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FOUNDER EDITOR
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A Sylhet hospital fully prepared to fight Covid-19

The great example set by them should be followed by others

AT a time when most of our government and private hospitals are struggling to get personal protective equipment (PPE) for their doctors, nurses and medical staff and sufficient resources for the infected Covid-19 patients, it is so encouraging to learn that North East Medical College Hospital in Chandipul of Sylhet is all prepared to provide treatment to those in need. The hospital arranged PPE for all its staff members, set up observation beds and isolation units for patients, prepared ICU and post-ICU units, and even managed BiPAP machines (a device that helps with breathing) and ventilators—the most important tools for treating coronavirus patients.

According to the managing director of the hospital, they had started taking preparation to fight coronavirus when the virus started spreading from Wuhan earlier this year. Thus, when medical professionals at different hospitals are worried for their safety while tending to patients, with foresight and planning, the hospital authorities have prepared the institution to fight the Covid-19 outbreak and serve people without any fear.

Had other government and private hospitals been prepared the same way, we would not have to worry so much now. However, they still have some time to prepare. So, we suggest, without wasting any more time, they should now get ready to handle the crisis that is unfolding in the country, following the example set by the Sylhet hospital.

Needless to say, the majority of our hospitals cannot do it without the government's assistance. So, the government should act fast to provide the hospitals with logistical support. Most importantly, the government must make some policy decisions regarding the Covid-19 testing—whether the IEDCR alone will test the suspected cases or others will join them, and whether only some specific hospitals will provide treatment to the coronavirus patients. As the managing director of the Sylhet hospital has suggested, the government should also ask all retired and expert doctors to come forward as the country needs their service. During these challenging times, the government should act wisely and keep people's wellbeing in mind over everything else.

Stop hiking prices of medicines

Let's not reduce ourselves to the worst version of humanity

IT is truly disappointing that, at a time when we need citizens of this country to be more selfless, compassionate and altruistic than ever, some unscrupulous businessmen and pharmacists are arbitrarily hiking prices of essential medications. A report published on March 28 sheds light on how some drug stores in Chattogram are harassing patients by charging almost 10 percent more for medications, even though there is no shortage of any medicines in the market.

The authorities meanwhile have assured us that there is adequate supply of medications in the market. Why, then, has the drug administration not taken any steps against these corrupt businesses who are trying to profit off of people's anxieties and miseries? We urge the authorities to take urgent measures across the country to ensure that prices of medicines are not increased artificially and that exemplary measures are taken against those who have no qualms in exploiting people at such a precarious time in the nation's living memory. The government needs to send a strong message to the pharmacists—and indeed to other businessmen who are hoarding at this time of crisis—that such practises will not be tolerated.

We also call upon businesses across the country, and particularly those who are providing essential commodities, to be ethical in their practices. Let's not reduce ourselves to the worst version of humanity.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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What will happen to slum dwellers?

Most of the city's slum dwellers are either domestic workers, day labourers, rickshaw pullers or basically low-income earners, who find it difficult to make ends meet even under normal circumstances. Due to the recent crisis regarding coronavirus, many employers have laid off these people to minimise the risk of infection. Since a lion's share of their earnings is spent on house rent, it would go a long way in alleviating the slum dwellers' sufferings if the slum landlords waive their rents for a few months.

The print and electronic media can take an initiative in this regard by offering to publish or broadcast interviews with those who do so. It is likely that such a move would elicit a favourable response since many of the landlords have political or community leadership aspirations and could use some publicity. The authorities may also intervene to help provide a valid solution to ease the burden faced by the residents of the slums.

Moinuddin M Nasrullah, by email



MANZOOR AHMED

IN an effort to stem the spread of the coronavirus infection, all educational institutions were ordered shut from March 18 to 31. Now it has been extended to April 9; it cannot be said if further extension

of the closure will not be needed. Some 30 million students in all types of institutions and close to a million teachers and other education personnel in Bangladesh are now confined to their homes obeying the social distancing rule to fight the virus.

According to UNESCO, by March 24, over 130 countries have implemented nationwide closures apart from local shutdowns, impacting over 80 percent of world's student population. Education authorities across the globe are scrambling to handle the unprecedented crisis, looking for immediate measures and trying to understand the longer-term implications.

Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni asked that the lessons for secondary school subjects be broadcast by television starting from Saturday, March 28. The Directorate of secondary and higher education is preparing to start the service. Access to Information (A2I) unit at the Ministry of Science and Technology and other agencies as well as Brac's Education section are expected to collaborate. The public television channel of Bangladesh Television devoted to broadcasting proceedings of the national parliament will be used for the broadcast.

Six to seven lessons every day for the school subjects in grades six to 10 are planned to be offered. Lessons will be recorded in advance by experienced subject teachers. Home work for students will be included and the results will be discussed in the following day's lesson. Trial lessons will be prepared and tried out before starting the regular programme. The Directorate of Primary education is also considering similar broadcast lessons for the primary school classes.

In 2009, when the present Awami League government took over, CAMPE, the civil society education advocate, had appealed for systematic use of the spare BTV channel for education broadcast to supplement classroom instruction. There was no champion with vision and imagination at the policy level to take the idea forward.

The present crisis has jolted the government into action. It is necessary to carry it out effectively and in as user-friendly way as possible. There is also the need to look beyond the emergency response and consider how some necessary innovations can be introduced in the school system.

The measures to make the TV

broadcast of lessons attractive and useful are essentially common-sense steps. The following are the three most important points.

Making it attractive: Make the lessons more than just talking heads. Essential elements of a good lesson are known and must be applied. They should be tried out and the room allowed for continuous improvement.

Making it interactive: The format of a TV broadcast limits interactivity. Teachers of schools may be encouraged to view the broadcasts and interact with their own students on the lessons by phone and mail. Can the major mobile phone companies, with the support of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), come up with a solution to provide dedicated telephone lines free of charge for student-

will receive their certificate based on school examinations and teacher recommendations. This solution would not work in Bangladesh.

The least that can be done is to decide that the public examinations would be simplified and shortened by testing students only on basic subjects of Bangla, English, Math, Science and Social Studies, with one 100-marks test subject for SSC at the end of grade 10. For HSC at the end of grade 12, the same principle can be applied but three or four more subjects may be added for science and social studies.

This would simplify logistics and relieve anxieties of students, teachers and parents. The effect on test validity and learning assessment is likely to be positive and should be considered as part of permanent examination reform. But this

mobile phone service providers, large technology companies, and facilitating and regulatory agencies—agree to work together taking a longer-term view.

Working purposefully with technology providers: Tencent, the largest internet service platform in China and one of the largest in the world, and sponsor of the Yidan Education Prize Foundation, have demonstrated how students and teacher can be connected remotely and productively when 120 million students in China were confined to their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tencent and Yidan Foundation propose to bring technology solutions to educational systems struggling with the impact of the pandemic. They intend to participate in UNESCO's global response to the crisis and invite its prize awardees to join. Brac education programme is



teacher interaction on the lessons?

Remembering the context: Given the health and safety emergency, essential messages about health and safety behaviour as well as social isolation for students and parents should be selectively included in the broadcast. Communicating with parents and school teachers should be an element of the broadcasts, providing for specific spots for this purpose.

Other steps moving beyond the emergency are important. Four points deserve serious thought.

Adjusting public examinations: Students and teachers are concerned about the SSC and HSC public examinations which have been postponed temporarily. In UK, the milestone secondary level General Certificate in Education (GCE) has been cancelled this year. Students

may be the subject for more discussion.

Building digital infrastructure for learning: Internet penetration, mainly through smart phone, is reported to have reached at least half the population. But effective use of internet to make a difference for formal education may be less than a quarter of the secondary and tertiary student population in Bangladesh, estimates technology giant Google. Despite various Digital Bangladesh initiatives and progress, these are arguably slower and more uncoordinated than it should be to serve education needs.

Internet in a functional way for learning remains unavailable, inaccessible and unaffordable to the large majority of people, especially in the rural areas. Practical technological solutions exist and can be available if the various actors—

a recipient of the 2020 Yidan prize for education development.

Fighting digital divide in learning: As ICT-based learning has become more widely available, equity in access and realising its benefits by those disadvantaged in different ways have become a growing concern. Indeed, those of a privileged socio-economic status or intellectually better endowed are the ones who gain most from the digital technologies. Those who need most help are the ones left out and behind, thus further widening the digital divide.

The broader perspective of equitable participation and learning outcome need to be the guide for technology-based innovations in the education system. Let adversity turn into opportunity to this end.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University.

COVID-19 has exposed the fragility of our economies



GUY RYDER

THE human dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic reach far beyond the critical health response. All aspects of our future will be affected—economic, social and developmental.

Our response must be urgent, coordinated and on a global scale, and should immediately deliver help to those most in need.

From workplaces, to enterprises, to national and global economies, getting this right is predicated on social dialogue between governments and those on the front line—the employers and workers. So that the 2020s don't become a re-run of the 1930s.

ILO estimates are that as many as 25 million people could become unemployed, with a loss of workers' income of as much as USD 3.4 trillion. However, it is already becoming clear that these numbers may underestimate the magnitude of the impact.

This pandemic has mercilessly exposed the deep fault lines in our labour markets. Enterprises of all sizes have already stopped operations, cut working hours and laid off staff. Many are teetering on the brink of collapse as shops and restaurants close, flights and hotel bookings are cancelled, and businesses shift to remote working. Often the first to lose their jobs are those whose employment was already precarious—sales clerks, waiters, kitchen staff, baggage handlers and cleaners.

In a world where only one in five people are eligible for unemployment benefits, layoffs spell catastrophe for millions of families. Because paid sick leave is not available to many carers and delivery workers—those we all now rely on—they are often under pressure to

continue working even if they are ill. In the developing world, piece-rate workers, day labourers and informal traders may be similarly pressured by the need to put food on the table. We will all suffer because of this. It will not only increase the spread of the virus but in the longer-term dramatically amplify cycles of poverty and inequality.

We have a chance to save millions of jobs and enterprises, if governments act decisively to ensure business continuity, prevent layoffs and protect vulnerable workers. We should have no doubt that the decisions they take today will determine the health of our societies and economies for years to come.

Unprecedented, expansionary fiscal and monetary policies are essential to prevent the current headlong downturn from becoming a prolonged recession. We must make sure that people have enough money in their pockets to make

needed for the most vulnerable workers, including the self-employed, part-time workers and those in temporary employment, who may not qualify for unemployment or health insurance and who are harder to reach.

As governments try to flatten the upward curve of infection, we need special measures to protect the millions of health and care workers (most of them women) who risk their own health for us every day. Truckers and seafarers, who deliver medical equipment and other essentials, must be adequately protected. Teleworking offers new opportunities for workers to keep working, and employers to continue their businesses through the crisis. However, workers must be able to negotiate these arrangements so that they retain balance with other responsibilities, such as caring for children, the sick or the elderly, and of course themselves.

Many countries have already



it to the end of the week—and the next. This means ensuring that enterprises—the source of income for millions of workers—can remain afloat during the sharp downturn and so are positioned to restart as soon as conditions allow. In particular, tailored measures will be

introduced unprecedented stimulus packages to protect their societies and economies and keep cash flowing to workers and businesses. To maximise the effectiveness of those measures it is essential for governments to work with employers' organisations and

trade unions to come up with practical solutions, which keep people safe and to protect jobs.

These measures include income support, wage subsidies and temporary layoff grants for those in more formal jobs, tax credits for the self-employed, and financial support for businesses.

But as well as strong domestic measures, decisive multilateral action must be a key stone of a global response to a global enemy. The G20's virtual Extraordinary Summit on the Covid-19 response on 26 March is an opportunity to get this coordinated response going.

In these most difficult of times, I recall a principle set out in the ILO's Constitution: *Poverty anywhere remains a threat to prosperity everywhere.* It reminds us that, in years to come, the effectiveness of our response to this existential threat may be judged not just by the scale and speed of the cash injections, or whether the recovery curve is flat or steep, but by what we did for the most vulnerable among us.

Guy Ryder is Director-General, International Labour Organization.