisoners.

"As the number of covid-19 cases in South Asia soars, the region's leaders must pay special attention to the most vulnerable and marginalised [communities] in this crisis," said the statement.

"They need to protect the workers for whom staying at home means losing their livelihoods, people who lost their homes in conflicts and now languish in overcrowded camps, prisoners squeezed into cells with several others, and, not least, the valiant doctors and nurses who have never had the resources they need and are now putting their own health at risk to save others," said Biraj Patnaik, South Asia director at Amnesty.

People living in rural areas, where literacy rates are low and access to healthcare severely limited, are particularly affected by a lack of reliable information about covid-19, the organisation said in the statement.

"States have a responsibility to provide information about covid-19 that is accurate and evidence-based... At the same time, there must be a concerted effort to counter misinformation about the virus that could harm people and to protect marginalised communities from stigmatisation," said Patnaik.

Amnesty International said authorities across South Asia have a responsibility towards not just their own citizens, but all individuals within their jurisdiction -- including refugees and asylum-seekers.

"There are limited medical facilities at the [Rohingya] camps [in Bangladesh] and no emergency services available nearby," it added.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 3

# What about those who live from day to day?



Rabeya Begum used to sit with her son Raihan at Mirpur-10 roundabout every day from 7am to around 7pm. For people like them, the coronavirus hits doubly hard -- their income dwindles and they have no choice but to expose themselves to the risk of contracting the disease.

PHOTO: STAR

SHAHEEN MOLLAH

Nine-year-old Raihan is the only child of his family. His mother Rabeya Begum named him Omar Faruk Limon at birth, with Raihan as the nickname. Six years ago, his limbs became disfigured due to polio.

Raihan's father Hasan Mia was a truck driver. Two years ago, he died in a road accident. As long as Hasan was alive, the family were able to arrange for everything necessary for Raihan's recuperation. However, their hopes were extinguished by doctors who said he was never going to recover and would have to live like this all his life.

In spite of this, Raihan's parents left no stone unturned for his treatment. But all of this stopped after Hasan Mia's death. Today, the family earns their living by begging on the sides of Mirpur's busiest streets.

Rabeya Begum told this correspondent that everyday she takes Raihan to the footpaths of Mirpur 10 roundabout, lays him down and the two of them beg money from passers-by all day. They collect a meagre sum, but it's enough to cover their rent, food, and bear a minimum of Raihan's treatment costs.

They get out from their tiny room at Mirpur Jhutpatti slum every morning at

SEE PAGE 4 COL 3



Youths spraying disinfectant on a street in the capital's Manipurpara yesterday. Under the initiative of "Manipurpara Tarun Sangha", they are also advising people over megaphones on how to stay safe from coronavirus.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

# Biman extends suspension of flight till April 15

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Biman extended its suspension of all flights except for two routes -- London and Manchester -- until April 15 due to the global coronavirus outbreak.

Biman's flight suspension to Jeddah, Madina, Riyad, Dammam, Kuwait, Doha, Masqat and Bangkok have been extended till April 5; Abu Dhabi till April 7; Dubai till April 9; Singapore till April 11; Kathmandu till April 12; Kuala Lumpur till April 14 and Kolkata and Delhi till April 15, Mokabbir Hossain, managing director and CEO of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, said.

Biman had earlier suspended flights on all seven domestic routes for an indefinite period, said Senior Secretary to Civil Aviation and Tourism Ministry M Mohibul Haque.

Biman so far incurred a loss of Tk 450 crore in the last two months due to wholesale cancellation of flights, reduce of income from cargo and ground handling operations at Dhaka airport.

Meanwhile, 364 Malaysia and Bhutan nationals stuck in Bangladesh returned to their countries on different flights on Thursday.

# Supplies arrive from China

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

China yesterday donated medical supplies, including 10,000 testing kits, 10,000 personal protective equipment (PPE) and 1,000 infrared thermometers to help Bangladesh fight the coronavirus outbreak.

A special flight carrying the supplies landed at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport at 4:23pm from Kunming, China, SN Wahidur Rahman, deputy director of HSAI told The Daily Star.

Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jiming, handed over the items to top officials of Health Directorate in a brief programme at the airport. Speaking at the programme, the Chinese ambassador reiterated its strong commitment to helping friends in need and building a community of shared future for mankind. "We are together," he said.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen on Sunday said the government is working to make an adequate stock of medical logistics to deal with the situation. "We need to have enough stock," he said, adding that the government is also allowing private companies to import testing kits.



The boat of love can climb mountains -- reads a box.

PHOTO: COLLECTED