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Don't miss the second window of opportunity

More tests and better communication crucial

AS the coronavirus pandemic rages across the globe with increasing ferocity, it has become evident that many countries missed the first window of opportunity to contain the spread of the virus by taking timely measures. As of March 27, there are well over 24,000 deaths and 536,454 cases worldwide. The WHO, while criticising countries who wasted time in getting together resources to combat the pandemic, has urged that the second window of opportunity which is narrowing fast, should not be squandered. For Bangladesh, this should be a wake-up call to act fast and take all the steps needed to control the spread. So far, we have been slow to react, with many gaps in our contingency plans.

The government is trying to impose self-isolation and social distancing of people and regarding this, they have been only partially successful. There are still many areas where there are vulnerable people who need to be given special attention. Slum dwellers in particular, who live in small, congested areas, are at great risk. They must be given running water, soap and masks in order to protect themselves and others. Many people from Dhaka have gone to the villages in droves, as we have seen in pictures and videos. It is important to increase surveillance of these people and those they have contact with. Resources have to be mobilised to reach not only hospitals in Dhaka, but in other districts where we are getting reports of more and more cases. This includes PPEs, masks and surgical gloves for all health professionals who are at greatest risk when treating patients. Ventilators and ICU facilities need to be increased, which is the biggest challenge given how limited our resources are. According to a report in this paper, government hospitals have 508 ICU beds and private ones have 737, but only 10 are available for coronavirus patients in the capital. From what we have learnt through international media, a country like the US, which has some of the best hospitals in the world and despite being one of the richest nations, is struggling desperately to get more ventilators, PPE, masks and testing kits. We have not been hit as hard as countries in Europe but we must prepare for the worst and get more and more people tested. The numbers given by the IEDCR of 48 confirmed cases and 5 deaths do not give the real picture of the extent of the pandemic here because of the small number of people being tested. Although the government is trying to expand testing kits available to hospitals, we cannot emphasise enough that this has to be accelerated along with health facilities, before we lose the second window of opportunity as warned by WHO.

The government, moreover, must go all out in communicating with the public by giving the actual scenario of the pandemic. While self-isolation and social distancing are being imposed, most people are not aware of why this is so important, which results in violations of such measures. The gap in information must be removed so that people voluntarily cooperate with the directives. As a nation, we must all work together, each in our own capacity, to fight this virus.

Scarcity of testing kits daunting for Barishal doctors

Proper diagnosis crucial during pandemic

PATIENTS with fever are thronging hospitals and diagnostic centres on a daily basis, especially as fear has gripped the nation while more and more people continue to show symptoms of Covid-19. The shortage of testing kits across the country has further fuelled speculations surrounding those who are falling sick. A recent report sheds light on the dire conditions doctors are facing in Barishal.

According to an emergency medical officer of Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH) in Barishal, without testing, they cannot send patients to isolation wards as it may prove hazardous. However, failing to provide accurate diagnosis without conducting appropriate tests due to the shortage of testing kits, the doctors in Barishal are resorting to sending the "suspected" patients to isolation wards simply based on the symptoms shown by them. The report states that a total of 2,472 people are under home quarantine in the Barishal division. Currently, the isolation ward in SBMCH has 78 patients suffering from fever while many of them have reported dry cough and respiratory problems. It is yet to be confirmed who is infected by coronavirus and who is not.

Another grave concern for the doctors in Barishal, like elsewhere in the country, is the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE). The doctors in the medicine ward of SBMCH—the place for primary diagnosis, after which, depending on their condition, the patients are sent to the isolation ward—are at risk and distressed about the unavailability of basic masks, which they have been arranging for themselves. Unfortunately, this is not the first time that doctors' concerns regarding their safety have been raised.

Testing equipment as well as PPE are crucial during this time of crisis. As it is the season of different types of fever including the common flu, whose symptoms are similar to those of Covid-19, the right decision could be the difference between life and death for patients and doctors alike, and help prevent the spread of this contagion. Government intervention in this matter is of utmost importance. A special flight from China carrying 10,000 testing kits and 10,000 pieces of PPE landed in Dhaka on Thursday. The authorities should immediately allocate these crucial items in a sagacious manner so that they can be utilised most efficiently, wherever and whenever required. While Gonoshasthaya Kendra's timely initiative to provide affordable testing kits for the general public is surely a promise of hope, it will require some time. The government can provide the necessary backing to ensure the swiftness of operation in this regard. As the gravity of the threat continues to weigh heavily upon us all, we hope the government will extend its full support to the health care facilities grappling with the crisis.

Covid-19 and economic recovery

Concerted effort and strong intervention needed

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE Great Depression of the 1930s left its mark on every society and changed the way we think about life. The Great Recession, which started in 2008 with the collapse of Lehman Brothers, one of the most famous investment firms on Wall Street with a 158-year old history, marked another milestone that brought about phenomenal changes in the global landscape, particularly the US economy. Now, there is increasing fear that the upheaval triggered by the coronavirus pandemic may be leading to another massive round of readjustments as country after country cope with the economic slowdown, job losses, and financial meltdown that can only be characterised as an "economic pandemic". The question on everyone's mind is, how much worse can it get before we see a turnaround and how fast or how slow will it be?

In an earlier op-ed in *The Daily Star* on March 18, I wrote that many financial economists and investment bankers are afraid that the recovery of business, trade, and market orders from the coronavirus epidemic is more likely to be U-shaped than V-shaped, implying that the economy will move forward at a glacial pace. Seasoned market-savvy commentators such as Deutsche Bank Global Head of Economic Research, Peter Hooper, declared, "No V in other words. The coronavirus epidemic will weaken the US economy, and that weakness will last an uncomfortably long time."

Let it be known, though, that the idea of a U-shaped recovery is but a speculative one or a worst case scenario, since every country is fighting the economic and global fallout with full vigour. The US central bank, the Federal Reserve, rolled out its third emergency credit programme in two days, aimed at keeping the USD 3.8 trillion money market mutual fund industry functioning. The Bank of England cut interest rates to 0.1 percent, its second emergency rate cut in just over a week. The European Central Bank (ECB) launched a host of highly calibrated financial measures to head off a recession, including new bond purchases worth 750 billion Euro (USD 1.17 trillion). Saudi Arabia, Canada, South Korea, South Africa and Australia, among other nations, have also slashed their interest rates to new lows in recent weeks.

Governments of G20 countries have already announced, or are planning to do so soon, several trillion dollars worth of

stimulus that are set to boost consumer spending, support failing industries, and increase investment to stave off a deep global recession. China acted swiftly to unleash trillions of yuan of fiscal stimulus and South Korea pledged 50 trillion won (USD 39 billion).

Evidently, the Covid-19 induced downturn has affected every sector of the economy, both in developed as well as in the developing countries. At this stage, it is premature to measure the GDP decline or the rise in unemployment since we are still in the downhill trajectory. The stock market is taking the first hit and share prices have gone down 30 percent in the USA, and major benchmarks in Asia and Europe are falling. Millions are out of work at this moment and billions of people are under lockdown.

Secondly, the role and reach of the government, at the central and local government levels, are very fundamental in this crisis, which is unique. There are no pre-existing scripts to follow and you improvise as you go. The governments of China, US and Italy were caught unprepared, or "with their pants down". Initially, they each tried to suppress evidence, provide false hopes and continued in a state of denial. All governments have by now learnt their lessons and must find a balance between its responsibilities and propaganda.

Thirdly, to halt the spread of the virus, the government and people must agree on drastic steps that do not violate civil liberties. The "containment strategy" as recommended by the World Health Organization might involve forcible

to World Bank estimates, the annual global cost of moderately severe to severe pandemics is roughly USD 570 billion, or 0.7 percent of global income. The current Covid-19 pandemic is by all accounts an outlier, which means the economic cost in terms of lost income may well exceed 2 percent of world GDP.

Finally, the current economic crisis demands global collaboration. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, many countries adopted measures that harmed global trade, and followed a "beggar thy neighbour" policy. With the current Covid-19 pandemic potentially triggering a global economic slowdown, leaders are already looking for ways to shore up their countries' economies. UN chief Antonio Guterres, however, warned that a global recession, "perhaps of record



The Covid-19 induced downturn has affected every sector of the economy.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

How fast the economy can recover from this dystopian scenario will depend on five factors. First of all, the spread and ferocity of the virus have to be halted. As we have seen over the last three months from the experiences in China, Italy, Iran and Spain, everything is not within our control. Fortunately, China was able to finally push down the death rate and new cases with some incredible efforts from its state-run healthcare system and state-controlled administrative system. However, China's social model may not be applicable and relevant for the rest of the world. Italy, with a much smaller population and land mass, faltered because democracy, however imperfect, has its own sets of norms and practices.

imprisonment of healthy people in their homes, and this was practiced in China. Fortunately, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan brought the transmission of Covid-19 under control without such draconian measures. Therefore, the larger society must play a role in finding the right mix of containment and mitigation policies.

Fourthly, the government has to play a critical role in jumpstarting the economy or priming the pump. As people go back to their jobs, businesses and the self-employed need working capital as well as a well-functioning supply chain. During the downturn, many lost their capital, a big chunk of their retirement funds, and other forms of savings. According

dimensions", was a near certainty, and that "this is a moment that demands coordinated, decisive, and innovative policy action from the world's leading economies."

Ultimately, the approaches each country take to stimulate economic growth will have long-lasting effects, so they need to be chosen carefully. The key elements are preparedness, agility in response, and an all-out effort for recovery. As ECB President Christine Lagarde said, "Extraordinary times require extraordinary actions".

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Against all odds

BLOWN' IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

ANY bored individual who has nothing better to do than to read the comment threads while listening to some old songs on YouTube must have come across these two ideas: "Who is listening to this in 2020?" Or "So-and-so brought me here". Forced self-isolation has created opportunities for us to go back and forth in time to look at the past, look for uncanny resemblances and find food for future sustenance. The ongoing dystopian desolation, for instance, has made us revisit the Spanish flu pandemic that humanity survived a century ago.

Because of a contagious virus that thrives on crowds, we were forced to celebrate our Independence Day in a subdued manner. Our streets are eerily empty. The army was deployed on March 25; this time around, they were sworn in to protect us from threats and assuage fear in this moment of crisis. On this day in 1971, after the brutal carnage of Operation Searchlight, there must have been an unprecedented fear of not knowing who our allies are. Nearly fifty years ago, on this day, we must have been reeling from the ominous news of the "ides" (a date that divides) of March—a date that had finally set off the timer of our victory signalled earlier by Bangabandhu on March 7. We must have picked ourselves up from the terror and havoc unleashed by the Pakistani army, and made the spirit of freedom go viral. We must have pondered over the momentary setback, and tried to figure out our local situation in a global context.

I chanced upon this idea while reading 1971: *A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India* by the Toronto based Pakistani oral historian Anam Zakaria. The book deals with forgotten memories and locates them in the mills of state narratives, providing a rare insight into the way the history of the subcontinent unfolded at a crucial juncture of global history that was suffering from a bipolar disorder due to the Cold War. This ethnographic history brought me to political history—Srinath Raghavan's 1971: *A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*. Reading these two books side by side made me reflect on the odds that were against us, making our victory—

without taking away the slightest of credit from our valiant freedom fighters—nothing short of a man-made miracle.

The national narratives of the three countries involved in the "conflict" prefer to choose a preset line of thought that rests on "insularity" and "determinism". For us, 1971 is the War of Liberation where we realised our national dream of having a country of our own. According to Raghavan, from a Pakistani perspective, 1971 is a defining moment when "East Pakistan" carried out a secessionist uprising instigated by India that "betrayed the idea of Pakistan as the homelands for the Muslims of South Asia". For the Indians, "1971 is the third India-Pakistan war: a continuation and decisive resolution of the long standing military rivalry between the two countries as well as the contest between India's secular nationalism and Pakistan's two-nation-theory that posited Hindus and Muslims

At this insular moment of quarantine in which we are forced to reflect on the worldwide lockdown, Raghavan's thesis holds more water than we would like to admit. The huge onrush of refugees from then East Pakistan made India look for international support and aid. The US, still licking its wounds from the Vietnam War, had no appetite for getting involved in a regional dispute. The civil servants present in Dhaka, including Archer Blood, after whom the library at the American Center is named, sent a series of cables highlighting the "selective genocide" carried out by Pakistan. The White House under the Nixon administration, notwithstanding the sympathetic humanitarian stance of many Democratic senators, turned a deaf ear to the Pakistani carnage. On March 29, 1971, Nixon received a call from his foreign and strategic advisor Henry Kissinger and was told, "the use of power

Minister Edward Heath took a strong stance against Pakistani military action and told Pakistan's high commissioner in London in April that any aid to Pakistan would be guided by the British public's reaction to Pakistan's handling of the crisis. By mid-April, however, most of the Commonwealth countries sensed that Pakistan would split into two. The Canadian high commissioner informed Ottawa that "the Pakistan of Jinnah is dead" and the emergence of an independent East Bengal was inevitable.

Canada, which supplied nuclear reactors to both India and Pakistan, was a key provider of aid to both countries. It was the second largest contributor of aid to Pakistan and was responsible for making sure that Pakistan remained tied to the western bloc during the Cold War. No wonder, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, father of the incumbent Canadian premier, was among the first to be briefed by Pakistan about the justification of its military action. Trudeau was advised by his civil servants to use its position to convince Pakistan of the futility of its military action. In response, the Liberal government led by Trudeau adopted a public posture of neutrality while providing humanitarian aid to refugees from East Pakistan and urging both India and Pakistan to maintain restraint. The big question is: why didn't Canada use its leverage to help Bangladesh earn its freedom? One possible reason is that Canada was trying to diffuse secessionist movements in its own Quebec province. Only in October 1970 had Trudeau sent the army to tackle the paramilitary group Front de libération du Québec. Canada pursued a self-delusional plan, asking the UN to deploy its personnel to initiate a political process in which Pakistan would be told to accommodate greater autonomy to its eastern province and the refugees would find confidence in going back to their home. An idea that makes one reflect on the Rohingya crisis.

Reflecting on our independence during these days of isolation, one truth grips hold of me: every man for himself. Every country for itself. We must learn to secure our interests before we decide to shake (or not to shake) hands with others. But that learning must involve a thorough understanding of the stories that make our existence possible.

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as separate nations". The determinist view, on the other hand, holds that the 1947 Partition that drew the bird like map of Pakistan with two wings was a non-starter. Salman Rushdie depicts the idea beautifully in *Shame*, stating, "the fantastic bird of a place, two Wings without a body, sundered by the land-mass of its greatest foe, joined by nothing but God."

Raghavan, however, dismisses the inevitability of Pakistan's breakup theory by carefully examining the breakdown process in which the Bengalis insisted on autonomy, first by seeking linguistic freedom and then economic parity. For him, "far from being a pre-destined event, the creation of Bangladesh was the product of conjuncture and contingency, choice and chance". Raghavan thus emphasises on the international dimension of our independence, which is often lost in our nationalistic fervour.

against seeming odds pays off. Cause all the experts were saying that 30,000 people can't get control of 75 million." To which, Nixon added, "30,000 well-disciplined people can take 75 million any time...look at what the British did when they came to India...anyway I wish Yahya well". Why such moral bankruptcy? Because the Nixon administration was using Pakistan to open a secret channel of communication with China, and General Yahya was instrumental in coordinating Nixon's visit to Peking.

The British were much more pragmatic. They decidedly did not want to take any side "while recognising the relative importance and strength of India." Britain's core interests in South Asia remained on securing trade, investment and influence, while "limiting Chinese and Soviet influence particularly in the Indian Ocean". Prime