



The Daily Star



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Know true extent, know it now

Public health experts once again raise alarm as country enters crucial fourth week; say authorities must scale up tests immediately

WASIM BIN HABIB and MOUDUD AHMED SUJAN

As Bangladesh enters fourth week since it reported the first Covid-19 case, public health experts now call for expanding and speeding up the testing process immediately to understand the scale of the outbreak.

Though the country didn't report any new cases for two consecutive days, the low count is the result of limited testing, and the situation could change quickly like it did in several countries, including Italy, Spain, France, Germany and the US, they say.

These badly affected countries had also reported a low number of cases in the initial weeks but saw a spike in the number of infections from fourth week, the experts mentioned.

Without widespread testing, it's not possible to gauge the spread of coronavirus in the country with a population of 16.5 crore. Widespread testing can give the authorities a clearer picture of the scale of virus transmission, they point out.

The country recorded its first coronavirus case on March 8. Three weeks later, the number stood at 48. So far, five people have died from the virus.

The Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) claimed to have carried out enough tests. It said there has been community transmission on a limited scale.

The World Health Organization has urged countries to test as many people as possible to curb the pandemic, but Bangladesh has one of the lowest testing rates compared to many other Asian countries that have been successful so far in containing the spread of the virus.

From January 21 till yesterday, Bangladesh tested 1,185 people for the virus, which is far below South Korea's daily testing capacity of around 20,000.

The IEDCR has been testing only those who have returned from the affected countries or come in contact with an infected person or shown symptoms after two weeks of quarantine. It, however, is now expanding the scope of testing.

Over the last two months, more than eight lakh people called the IEDCR hotlines for virus-related issues.

According to official records, 802,580 corona-related calls were made to the hotlines from January 21 till yesterday. Yesterday, 73,134 such calls were made on

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TEST, TEST, TEST: People are tested at a community centre in Dearborn, Michigan. Right, a health worker conducts a swab test in Bronx, New York City; a German doctor takes a sample from a car driver in Halle, eastern Germany; medical professionals wait to administer a COVID-19 test in Daly City, California.

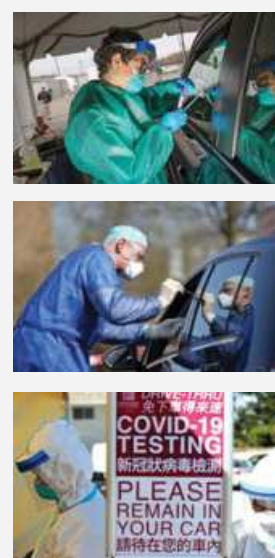


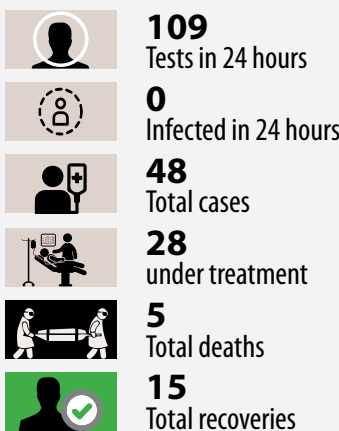
PHOTO: AFP

COVID-19 IN BANGLADESH

8,02,580 coronavirus-related calls received since January 21

1,076 tests done so far; 4.47% of them coronavirus positive

73,134 calls on three different hotlines in 24 hours



GLOBAL UPDATE



IEDCR, DGHS: SOURCE OF PHONE CALLS, TESTS
LAST UPDATE: YESTERDAY EVENING

'Don't worry, be prepared to face any situation'

PM urges people

BSS, DHAKA



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday urged the people not to worry about the Covid-19 and to be prepared to face any situation that may occur in the wake of the virus outbreak.

She also said that it was necessary to ensure supply of food to the day-labourers and working class people during the crisis period.

"I'll tell all that they shouldn't worry, rather they'll have to remain prepared for tackling any situation that may rise due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus," she said.

Sheikh Hasina added, "We've to take measures in such a way that we can protect every person of the country [from the deadly disease]."

The prime minister said this while receiving

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Four die with Covid-19-like symptoms

STAR REPORT

At least four people with coronavirus symptoms died in three districts yesterday while a patient with Covid-19 symptoms ran away from a hospital in Kishoreganj.

In Barishal, two patients undergoing treatment at the isolation unit of Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH) died yesterday morning.

One of the patients, aged about 40, was suffering from fever, cough and breathing issues, said Bakir Hossain, director of the hospital.

He had received treatment at Patuakhali Medical College Hospital for four days and was taken to SBMCH on Saturday, the doctor said.

Another 45-year-old woman died at the hospital with coronavirus symptoms, including fever, breathing difficulties and diarrhoea, said Bakir.

Blood samples of the two deceased and four other suspected patients, who are undergoing treatment at the hospital, will be sent to IEDCR, he added.

Meanwhile, in Khulna, a 70-year-old man, who was receiving treatment at the isolation unit of Khulna Medical College Hospital with flu-like symptoms since

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CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Global toll 31,000

World braces for long-term lockdowns; patient-surge overwhelms the hospitals in the US, Europe

AFP, Madrid

Spain yesterday reported a national daily record of 838 coronavirus deaths in a fresh warning to the world that long-term lockdowns may be needed to halt the deadly march of a disease that has claimed more than 31,000 lives.

A deluge of patients are overwhelming hospitals in Europe and the United States, now the focal points of a pandemic that is upending the global economy in unprecedented ways.

In the US, an about-face by President Donald Trump on quarantining New York highlighted the panic and confusion unfolding across many parts of the world trying to contain the virus.

In Spain, where the 24-hour death toll rose for the third consecutive day, lockdown measures have been tightened as officials cling to hope that slowing growth rates mean they are nearing the peak of the crisis.

COVID-19's relentless spread has infected nearly every sphere of life, from wiping out millions of jobs to postponing elections and putting a pause on the world's sporting scene.

It has also spurred a worldwide scramble

for medical gear as exhausted doctors and nurses in some of the world's wealthiest cities struggle to dole out limited stocks of face masks and life-saving respirators.

From snorkel masks to 3D-printed face shields, creative solutions have popped up around the globe in efforts to plug the gap as factories rush to keep up with international demand.

But frontline medical workers in places like Italy, Spain and New York, where the crisis is already-biting hard, don't have time to spare.

"Everybody is scared," said Diana Torres, a mother of three who works in a rehabilitation centre at New York's Mount Sinai hospital group, where a 48-year-old nurse manager recently died from COVID-19.

"I have nothing for my head, nothing for my shoes," she said, explaining how it took significant effort to acquire one face shield, one N-95 respirator mask and one gown -- all of which she said she must reuse.

Cities around the world have fallen eerily quiet as a third of humanity adjusts to life confined within the walls of their own homes.

Some leaders warn the worst is yet

SEE PAGE 2 COL 6

Six held for 'spreading rumours'

100 social media accounts under watch, 50 blocked

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and RAHUL ISLAM

Police yesterday arrested six people for "spreading rumours" and claimed to have kept over 100 social media accounts under surveillance for their involvement in spreading misleading information and rumours regarding the coronavirus outbreak.

As a part of taking action, police have already blocked 50 other social media accounts and arrested around 12 people from different districts of the country, including Dhaka, in the last two weeks, a high official of police, involved with social media monitoring, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"We are keeping close contact with all police units across the country and have arrested six

SEE PAGE 5 COL 2

Hope battles despair on Dhaka streets

Wealthy people, community-based voluntary organisations stepping forward to support the needy

RASHIDUL HASAN and MUNTAKIM SAAD

Dhaka is eerie quiet, much like most capitals and countries around the world as they grapple with a common enemy -- the spread of the coronavirus. Bangladesh is currently in the midst of a country-wide shut down that has been in force from March 26 and will extend till April 4.

Daily income of rickshaw-puller Aminul, who operates in Farmgate, in normal times the capital's busiest area, has almost dwindled to nothing. Like millions who depend on their labour and the city being the vibrant one it was less than a month ago, anxiety has gripped him about how he will provide even the basic necessities to his family of four.

But a pleasant surprise was in store for him. A passenger eventually came by, headed for Mohammadpur. After reaching the destination, the passenger gave him a bag full of groceries -- rice, lentils, oil, eggs, potato, biscuits, soap and washing powder -- that would support Aminul and his family for at least two days.

The despair on the streets and in homes seem to have bred an attitude that is breaking down barriers between classes and producing tales of fellowship and humanity. The effort has been undertaken at an individual level as well as from community-based voluntary organisation across the city and they have stepped forward to distribute daily needs to the poor.

Talking to this newspaper, the passenger, who is an employee of a private organisation, said he and his relatives have undertaken an initiative to support day labourers every day on their way to work.

"If you are going to office or if you come out for daily needs, at least help a day labourer with groceries," he said.

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ICCB to be turned into Covid-19 hospital

Bashundhara offers govt amid outbreak

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bashundhara Group has given the government the International Convention City Bashundhara (ICCB) in the city's Kuril area to be converted into a hospital to treat Covid-19 patients.

The group, one of the country's largest conglomerates, handed over a letter to PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikus, who accepted it on behalf of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in this regard when its Managing Director Sayem Sobhan Anvir gave him a cheque of Tk 10 crore at the Prime Minister's Office to fight the spread of coronavirus in the country.

Mohammad Abu Tayeb, adviser (media) of the organisation, said Hasina joined the cheque-giving ceremony via video conferencing from the Gono Bhaban.

Tayeb told The Daily Star that the PM accepted

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Ignoring experts's advice for social distancing, people form a tight queue on Nabapur Road in Old Dhaka yesterday to collect relief materials a local business was offering there.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

'Everything was good, then came coronavirus'

Low-income families in the city staring at bleak days

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARI and RASHIDUL HASAN

Mainul Islam was waiting by his rickshaw near an almost deserted Nakhhalpara Rail Gate in the capital for over 20 minutes.

The man, aged over 40, readily agreed when asked for a ride and did not even ask to know the fare.

"You are the first passenger I got after my lunch," he said around 4:00pm yesterday.

Only two weeks ago, he and his wife, a domestic staff, used to make enough to feed themselves and support his mother and two school-going sons in his village home in Gaibandha sadar.

"Everything was going fine. Then came something called corona and changed our lives," Mainul said.

He is among the thousands of people who are suddenly finding it difficult to make a living after the government began a 10-day shutdown to contain the spread of coronavirus.

Thousands of people left Dhaka ahead of the shutdown and most of those still in the city are barely leaving home.

Many day-labourers and low-income people like Mainul did not leave the city fearing that they would not be able to find work in the village.

Mainul, who owns his rickshaw, used to earn Tk 600-700 a day and his wife Tk 7,000-8,000 a month.

"I am earning about a third of what I used to while my wife has become unemployed with only half-a-month's salary.

"I have to pay Tk 3,000 to the landlord in a few days

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STOCKS		COMMODITIES		ASIAN MARKETS				CURRENCIES				
DSEX	CSCX	Gold	Oil	MUMBAI	TOKYO	SINGAPORE	SHANGHAI	USD	EUR	GBP	CNY	
Closed	Closed	\$1,630.00 (per ounce)	\$24.93 (per barrel)	0.44%	3.88%	1.66%	0.26%	83.95	89.67	98.12	11.69	
				29,815.59	19,389.43	2,528.76	2,772.20	BUY TK	84.95	93.47	101.92	12.29
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TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

Mobile users puzzled by govt SMS to gather health-related info

MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

Mobile operators are receiving a barrage of questions from users after sending them text messages seeking information on their health condition as part of a government plan to draw a digital map to track coronavirus cases and detect potential risk zones.

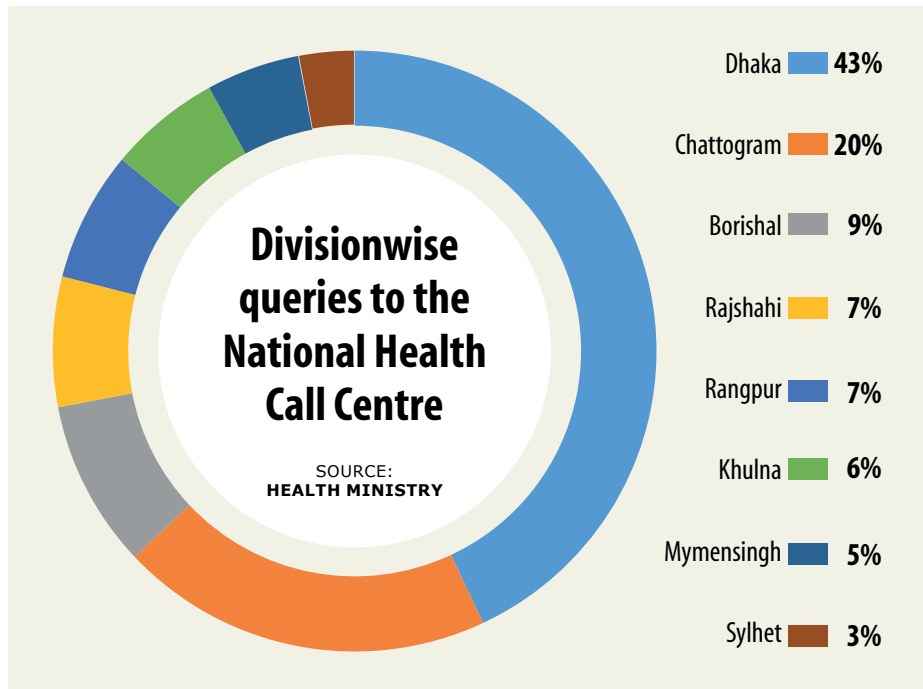
Instead of acting upon the instructions given in the messages, many rang the operators' call centres to know the purpose of collecting the information.

"Our call centre executives have been rushed off their feet dealing with the numerous calls," said a senior official of a mobile operator asking not to be named.

As per plan, the operators were supposed to share the information with the National Telecom Monitoring Centre (NTMC).

The NTMC along with the Access to Information (a2i) programme under the government's ICT Division would then draw a digital map using the data and artificial intelligence to help the government take stock of the situation.

If the government gets authentic



information, it will be able to install quick quarantine facilities, ventilators and ICU beds before the patients become severely ill, said officials working closely with the plan.

"Most people infected with coronavirus start to show symptoms within five days and their condition begins to deteriorate in the next few days. So, the government wants to know in advance," said a top

official of a2i.

After getting a directive from the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission on Saturday, the mobile operators began sending the messages to their customers from yesterday asking them to call *3332# free of charge if they have cough or fever.

During the 90-second interactive voice response, users are asked to reply to five questions: what their age is; whether they have breathing problems; if they have fever or cough; whether they have come in contact with anyone who has returned

from abroad recently; and if they have come close to any coronavirus-infected people.

Users might have taken the SMSs for the run-of-the-mill messages they receive every day, said the official of another mobile operator. "That's why a huge number of them didn't bother to respond," he added.

The operators would need at least a couple of days to complete sending the SMSs to all the 16.62 crore active users in Bangladesh.

The customers' health information is being collected under a self-reporting method to identify the areas where the virus has spread so that the government can come up with a contingency plan and location-based response.

People can also share their health information via <http://corona.gov.bd> or some mobile applications like bKash, GP, Robi, Banglalink and Uber.

However, as the telecom division has raised questions about customers' data security, the NTMC will have to take the go-ahead from the government to take the process forward, said a government official.

The government already has a huge volume of user data in its hand as about three lakh calls are generated every day in three different platforms: the government's popular helpline of 333, the national health call centre at 16263, and the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control & Research.

The health ministry said their call centre has received 842,480 calls until Thursday, of which 632,177 were related to coronavirus, and the call volume has been growing since last week.

Logistics for stimulus package allocation to be finalised by next week

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The government has started work on devising a method to allocate its Tk 5,000 crore stimulus package for the export-oriented sectors announced by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on March 25.

Now, the finance ministry will form a committee -- where the business leaders would also be included -- to work out the logistics.

The committee would scrutinise the claims made by the affected export-oriented sectors. The funds would be disbursed after their need assessment, said an official of the finance ministry.

Already, finance ministry officials have held meetings with a number of trade bodies.

A method is likely to be finalised within a week, he said.

Bangladesh's export sectors had been reeling from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic even before the virus's presence was established in the country as economic activities in its major export destinations such as the EU, the US and the UK have almost ground to a halt in recent weeks.

Garment comprised 84.21 per cent of Bangladesh's total exports worth \$40.5 billion in fiscal 2018-19 and the sector employs more than 4.1 million workers.

The coronavirus pandemic in the Western world has led to many of the brands shutting down their stores, forcing them to cancel orders or delay shipments.

As of yesterday, \$2.80 billion worth of garment export orders were cancelled by international retailers, according to data compiled by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

Some 1,016 garment factories reported a loss of 862 million units of work orders. The cancellation will affect 2.05 million workers.

But the domestic market-based industries and the services sector have now been affected too as the government enforced a ten-day shutdown to prevent the spread of lethal, pneumonia-like virus.

Many workers in the informal sector have completely lost their incomes and they do not have any coping capacity.

At the moment, the government's top most priority is to take steps to ensure food for 100 per cent of the population, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Once the crisis is over, we will take whatever steps we need to take so that the affected businesses and businesses can return to their pre-crisis level. No sector would be left out. The Prime Minister's Office and the finance ministry are working on it," he said.

The government needs to quickly devise a method to disburse the Tk 5,000 crore assistance to support payroll in the export-oriented industries, said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

"Since the size of the assistance is less than their monthly wage bill, a formula is needed to determine who gets how much," he said.

The BGMEA though has sought three months' wages for its workers.

One simple formula would be to allocate based on the number of workers in each enterprise as a proportion of total employment in the sector. The assistance should be limited to blue-collar workers, all of whom could be paid an equal amount.

The veracity of data on the number of blue-collar workers provided by the industries can be checked against data existing in the Directorate of Inspection of Factories and Establishment.

If it does not have the data, the government could randomly check the payroll registers of the factories directly.

"To make sure the blue-collar workers actually get the money, the disbursement could be made conditional on submission of payment receipts signed by the workers. This will require the factories to pay first and then claim reimbursement."

There should be cash support initiatives to cover all the affected workers -- wage employed and self-employed -- in all sectors until the economy gets back to its normal gear, he said.

Financing is a serious constraint on the government budget. As in previous episodes of livelihood crisis, the rest of the society must share part of the burden, Hussain said.

"I think they will if they could find some trustworthy intermediary who will make sure the money reaches the intended target. We have many well reputed non-governmental organisations who could be used for this purpose," he added.

The government is looking to secure \$750 million from the International Monetary Fund and \$200 million from the World Bank to tackle the health crisis and tide over the economy.

The Asian Development Bank has approved \$300,000 in emergency grant. The Manila-based lender may provide \$500 million in budget support to Bangladesh.

In the meantime, the finance ministry is working to devise immediate and mid-term strategies. The export-oriented industries would be supported under the immediate plan while the rest under the mid-term plan within the current budget.

The ministry is now looking to restructure budgetary allocation as many projects are on pause owing to the pandemic.

The non-export-oriented sectors would be supported from the funds to be freed up through the restructuring of the budgetary allocations and from the funds promised by the development partners, the finance ministry official said.

Foreign exchange reserves heading towards choppy waters

AKM ZAMIR UDDIN

The country's foreign exchange regime is cruising towards headwinds due to the dwindling exports and remittances thanks to the global economic slowdown brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

"Banks have already started to feel the pinch," said Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank.

Many lenders had faced foreign exchange shortage just before the central bank asked banks to shutter their major operations for ten days.

The problem will come back with vengeance once normal service resumes, he said.

The balance of payment has not faced a crisis in recent period due to the upward trend of remittance, which increased 20.05 per cent year-on-year to \$12.49 billion in the first eight months of fiscal 2019-20.

The 2 per cent cash subsidy for remitters from this fiscal year has been the main driver behind the spike.

But the subsidy is not working at the moment as the global economy is now

facing a recession, which has forced many Bangladeshi expatriates to return home, Rahman said.

The inflow of remittance has almost stopped and a severe crisis will be created if the lockdown in the migrant workers' host countries continues for long, said M Kamal Hossain, managing director of Southeast Bank.

"We are now unable to give prediction as to how long the crisis will prolong," said Faruq Mainuddin Ahmed, managing director of Trust Bank.

If it prolongs, the state of affairs of the external sector will get worse, Rahman said, while urging both the central bank and the government to take prompt measures to tackle the impending crisis.

The country's foreign exchange reserve stood at \$32.56 billion on March 24, up 2.83 per cent from a year earlier.

The reserve is sufficient to settle import payments for at least five months, which is better than the global standard of three months.

But a good number of buyers have already cancelled their work orders, which

is set to have a negative impact on the foreign exchange reserves, said Emranul Huq, managing director of Dhaka Bank.

The balance of payment is not facing any problem right now as import has already declined significantly in recent months, said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute.

Between the months of July last year and February this year, trade deficit, which occurs when imports outweigh exports, stood at \$9.4 billion, down 2.32 per cent year-on-year.

In the first seven months of the fiscal year, imports decreased 4.43 per cent year-on-year to \$32 billion.

"Imports will go down more in the days ahead as demand will reduce because of the ongoing fallout," said Mansur, also a former official of the International Monetary Fund.

The foreign exchange crisis will be felt when the economy gets back to normal post coronavirus.

He suggested the central bank to depreciate the local currency against the dollar in the interest of the exporters as

many peer countries have already done so.

"Remittance is the main tool to avoid the foreign exchange crisis. Along with Europe and North America, the Middle East is also facing recession because of a sharp decline in petroleum price," he said.

The country's majority of migrant worker are based in the Gulf nations, he added.

Saleuddin Ahmed, a former governor of the central bank, echoed the same.

The interbank exchange rate stood at Tk 84.95 per dollar on March 25, up from Tk 84.25 a year earlier, according to the central bank.

"Both the remitters and exporters will get support if the taka depreciated," Ahmed said.

Meanwhile, the central bank bought greenbacks worth \$305 million from banks in the second week of this month after a gap of about three years.

But the central bank was forced to sell \$40 million to banks on March 25 due to the downward trend of remittances, said a BB official.

Container congestion feared at Ctg port amid limited delivery

DWAIPAYAN BARUA, Ctg

Loading and unloading of bulk cargoes and containers to and from the vessels are going on as normal at the Chattogram port, which handles 93 per cent of the country's consignments, with the view to keeping the supply chain smooth amidst the ongoing countrywide movement restrictions.

However, only the delivery of commodity, emergency medicine and service-related materials are being allowed as the Chattogram Customs House operates on a limited scale.

Officers from different departments like Traffic, Accounts and Marine have been tasked with assessment of the selected goods for release, according to Md Omar Faruq, secretary of the Chattogram Port Authority (CPA).

However, the curtailed delivery poses to create another problem of container congestion.

Around 5,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) of import containers were delivered in 24 hours until 8am on March 26 before the holiday began. The number came down at 1,200 TEUs

yesterday. Congestion has already been created at the Kamalapur inland container depot in Dhaka as importers are not taking delivery

of their goods.

CPA Member Mohammad Zafar Alam confirmed it, saying the ICD has already exceeded its capacity.



Containers are piling up at the Kamalapur Inland Container Depot in Dhaka as importers are unable to take delivery amid the movement control order from the government.

SHEIKH ENAMUL HAQ

Until yesterday afternoon, 4,700 TEUs of containers were lying at the Dhaka ICD, which has the capacity to store at best 4,000 TEUs.

Finding no space, they even kept around 120 TEUs import containers at the space designated for export containers, said Ahmedul Karim Chowdhury, head of Kamalapur ICD.

Though the situation at the port is under control as it still has enough space, it can change because of the poor delivery, said Alam, adding that if they cannot send the Dhaka ICD-bound containers they would occupy space in the port.

Transport of import-laden containers from Chattogram Port to Dhaka ICD through railway was suspended from Saturday afternoon to Sunday evening.

After the last cargo train left Chattogram port for Dhaka ICD on Saturday afternoon, two trains loaded with import-laden containers were stuck at the Chattogram Goods Port Yard.

One of the trains was due to start for Dhaka last night, Shadequr Rahman, divisional railway manager in Chattogram, told The Daily Star.

TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

Are the policy and community responses adequate?



ZAHID HUSSAIN

The government and the Bangladesh Bank have come up with several initiatives in response to the evolving public health and economic crisis.

Several of the initiatives pertain to flattening the spread curve of coronavirus while the others attempt to flatten the fattening of the economic costs curve due to social distancing measures.

How does the overall response package look like, taken together, and how adequate and well defined are the responses?

Flattening the curve
The measures introduced to flatten the spread curve include public holiday announced from March 26 to April 4, school closures, deployment of armed forces to enforce social distancing, closure of the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission and the bourses in line with the closure of public offices.

The decision on whether to keep factories open or running has been delegated to the respective industry associations.

The general feeling is that these measures came a little late, though better than never.

The measures lacked internal consistency -- with some factories closed and some open, when the conventional wisdom is such middle grounds are self-defeating -- and they failed to anticipate the callous behavioural

response from people covered, who chose to travel in crowded transports and went on vacation to tourism spots, thus exacerbating the transmission risk.

The deployment of the armed forces could be a lifesaver assuming they themselves have enough personal protection equipment.

FISCAL RESPONSE
The National Board of Revenue withdrew all duties and taxes on imports of medical supplies related to COVID-19 such as protective equipment and test kits.

The scarcity of isopropyl alcohol or ethanol has hindered the supply of enough hand

and the monthly salary bills will have to be borne by the owners and perhaps the buyers.

More support is already being demanded by the industry leaders.

No support is available for deemed export, domestic market-oriented industries and those in services, who too are facing cash flow disruption due to the sudden stoppage of the wheels of the economy.

There is a lack of clarity in the support announced for the at-risk population dependent on the informal sector.

Facing the choice between death due to starvation and coronavirus infection leading

bank financial institutions (NBFIs) beyond those needed to meet the statutory liquidity requirement.

This will help counteract the disruption in recoveries due to a virtual moratorium on loan repayments to the banks and the NBFIs until June 30.

The banks that have rescheduled loans according to the new rescheduling policy will be allowed to keep 50 per cent of the provision required.

The BB also increased the repayment tenure of loans given out from the Export Development Fund (EDF) from three to six

There is a lack of clarity in the support announced for the at-risk population dependent on the informal sector.



COVID-19-related life-saving drugs and essential medical items, including kits and equipment.

The BB has allowed increasing the usance period for industrial raw materials up to 360 days from 180 days and the usance period for life-saving drugs to up to 180 days from 90 days.

All these will make trade financing easier and more flexible.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

Overall, both the fiscal and monetary responses described above are in the right direction, but not even remotely adequate.

They also lack clarity on the implementation modalities. The devil could be in these details. The fiscal response will not see the light of the day without working out the details. Time is of the essence here.

Many governments have introduced support packages equivalent to 8-10 per cent of GDP. Indian fiscal package constitutes 0.8 per cent of GDP.

Ours is hard to estimate because of the lack of clarity on the amount allocated for food, medicine and housing-based assistance. However, it is unlikely to be even close to that of India.

It is not fair to look only to government for support to deal with a crisis as ferocious and devious as the coronavirus, which has brought the entire global economy close to a standstill.

The financial and non-financial corporates have to come forward as well using their corporate social responsibility funds.

The established industries who are virtually living on profits should be willing to dig into their accumulated reserves to maintain their workforce. After all, social distancing has only artificially stopped the wheels of the economy.

While it may cause some permanent damage if it has to be continued too long, once the economy gets moving with relaxation of social distancing measures, the unleashing of the pent-up demand could lead to a business boom and thus help replenish the depleted reserves.

The well-off individuals should come forward with voluntary contributions to support the incomes of the workers and the self-employed in the informal sector.

The non-governmental organisations and the other social organisations need to deploy their institutional capacity in identifying and reaching the adversely impacted groups with social assistance.

Unfortunately, other than perhaps the cricketers, we are yet to see a significant community response comparable to what we have seen historically in times of floods, cyclones and food price shocks.

The government has to lead the effort and the rest of the society must chip in with cash, kind, skills and organising support to contain the spread of lethal virus, deal with the COVID-19 infected cases and cope with the economic fallout of social distancing.

The author is an economist

The economically affected are spread all over the country. How will they be identified and reached? How will the delivery mechanism ensure that social distancing is not traded off in the process? How many will these assistance cover?

sanitisers. The high duty on rectified spirits continues, thus discouraging its use for producing hand sanitisers and symbolising another policy inconsistency.

The recent announced fiscal response is in the right direction, though far from adequate.

The most significant in terms of the amount of financial resources is the Tk 5,000 crore -- which is equivalent to 0.2 per cent of fiscal 2018-19's GDP -- wage support to workers in the export-oriented industries.

Now, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association claims that it pays Tk 4,000 crore in wages every month.

The Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association probably pays an amount very similar.

Then there are the others: leather, footwear, furniture, ceramics and so on.

Most are demanding more than a month's basic pay.

How the announced amount will be rationed among all the different claimants in the export sector is not clear.

But rationing is inevitable since the total is well short of the wage bill in the exports sector. It could be done on the basis of the number of workers in each export-oriented factory as a proportion of the total workers in the sector.

The difference between the public support

possibly to death, they prefer the latter. This demonstrates once again that there is nothing more lethal than an empty stomach.

To them the risk of contracting coronavirus pales compared with the pain from starvation.

The government has indicated providing 6 months' free food, free shelter, free medicine for poor people without defining eligibility criteria, the financial allocations and the distribution mechanism.

Rice will be sold at a discounted price. The ministry of disaster management and relief has reportedly received more than 24,000 tonnes of food for distribution to the needy. But where and how -- are unclear.

The economically affected are spread all over the country. How will they be identified and reached? How will the delivery mechanism ensure that social distancing is not traded off in the process? How many will these assistance cover? As done in India, why not make cash transfers to the target groups through mobile financial services?

MONETARY RESPONSE

The BB has reduced the repo rate from 6 per cent to 5.75 percent and the cash reserve ratio from 5.5 per cent to 5 per cent. The latter is estimated to inject about Tk 6,500 crore liquidity into the banking system.

It has also committed to purchase treasury bills and bonds from the banks and the non-

months. This will relieve pressure on cash outflows of the beneficiaries of EDF.

The monthly transaction limit using mobile financial services (MFS) has been increased to Tk 200,000 from Tk 75,000. No charge can be applied for person-to-person transfer.

Merchants cannot be charged for settling transactions of Tk 15,000 daily and Tk 100,000 monthly while selling medicines and other essential goods if they use debit or credit cards for payment.

Transaction limit using contactless debit and credit cards has been increased from Tk 3,000 to Tk 5,000 per day.

All these will facilitate the functioning of payments when restriction on movements outside home require limiting the number of transactions needed to make a payment.

The BB instructed banks to extend the tenure of realising export proceeds from four to six months.

Importers now have more time to make import payments with extension of the tenure of Letters of Credit to six months from the existing four months.

The period of back to back letters of credit opened under suppliers and buyers' credit has been extended up to a year from six months.

Banks are allowed to accept advance payments of up to \$500,000 from typically \$10,000 from businesses seeking to import

H&M comes to its garment suppliers' rescue

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Swedish retail giant H&M yesterday assured its garment suppliers of taking shipment of goods that have already been manufactured, much to the relief of some Bangladeshi exporters.

H&M came up with the message at a time when apparel suppliers across the world, including those from Bangladesh, are being slammed by work order cancellations and delayed shipments.

"We will stand by our commitments to our garment manufacturing suppliers by taking delivery of the already produced garments as well as goods in production," said H&M in a media message.

The Swedish company did not mention any particular supplier from any particular country.

H&M sources garment and textile items worth nearly \$4 billion from more than 230 Bangladeshi factories annually, according to industry insiders.



"We will, of course, pay for these goods and we will do it under agreed payment terms. In addition, we will not negotiate prices on already placed orders," H&M said.

At this point, it is necessary to temporarily pause new orders as well as evaluate potential changes on recently placed orders.

"We will start placing orders again as soon as the situation allows," H&M added.

Meanwhile, as of 5pm yesterday, 1,025 factories reported cancellation of 864.17 million units of work orders worth \$2.81 billion, according to the

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

H&M says it is well aware that the suppliers, and their employees, are extremely vulnerable in this situation.

"Given the constantly changing situation and the uncertainty that we, the industry and the whole world are facing, we want to be clear and transparent towards our garment

suppliers."

The entire fashion industry now faces its biggest challenge ever, according to the Swedish company.

"And we utilise all our networks and contacts to find solutions that can contribute in the best possible way."

Companies such as H&M play a key role in many developing countries, as well as global trade. The textile industry contributes to economic growth, employment and stability in textile producing countries.

"We are at this instance intensively investigating how we can support countries, societies and individuals from a health and financial perspective. In this first urgent phase, we will focus our efforts on countries that are highly dependent on the textile industry," the retailer added.

Meanwhile, the BGMEA plans to make at least 20,000 personal protective equipment (PPE), which will be donated.

"What we are making is a substitute of Level-1 PPE," it said in a WhatsApp message.

Doctors and staff treating COVID-19 patients need level 3/4.

Customers at Sonali Bank's local office in capital's Motijheel take counter services yesterday while maintaining a social distance when queuing up. Banks will remain open for two hours from 10am during the ten-day public holiday announced from March 26 to April 4 to contain the spread of coronavirus. Staff manning the counters have been given personal protective equipment for their safety.

ANISUR RAHMAN



Withdrawing the Barguna OC not enough

Those responsible for custodial death should be tried after proper investigation

WE are outraged at the death of Shanu Hawlader, a 55-year-old farmer, in police custody in Barguna. The hanging body of the man was found in Amtali Police Station of the zilla on March 26, three days after he was arrested. His family members alleged that police demanded Tk 3 lakh from them for releasing him, and as they could not arrange the money, the OC of the thana along with other police officers tortured Shanu to death.

The increasing number of custodial deaths in the country and the lack of measures from the police and the government to investigate the incidents and hold those accountable for these deaths make us wonder about the existence of rule of law in the country. According to rights body Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 10 people died in jail custody across the country from January, 2020 to February, 2020. ASK statistics show that at least 14 people died in custody last year, of them, six died after torture.

Sadly, such incidents are never investigated properly and as we know, no police official has ever been punished according to the law of the country for torturing someone to death while in their custody. The only steps that are usually taken against the accused police officials include withdrawing them from their respective police stations and suspending them for a short period. And this is what has been done in the Barguna case also. At first, two police officers of the thana were suspended and later the OC was withdrawn and attached to Barguna Police lines. We would like to ask, what does this withdrawal mean? Why has he not been suspended until the investigation is complete? And what about punishing the OC and other responsible police officials for what can only be described as murder?

We have heard that two probe committees have been formed to investigate the incident. We demand a proper and impartial investigation from them and hope that action will be taken against the officials according to the law.

Implement shutdown with empathy

Essential movement shouldn't be stopped

THE countrywide shutdown was a timely step by the administration. It was a necessary inconvenience to stem the spread of COVID-19 and ward off the likelihood of the kind of situation that was and is being faced in many countries. More than 200 countries have been afflicted by the virus, in varying degree, and most of them have ordered people to go on self-isolation. However, while such orders do oblige people not to venture out from homes, essential movements outside is allowed. After all people need to buy necessities like food stuff and of course the sick need to get to the hospital or treatment centres.

Unfortunately, media reports show that the police and other members of the administration have been rather draconian in their attitude while implementing the lockdown orders in our case. There have been instances of public outrage at police excesses, as reported, in their bid to ensure social distancing and shutdown. The enforcing agencies shouldn't administer corporal punishment, and that too to elderly people as happened in one instance, or prevent people taking patients to the hospital while enforcing the lockdown. In fact, in one instance as reported in this paper yesterday, a person had to bribe his way out of the situation. We are happy to note the IG's instruction following these incidents, urging compassion from his forces. This should have been the attitude of the police from the very start.

But apart from the police, what has created a serious problem is the complete shutdown of public transport of every denomination since the lockdown was announced. And it is the less affluent and the poor who are the hardest hit. We suggest that the administration in conjunction with the two city corporations arrange for pool of transport in various parts of the city which people can avail easily in time of their need, particularly for going to the hospital. That would lessen the pains of shutdown considerably.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Please maintain safety measures

Yesterday, I got out of my house after staying indoors for five days to buy some medicine. When I got out of the building and walked a little further, I was shocked to see several groups of people. There was a group of young boys smoking in a corner. On the other side there were two men talking to each other without wearing any face mask. Some teenagers were playing on the road.

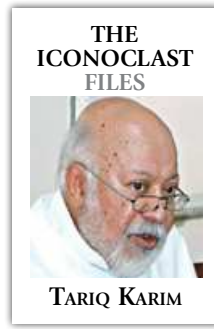
To be honest, I was quite angry to see the carelessness of people when it came to protecting themselves and others. It is as if they are immune to the virus and all the warnings seem to be falling on deaf ears!

On one hand, we are complaining that the authorities are not taking enough measures to curb the crisis, and on the other, we ourselves are not abiding by the most basic safety requirements. To stop the spread of the virus we must all be more careful.

Md Habib, Dhaka

Preparing for a post COVID-19 world

A regional architecture of cooperative mechanisms for addressing non-traditional security threats is needed



THE ICONOCLAST FILES
TARIQ KARIM

THREE days ago, on March 25, listening to a briefing on the then available latest global statistics about the COVID-19, I learnt that the global total of recorded cases was then a little over 400,000, spread across over 169 countries. Of these, the first 100,000 cases had taken 67 days, the second 100,000 about 11 days, the third 100,000 about 4 days, and the last 100,000 less than 4 days. We were told in no uncertain terms that this was the first great pandemic, of truly global proportions in a hundred years, after the so-called "Spanish flu" of 1918-20, (which had afflicted over 500 million people or a quarter of the world's population at that time, and inflicted a death toll of between 17-50 million). The entire world today is in a dire economic situation, a global recession worse than the recession of 2009 is inevitable, only this time it would be somewhat different in nature: there would be a very big hit on the services sector, in which there are typically no rebounds; supply chains are standing fractured or not available any longer; there would be a very likely rise in food prices because of severe disruptions to the logistical or other chains on which assured availability of food depends; social safety measures would prove woefully inadequate; and domestic and external shocks would reinforce each other, perhaps exponentially.

Three days later, on March 28, 2020, the number of globally recorded cases was nearly 600,000 with the numbers increasing steadily by the hour. In other words, the number jumped from 400,000 to 600,000 in about 3 days. Of these, currently infected patients number over 436,000, of whom over 23,000 are in serious or critical condition. The United States has now surpassed Italy (and China) with the highest number of cases (over 104,000). Mr Trump can now boast of presiding over the new epicentre of this pandemic. I am willing to bet that by the time this article is published all the numbers will be higher.

This situation will get worse, given the now well-established trajectory globally. While experts everywhere, from different nationalities and different disciplines in science, are near unanimous in agreeing that the crisis will become worse, much worse, and all countries (including the United States), are either woefully inadequately prepared or ill equipped, or both. Chinese President Xi Jinping has reportedly reached out to President Trump and offered help in sharing knowledge (gleaned from his own experience) and equipment to tackle the critical situation. However, because of stonewalling and sheer cussedness on the part of some, the G-20 virtual summit ended in a fiasco. Mr Trump kept insisting on publicly labelling this disease as the "Chinese virus/Wuhan virus", to which the Chinese objected with injured ego. Mr Trump would do well to delve into some history of his own country, and recall that the so-called "Spanish flu" of 1918 is now thought by many as actually having originated in an obscure farming community in Haskell county in Kansas, USA where a farm worker caught the infection from a pig, and then carried it to Spain where it ballooned among an unsuspecting population from where it travelled to the World War-I theatre (in which Spain, ironically, was not a protagonist), and then travelled back to the United States, in two successive waves, from Summer, to Fall and then Winter. The Spanish flu should therefore be correctly renamed today as the American flu of 1918. Perhaps this will satisfy the respective egocentricism of the respective world leadership today, who should instead buckle down to addressing the crisis and putting in place institutional arrangement to deal with the current pandemic, and its resultant fallout on food and employment security and ensure that more such pandemics do not recur.

We should assume that more such unexpected pandemics will very likely occur, because there are countless strains of coronavirus among other animals, birds and reptilian species than we know of, and with spaces of separation between species and homo sapiens ever shrinking (or basic principles of ecological equilibrium having been ignored and shattered), the intervals between such pandemics could well also dwindle, alarmingly. Pandemics jump over time and space, across peoples, countries and cultures, ballooning exponentially. Despite all indications to the contrary, people worldwide took the onset of the current pandemic complacently, almost smugly, holidaying on beaches when governments advised them to go into social distancing and self-isolation. When Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states advised their nationals that they should abjure from going to mosques and instead remember God and offer their prayers in the isolation of their respective homes, we have had examples of people in some of the most densely populated Muslim countries (including in Bangladesh and Indonesia) congregating in very large numbers for congregational prayers or "waz mahfil" sessions (in which there could have

already been some infected people, but quite unaware of their being so). In Malaysia, one such event resulted in notable community transmission of the disease. In Bangladesh, the officially announced total number of cases today is 48, with 5 fatalities. The official statistics does not necessarily reflect the accurate statistics, because of the very tiny number of the population having been tested, even among the several thousand returnees from China, Europe or elsewhere who were allowed to go home on condition of "self-isolation" which was merrily (and most irresponsibly) largely not observed. The Bangladesh Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) announced its detection two days ago of the first community transmission of the disease. I await with considerable trepidation to what the figures will exponentially translate into in, 7 days, 14 days or 21 days from today.

In my last missive on the subject published in this newspaper a week ago ("Implications of coronavirus for regional and global cooperation", *The Daily Star*, March 22, 2020) I had advocated that we needed to shift our focus away from viewing our security within the traditional paradigm only, but consider our overall security as contextually nested in what I describe as ecological security that includes a host of non-traditional causes all of which would at some stage, sooner or later, translate into a traditional security threat as understood conventionally.

Ecological and non-traditional security may be defined as maintaining a dynamic equilibrium not only among human societies (friction among whom used to be the traditional source of conflict) but equally, if not far more importantly, between humans and nature, humans and other species and humans and pathogens. Any disruption to this dynamic equilibrium between any two

some natural cataclysm like another great tsunami, or a mega volcanic eruption or a mega earthquake is not likely to occur anytime soon? I for one, would wish governments and peoples to be prepared for such unpredictable scenarios, however unlikely they might appear to be at cursory glance now.

Such an organisation would be an authoritative umbrella body (rather than a toothless association or "club") with the mandate and authority to enforce adherence to its collective decisions. It should be headed by a ministerial-level Governing Council, that should meet periodically, at least once a year, by rotation in each member-country's capital. Decisions should be arrived at by a simple-majority consensus. Decisions once taken, are mandatorily binding on every member state. Its decisions are like laws passed by the national parliaments, but where the decisions are in conflict with national laws, they over-ride the latter. The body will derive its funding through mandatory contributions from each of its member states, the amount proportional to its population but weighted by its GDP. Where necessary, it may dictate levying of taxes on income according to income slabs to meet sudden emergencies. For wildcard events, (like the current COVID-19 pandemic) it will maintain an emergency fund of a predetermined amount raised through taxes as well as central funding. Money for this fund is to be raised through levying taxes on specific/related activities, like travel, entertainment, retail sales, etc. While the amount of the levy would be relatively very small, since it is collected on a daily basis from a wide swath of the population across the entire region, cumulatively it would translate into a considerable amount which would be sufficient to cope with an extraordinary emergency in its immediate aftermath.

This umbrella body will have at least six sectoral cells to deal with food

protective gear for medical personnel and patients, testing kit and life support equipment. Certain industries may be designated and tasked with being geared to produce such kits/equipment/gear on an emergency basis to cater to national and regional emergencies, as well as to replenish stock. It will also monitor animal diseases linked to poultry and livestock on a similar basis and will exercise the authority to impose very strict quarantine regulations in order to forestall spread of man or animal borne diseases across borders.

Ensuring food security

The authority will require each member state to maintain a minimum reserve of food grains stock (rice, wheat or maize, etc.) sufficient to meet consumption requirements of its nationals for four months, at any given time. This is to meet national emergencies within its own domestic jurisdiction. The cost of this buffer stock is met from the domestic national budget of each member state. Additionally, a pre-determined quantum of food grains, pulses, powdered milk, bottled water, salt and sugar is also stored along centrally designated locations, (close to airports/railway stations/ports) and along the borders with adjacent countries for fast movement to disaster areas in times of extraordinary trans-boundary emergencies. Both categories of the above reserve stocks will have specifically designated shelf lives.

These items will be put on the market at least two months before expiry of such shelf life but also be replenished simultaneously with new stock with new shelf lives. The cost of these emergency buffer stocks will be raised through a system of food security tax/levy raised monthly at a rate not less than a minimum percentage of an individual's regular income (say a monetary unit per person irrespective of par value of that unit vis-à-vis the strongest unit in the



We should assume that more such unexpected pandemics will very likely occur.

PHOTO: REUTERS

or more component sets of actors or factors integral to this equilibrium would translate into a disturbing, risk-fraught disequilibrium endangering all. Man, as the dominant species with a steadily burgeoning population, has a greater ability today than ever earlier to affect how this equilibrium is maintained. Changes in the complex intertwined relationship between man, nature and other species can be destabilised by changes in nature or in human behaviour.

As resources needed by man for his sustenance and development steadily dwindle, fierce competition has already increased among peoples for control over decreasing resources that sustain human societies. In this struggle for control, non-state actors have increasingly emerged as posing by far the greater threat to societal security than conventional military threats by other state actors. Maintaining ecological equilibrium in any given geo-space has, therefore, emerged as increasingly integral to not only ensuring the overall wellbeing of the peoples who inhabit that space, but to ensuring their continuing security, traditional and non-traditional. But this requires exponentially increased cooperation and collaboration between states.

Most of the NTS threats need a well-thought out systemic and institutionalised response, in a pan-Westphalian context. I have earlier advocated for establishment of a regional Authority called South Asian Regional Ecological and Environmental Authority (SAREESA), which would have several sectoral bodies under it to address different NTS threats, one of which would be addressing pandemics.

Now that we are wading ever deeper into, and increasingly floundering in, a pandemic and we are assured by experts that more such pandemics are very likely to afflict us unless we think in anticipatory mode, and not just to address pandemics—who is to say that

security, water security, energy security, employment security, health security, and environmental security, respectively. For the moment, let me present only three of these sectoral cells: wildcard events, health security and food security—these are the specific areas where I foresee immediate problems likely to confront us all in the wake of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

At the first signs of an event occurring (like current pandemic, or a major tsunami, flood, drought, earthquake or volcanic eruption), it would trigger off a regional warning system that keeps vulnerable populations informed and evacuates endangered populations where deemed necessary. It also activates across the region emergency related services to go into standby mode to cope with health and food security.

Ensuring health security

With global and regional movements of people and all sorts of goods, including flora and fauna, and particularly microbial or viral passengers having become easier with the communication revolution and induction of super jumbo aircraft, ensuring regional health has become a greater challenge than ever.

The contemplated authority's mandate would include regional health management issues linked particularly to communicable diseases (cholera or other diarrheal diseases, typhoid, etc.) that may escalate into epidemics or pandemics. For the purpose, it maintains a central information system of networking that links all national/or designated hospitals to a regional information centre. It monitors the instances of communicable diseases that are known to spread easily, and tracks movements of such diseases if they occur. The centre also maintains a regional health registry, where it stores and updates on a continuing basis, data from its network of hospitals across the region, information on supplies of

region). This principle of compulsory contribution will instill a sense of value and participatory ownership that raises the importance of this scheme in the public perception.

In case of a disaster outside the region (another region located near or far away, in the same or another continent), individual countries will be required to contribute in aid to the afflicted outsider region from its own domestic reserve, provided it has the capability or a viable plan for replenishment of its own stock in a timely manner. Similar contribution may be made from the regional reserves mentioned above also, provided replenishment is lined up within a reasonable timeframe.

The regional authority should be able to requisition multi-modal transportation vehicles (marine, air, riverine or road) from any or all of its member-states' civil and military resources. For this purpose, it can maintain a database of all such available transportation, listing what is available and where at any given time. And for this, the national civil and military bureaucracies will be required to update a centralised database on a regular, continuous and real-time basis.

While most ideally, we need to have a regional body for such an unprecedented emergency, (and I had hoped in my last article that this crisis would have impelled us to move towards such a dynamics), if that does not happen, Bangladesh should take the lead in instituting measures envisaged above on a national basis and set an example of good governance that might nudge others to emulate. As Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore famously exhorted: "if no one heeds your call, walk alone". Sooner or later, others will be compelled to join, inspired by the example you set.

Tariq Karim is a retired ambassador and currently Senior Fellow at the Independent University.

What about workers in the informal sector?



THE present pandemic COVID-19 has created havoc in the world throwing millions out of jobs and means of livelihoods. Countries rich or poor are struggling to cope and survive as infections and death rates soar.

It has created disruptions as never witnessed after the Second World War. Rich countries such as UK, US and the EU have allocated millions, billions and even trillions of dollars to offset the catastrophe suffered by businesses, joblessness and other major disruption to people's lives.

Bangladesh is no exception, although our rate of infection and death is low compared to many countries, the impact on the lives of people specially from low income groups is evident with schools, business houses, restaurants and shops closed, leaving thousands without any means of earning. The garment industry which hires about 5 million workers, mostly women, have been given a lifeline to offset massive cancellation of orders. Special incentive package has also been offered for the rural poor and massive relief operation such as distribution of food has started. The government is keen to see that the pandemic does not have an adverse impact on the poorest.

However, it is the workers in the informal sector who are left more vulnerable than others and merits our attention. The Labour Law of 2006 is a comprehensive one which was further refined in 2010, 2013 and 2018 providing detailed guidelines for the workers-employers relations and benefits. However, the informal sector workers are not included. The Bangladesh Worker Welfare Foundation Act 2006 defines informal sector as those "private bodies where the terms and conditions of employment of workers and other relevant issues are not determined or guided by the provisions of the existing Labour Act, Rules or Policy, promulgated thereunder, and where there is very limited



The informal sector accounts for almost 89 percent of total national employment which is about 64 million people.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

scope for the workers to be unionised". This Foundation was created specifically to come to the aid of all workers, whether formal or informal in case of emergencies for them and their dependents. Although the National Labour Policy 2006 mentions workers of the informal sector as a huge working force whose skills need to be developed, quote: "One of the important duties of the Government is to ensure the rights and welfare of the Labourers. The Government, focusing on this target, shall take initiatives to enact necessary laws to upgrade the living standards of the huge number of people, working in the informal sector." However, this law is yet to be enacted as workers in the informal sector continue to be out of the purview of the Labour Law.

The present situation and especially

the lockdown (which was necessary) has put workers in the informal sector in a precarious situation. The informal sector accounts for 51.4 percent of total national employment which is about 64 million people. They are the rickshaw pullers, agriculture workers, construction workers, hawkers, rag pickers, transport workers, part time domestic workers, etc. (source: BBS). Child workers are included numbering around 4.8 million or 12.6 percent aged from 5 to 14. 83 percent are employed in rural and 17 percent in urban areas, they mostly work in the transport sector, as hawkers, rag pickers, in *biri* and welding factories, etc.

With schools and offices shut rickshaw pullers have no passengers, construction work has come to a halt therefore day labourers are sitting idle. Self-employed workers and

hawkers, both men and women who earn a living by selling food and other daily use items have no buyers. The disruption is total and widespread. While the well to do people are either working from home and spending time reading, exercising or meditating, the poor are waiting desperately for the situation to improve.

As we all know, women and children face a disproportionate brunt of any crisis be it war, social unrest or a pandemic like the present one. Women in the informal sector not only earn a living to support their families but also have to take care of their children. Given the closure of every means of livelihood, there is no alternative back up for them. Women headed households are in special jeopardy. Street and working children, boys and girls whose lives are already precarious

find themselves bereft of the little social support they had. Shelters, drop-in centres and other facilities have closed down. Their meagre earning is now nil. They have to go back to their families who have no means to support them. Adolescent girls and boys are particularly vulnerable and may fall prey to anti-social groups who will exploit them further.

Government relief initiatives are laudable, however, concern remains about coverage. What about the specially marginalised groups such as persons with disability, sex workers, minority population, people living in hard to reach areas and of course children? We know of the challenges surrounding proper targeting of the social safety net programmes. In this situation strategies to address different segments of the vulnerable population and a proper database is required. However, it should be noted people need more than just rice, dal and cooking oil to survive. They need cash to face the uncertain future such as sickness, accidents, etc.

Just as workers in the formal sector, informal sector workers need to be paid. Employers are urged not to deduct their salary during the present lockdown. The Workers Welfare Foundation mandated to respond to emergencies should transfer to them cash equivalent of two month's salary. City corporations and local authorities can issue ration cards for three months. Social safety net programmes should cover informal workers also. Collaboration with the NGO sector, many already in the field, will assist government to accelerate relief efforts. The Social Welfare Department is especially urged to take responsibility for working and street children. All initiatives have to be undertaken on an emergency basis as seven days of lockdown has passed compromising food intake and health status of millions.

It is the workers in the informal sector who keep our domestic economy moving. Just think what would happen if all such workers stopped working for a day. In this time of crisis, they deserve our special attention.

Shaheen Anam is Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation.

Free flow of information in the time of COVID-19

FARUQ FAISEL

TODAY the whole world is struggling to manage the global crisis of COVID-19 and Bangladesh has been listed as one of the 25 high risk countries.

In light of the growing disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the monitors for freedom of expression and freedom of the media for the United Nations, the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe issued a joint statement.

The statement says: "Human health depends not only on readily accessible health care. It also depends on access to accurate information about the nature of the threats and the means to protect oneself, one's family, and one's community. The right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, through any media, applies to everyone, everywhere, and may only be subject to narrow restrictions."

In this connection, they pointed out that it is essential that governments provide truthful information about the nature of the threat posed by the coronavirus. Governments everywhere are obligated under human rights law to provide reliable information in accessible formats to all. The statement clarified that the right of access to information means that governments must be making exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists.

Independent journalism, citizen reporting, open public discourse and the free flow of information are indispensable in the global effort to counter COVID-19. Governments must develop policies and responses to the outbreak that embrace freedom of expression. The media and social media companies must also contribute to the fight against misinformation related to the COVID-19 crisis. Journalists should report accurately and without bias, investigate propaganda campaigns and official discrimination, and make sure there is the right of correction and reply.

Alongside other fundamental human

rights, the right to freedom of expression and information should provide the legal foundation for tackling the COVID-19 outbreak. During a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak, the free flow of information is critical. Viral epidemics and pandemics are by their nature diffuse events, impacting populations on a regional, national or global scale. State authorities cannot comprehensively monitor the spread of a virus and the emergence of new hotspots in real time. Instead, effective public health

the actions of policymakers. During the COVID-19 outbreak, public fears and frustrations have at times manifested in criticisms—both founded and unfounded—of state officials and critiques of government policies. State action to stifle criticism of public authorities is inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has emphasised that information accessibility is a key component of the right to health. When states restrict

freedom of expression ensures that vital information collected by the public, journalists and local health officials reaches policymakers and other key stakeholders. The Special Rapporteur on the right to health has also emphasised the need for transparency in public health policy and the importance of information in holding policymakers accountable and empowering individuals to protect their own health. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has likewise condemned the deliberate withholding or misrepresentation of information vital to health protection or treatment.

Misinformation represents a serious challenge in addressing a viral epidemic or other public health crisis. During the COVID-19 outbreak, individuals around the world have struggled to decipher fact from fiction. Some have embraced beliefs or practices that deepen, rather than mitigate, health risks. Governments are right to take the threat of misinformation seriously. They should develop policies to effectively halt the spread of myths and to counter deliberate disinformation campaigns. Misinformation not only disrupts public health efforts; it can lead to the violation of other human rights. Despite the threat posed by misinformation, any restrictions on the dissemination of supposedly false information must comply with the requirements of legality, legitimacy and necessity and proportionality.

Unfortunately, beyond merely embracing responses to misinformation that violate international human rights law, some states have also spread disinformation and propaganda themselves. During a public health crisis, government programmes and policies are closely scrutinised, and states often have an incentive to control narratives and shape perceptions of the performance of public authorities. Some states have been accused of covering up the spread of the virus or promoting falsehoods for political gain. State-sponsored misinformation is especially dangerous. It both erodes trust in state authorities and promotes misguided responses by the public and health officials. Nevertheless, government, politicians and ordinary citizens use the term to condemn opinions with which they disagree and to call

for restrictions on certain types of expression.

A free and independent media is especially important during a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak. The media plays a central role in providing information to people most likely to be affected. A free and independent media can monitor national and international responses to an outbreak and promote transparency and accountability in the delivery of necessary public health measures. The media can also serve to relay back key messages from those affected to policymakers and other important stakeholders. However, journalists have also at times failed to uphold the highest professional standards, reporting inaccurately or contributing to discriminatory narratives. Governments undermine their own ability to respond to COVID-19 when they attack journalists.

Social media platforms play an increasingly dominant role in facilitating communications, disseminating information and sharing opinions. Possibilities have been evident in the use of social media during the COVID-19 outbreak. Governments, health workers, communities and individuals have regularly turned to social media platforms to get essential information concerning the virus. However, they have also been confounded by the diverse and conflicting information found online.

At this time of crisis, government should use freedom of information legislation to facilitate access to public information, including by mandating disclosure of certain types of information and establishing a system for individuals and groups to request information from public bodies.

It is important that the public authorities ensure that they do not spread misinformation, and governments should abandon intentional propaganda or disinformation campaigns.

Governments should ensure strong protections for whistleblowers. Moreover, the authorities need to protect those raising concerns about government misconduct or policy failures relating to COVID-19.

Faruq Faisal is the South Asia Regional Director of the UK based international freedom of expression organisation, Article 19.



responses to epidemics and pandemics rely on monitoring and reporting by the general public. Journalists, researchers and public health professionals also play essential roles in tracing the spread of a virus. At the same time, individuals, doctors and epidemiologists cannot effectively protect themselves and others without access to accurate and up-to-date information from authorities. Official denials and withholding of information fuel viral epidemics.

Public health crises such as viral epidemics or pandemics often place a spotlight on

speech relating to health issues or block access to health-related information and do not publish health information proactively, populations suffer adverse health impacts and cannot fully enjoy the right to health.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has specifically warned against censoring health-related information or taking other steps to prevent public participation in public health conversations and initiatives. COVID-19, stifling public reporting of an outbreak hampers monitoring and response efforts. Conversely, protecting

QUOTABLE Quote

ANATOLE FRANCE
(1844-1924)
French writer.

An education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you know and what you don't.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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25 Nation on the Black Sea

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28 Take offense at

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36 Tavern order

38 Diner sandwich

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

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

R	E	C	A	P	S	P	A	R
O	M	E	G	A	S	L	O	M
B	A	R	E	D	T	A	R	P
O	N	E	S	G	A	G	G	L
T	A	B	M	U	G	Y	E	S
S	T	R	E	A	M	E	R	
E	A	S	T	S	N	U	G	
M	O	B	R	O	T	R	O	E
A	M	A	Z	E	D	B	A	R
R	A	G	E	S	B	E	I	G
C	H	E	S	S	L	E	N	I
H	A	L	T	T	R	E	A	T

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

LIFE IS NOT MEASURED BY THE YEARS WE LIVE BUT WHAT WE DO WITH THOSE YEARS

THEN HOW WILL MY LIFE BE MEASURED, CHAPLAIN?

IF WE'RE TALKING ABOUT ACTUAL MOVEMENT, IN NANOMETERS

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

HOW WAS BASKETBALL PRACTICE?

AWESOME!

DAD TAUGHT ME HOW TO PLUG ONE NOSTRIL AND BLOW SNOT OUT OF THE OTHER ONE!

I WONDER WHERE YOU'LL GO TO PICK UP YOUR FATHER-OF-THE-YEAR AWARD?

YOU'RE JUST JEALOUS BECAUSE I DIDN'T TEACH YOU FIRST.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Construction sector staring at an uncertain future due to coronavirus pandemic

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh's construction sector is set to face challenging times because of the coronavirus pandemic as it would slow down the economy, disrupt development activities and put workers out of jobs.

"The impact could be far-reaching if the crisis prolongs," said SM Khorshed Alam, president of the Bangladesh Association of Construction Industry (BACI).

"We don't know when it will come to an end. So, we can't say immediately what impacts it would have on the sector."

Alamgir Shamsul Alamin, president of the Real Estate & Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB), echoed the sentiments of the BACI chief.

"Undoubtedly, the pandemic would take a huge toll on the construction and the real estate sectors," Alamgir said.

"But we are now in a situation where we are not thinking about the sector any longer. Now our focus is how the people will survive in this situation. If people are alive, businesses will stay afloat, including the real estate sector."

Their comments came as Bangladesh became the latest victim of the novel coronavirus.

On March 8, the government reported the maiden cases of the coronavirus,

"This is the time to support the government and stand by them. It is not the time to demand something from the government. There will be plenty of time to persuade the government to meet demands of the sector once the country successfully tackles the coronavirus."

which originated in China in December last year and has since spread to 172 countries. Since then, at least 44 people have been infected and five have died as of March 26, according to the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

Globally, it has infected 474,204 people and killed more than 21,000 people, data from the Johns Hopkins University showed on Thursday.

The outbreak has compelled Bangladesh to enforce general closure across



Construction of the elevated expressway in progress at Airport Road.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

the country from Thursday (March 26), shutting public and private offices and educational institutions, limiting banking activities and transport movement.

"Construction activities have already halved as the implementation of projects, small or large, has slowed," Khorshed Alam said.

The construction sector is a labour-intensive sector but workers are fearful in the current situation. Many construction workers are operating in environments where social distancing is impossible.

Respiratory problems are very common among construction workers because of dust.

"The other day, one of the 10 workers in my construction site coughed and the rest of the workers declined to continue working. I had to convince them to return to work."

As a result, it is taking more time to finish a project compared to normal period, he said.

As a construction site is usually vast and a lot of people remain involved, precautionary measures usually don't work. "You either keep the activities up and running or stop them," Khorshed said.

The pandemic would have a chain effect on the whole real estate sector, said Alamgir Shamsul Alamin.

"Customers may not get delivery of projects on time. Banks may not get back their loans on time. Realtors will have problems with landlords."

He said real estate is one such sector that can't run without political, social and economic stability. Construction workers have already started to leave the city for villages.

"We don't know whether they would be able to come back very soon."

Tapan Sengupta, deputy managing director of BSRM, one of the top steel-makers in Bangladesh, said: "The whole country is now facing a crisis and it is affecting the entire economy, trade and commerce. Definitely, it has had an impact on the construction sector."

He said if the situation doesn't come under control and if the country faces a situation similar to that of Italy, the ensuing scenario would be beyond one's imagination.

So far, the supply of raw materials has remained largely unaffected as the main raw material, scrap, comes from Europe, the US, Australia and Japan. "But the shipment has slowed down."

"If the country is locked down and people limit their movement, the implementation of construction projects and other construction activities would

slow down," he said.

Md Alamgir Kabir, president of the Bangladesh Cement Manufacturers Association (BCMA), said most of the raw materials used in the cement sector come from the remote areas of the southern Arab nations as well as Indonesia and Vietnam.

Clinkers and other main raw materials of cement are limestone-based and are sourced from the remote areas of the countries where population density is very low. So, there is little scope for the virus to spread from these areas.

However, the virus may spread through the crew who work in the ships used to transport the raw materials. But there is hope since there has been no news of the crew being infected with the virus since its outbreak.

"So, I think the import of the raw materials in the cement sector is safer compared to import in other sectors," Kabir said.

However, according to Kabir, the coronavirus has already affected the local industries largely in two ways. First, there are many foreign companies in Bangladesh. Most of their engineers are absent which has adversely impacted development work. Second, private sector development has slowed to some extent.

For example, the earnings from wage earners have gone down. The momentum to set up new industries has slowed down, said Kabir, also the vice-chairman of Crown Cement Group.

The entrepreneur also said that there might be long-term impacts of the coronavirus. The countries that are home to Bangladesh's overseas labour market and are an important source of foreign currency for us have been affected by the virus.

Besides, the buyers of garments, the country's major player in export earnings, are mostly from the West. The high prevalence of the virus in developed countries may lead to a big impact on this crucial sector.

"So, our garment exports may fall and this may cause a major hit for the economy."

The surge of the COVID-19 has already slowed down the implementation pace of some key projects such as the Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project, Padma Bridge Rail Link, Dhaka-Ashulia Elevated Expressway, Joydebpur-Ishwardi Dual-Gauge Railway Line, and Multi-lane Road Tunnel under the Karnaphuli River.

This coupled with the slow pace in other foreign-aided projects may affect the implementation of the overall annual development programme (ADP) in the current fiscal year, said the Centre for Policy Dialogue in a paper on March 21.

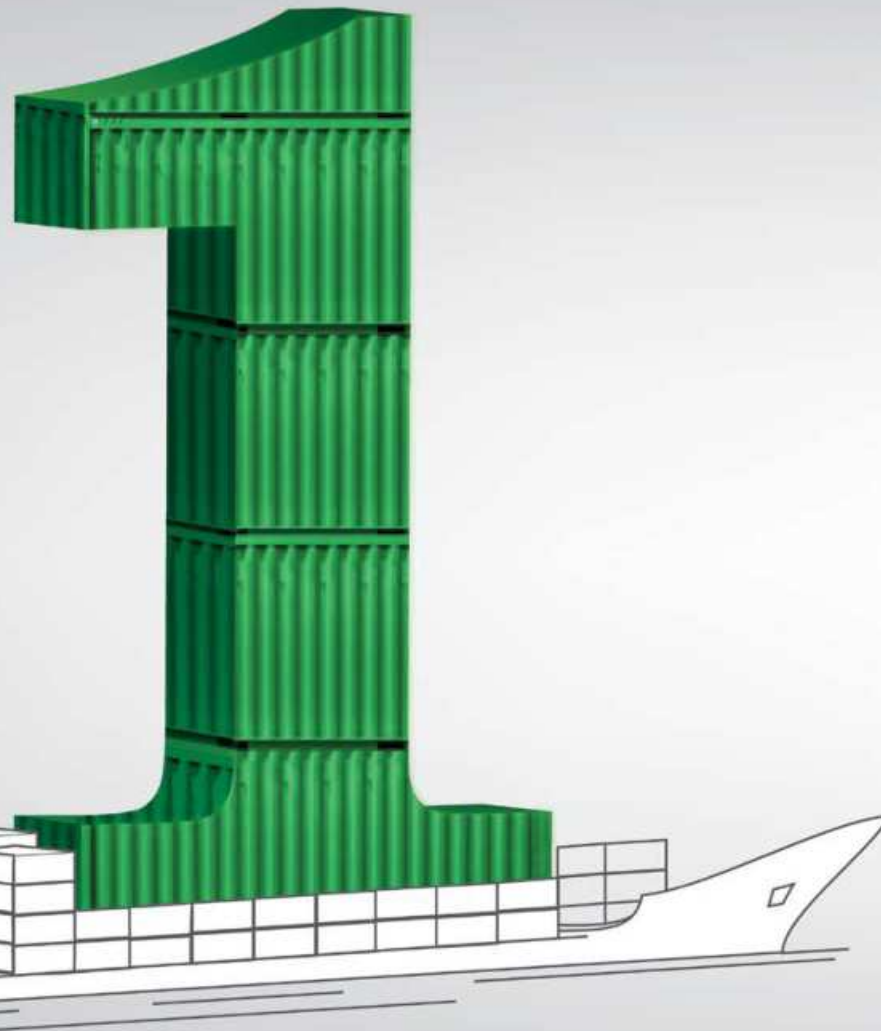
Supply-chain disruptions due to the coronavirus are likely to increase the cost of business for manufacturing and construction companies, said Elise Gould, an economist for the Economic Policy Institute, a progressive think-tank based in Washington, according to a report on the MarketWatch.

The situation calls for sensible behaviour from all parties involved – retailers, customers, banks and landowners – said REHAB's Shamsul Alamin.

He lauded the measures the government has taken so far to slow the spread of the deadly virus.

"This is the time to support the government and stand by them. It is not the time to demand something from the government. There will be plenty of time to persuade the government to meet demands of the sector once the country successfully tackles the coronavirus."

"Our wholehearted focus should be on how to contain the virus. We are ready to help the government."



THE EXPORT LEADER

Crown Cement has achieved National Export Trophy thrice for its outstanding performance in cement export. Demand for Crown Cement is gradually increasing at home and abroad for its quality. With the export of Crown Cement, Bangladeshi products are also getting the fame. In addition, Crown Cement is contributing to the national development through foreign currency earning. It's a pride for Bangladesh.



'Save Bangladesh; let's fight together'

STAR SPORT DESK

The Shakib Al Hasan Foundation, an initiative of Bangladesh's ace all-rounder, united with Mission Save Bangladesh -- a joint initiative of The Daily Star, Sheba.xyz, and Samakal and now Shakib's foundation -- on Saturday to aid in the fight against coronavirus.

Mission Save Bangladesh is the first initiative with which The Shakib Al Hasan Foundation has joined forces.

The Shakib Al Hasan Foundation is dedicated to improving the livelihood of Bangladeshis and make their lives better and safer.

So far, Mission Save Bangladesh has received donations amounting to Tk 38,64,679 from different private organisations and NGOs, with which the initiative will be supporting more than 2,500 underprivileged families.

Shakib announced his decision in a post on his official Facebook page on Saturday afternoon. The post read: "The Shakib Al Hasan Foundation has taken steps to raise funds from individuals and organizations around the country and around the world to



Mission Save Bangladesh

Shakib Al Hasan

help the underprivileged people affected by Coronavirus.

"This is going to be the first initiative in which The Shakib Al Hasan Foundation will provide support.

"Mission Save Bangladesh is an initiative of The Daily Star, Sheba.xyz and Samakal. The purpose of this project is to provide support to low-income and underprivileged people affected by Coronavirus. So far this project has helped over 2000 underprivileged families and efforts are underway to increase this number.

"Keep an eye on the Facebook page of

'Mission Save Bangladesh' to be updated with the activities - <https://www.facebook.com/missionsavebangladesh/>

"Let's all fight together, live together because human beings are there for each other."

Besides providing the families with groceries, Mission Save Bangladesh has also been carrying out community-based activities like disinfecting public places.

The partner brands and the initiators of Mission Save Bangladesh are looking forward to receiving support from The Shakib Al Hasan Foundation.

"Let's all fight together, live together because human beings are there for each other."

No opportunity before May: Hassan

SPORTS REPORTER



Sport worldwide has grinded to a halt following the outbreak of the coronavirus, with events postponed in order to stop the spread of the virus.

In Bangladesh, State Minister for Youth and Sports Zahid Ahsan Russel on March 16 informed that all sporting activities would be postponed till March 31.

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan took it a step further, telling The Daily Star yesterday that there was no opportunity to consider starting sports before May.

Caution was on the BCB president's mind after several footballers already contracted the disease.

"We are going to maintain the highest level of caution. We don't know where, when or how it will end. I think after April there may be a chance to talk but before that I don't think that there is an opportunity to talk about sports," he said.

The Dhaka Premier League's (DPL) second round was postponed on March 16 and the BCB was mulling the completion of the tournament when normal services resumed.

"After April, if it appears that the situation is in our favour, we can think about the DPL and whether we can finish it. The reason we need time is because, when sports would begin again after such a crisis, we need some preparation. What will happen to the international calendar and the series which were not played is not clear yet. I have been in talks with other ICC members and no one can grasp when the calamity might end. So we don't know the fate of the international schedules yet. We would like to start with the DPL in April to give ourselves some time to get prepared," Hassan said.

He said that they would be "focusing on what the other teams in the subcontinent are doing and how they will plan going

forward" and reiterated that their highest priority will be to "remain cautious and not to rush".

The DPL is the prime source of income for many cricketers and without any matches a lot of cricketers not under the BCB's first-class contract list are fearing financial hardships. The BCB had on March 28 announced that players who were not under its central contract list would receive a one-time incentive.

"It is our duty to help out the cricketers," Hassan said, before informing that BCB had contacted concerned authorities to make a donation to a government fund to fight the virus.



We are going to maintain the highest level of caution. We don't know where, when or how it will end. I think after April there may be a chance to talk but before that I don't think that there is an opportunity to talk about sports.

NAZMUL HASSAN
BCB PRESIDENT

Smith's leadership ban ends

AFP, Sydney

A two-year leadership ban slapped on Steve Smith after the ball-tampering scandal in South Africa ended Sunday, leaving the master batsman free to skipper Australia again.

The 30-year-old captained the team until he was suspended for 12 months over a brazen attempt to alter the ball with sandpaper under his watch during a Test in Cape Town in 2018.

Part of his punishment included a further year-long exile from any leadership role, which has now expired.

Co-conspirator and former vice-captain David Warner was banned from any leadership role for life, although both have successfully resumed their international careers. There have been calls for Smith to take back the Test captaincy from Tim Paine, but it remains unclear whether he wants to, with the 35-year-old seemingly intent on playing on.

Coach Justin Langer last year praised Paine's leadership as "brilliant" and said Smith may not want the "burden" of captaincy on top of batting pressures.

Aaron Finch is skipper of the Twenty20 and one-day teams.

Smith told Channel Nine television on Sunday he was focused only on trying to stay physically and mentally fit during the coronavirus shutdown of Australian cricket.

He was supposed to be preparing for a big-money payday at the Indian Premier League, but the tournament has already been delayed until April 15 in response to the pandemic.

With India in a three-week lockdown in a bid to contain a spread of the virus, Smith admitted the IPL appeared unlikely to go ahead.

"I think the country's basically shut its borders until the 15th of April," he said.

CA defers contract list by one month

AGENCIES, Melbourne

Cricket Australia's contract list announcement will be pushed back at least a month as the game prepares to grapple with the coronavirus pandemic.

Officials had planned to bring forward the announcement of contracts from May to April this year, in a bid to provide more certainty to the states given the flow-on effect.

Contracts run on a financial year basis until the end of June, however, announcing the women's list on Wednesday and men's on Thursday would have assisted all parties. But that plan has been put on hold for now until the end of April, given the economic uncertainty due to the pandemic.

The Australian Cricketers' Association agreed to the move. Australia are due to tour Bangladesh in June and England in July, with both those series now in serious drought. CA have been largely unaffected by the crisis for the 2019-20 financial year.

Reminiscence: My first match

In these times of social distancing, we must be safe while remembering that we do not get too used to the world being at a standstill. We were meant to go watch matches together, agree with a few of our neighbours and disagree with the rest. So, we are taking turns at The Daily Star Sport talking about what our first live experience at a cricket venue was.

Sakeb Subhan from London, 1996



The cricket bug (intended) bit me hard around the winter of 1995, when Sri Lanka, West Indies and Australia

were locked in battle in the tri-series down under and I was holed up at my grandparents' with fever, glued to the television.

The 1996 World Cup soon followed and I was hooked. That summer, we were lucky enough to go to England on my father's furlough, and at the back of my mind, I knew that I would be in the same country where the likes of Wasim Akram, Waqar Younis, Saeed Anwar and Inzamamul Haque would be engaged in a Test series.

In my early teen mind, I was just cherishing the opportunity to watch it on television in the same country. But my father, who viewed my cricket mania with a kind of amused annoyance, had the best surprise in store for me.

On July 29, he told me that he had bought tickets for the fifth day of the first Test. I cannot adequately describe my glee -- just picture



Pakistan pacer Waqar Younis is exultant after his signature yorker castles England's Graeme Hick on the fifth day of the first Test at Lord's on July 29, 1996.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

scenes of children running around the dinner table and shouting at the top of their voices.

Lord's did not have the futuristic looking media centre then, and was steeped in tradition. Reverence

is the only word to describe the feeling when entering the ground. I do not quite remember the name of the stand we sat in, but the view was that of square leg or deep cover. England, who had reached 152

for one at lunch, certainly seemed to be responding well to the target of 408 set by Akram. Skipper Michael Atherton had been leading the way with 64. Alec Stewart hit 89. The pitch, Cricinfo tells me, was slow. The sound of ball hitting bat was clear as the tradition-obsessed crowd quietened down as the bowler ran up.

England had reached tea with three wickets down, and it seemed a draw was looming. But after the break, came Waqar, who had earlier dismissed opener Nick Knight. Running in furiously, and bowling lightning fast, he made short work of England's batsmen. Graeme Hick was first to go, and Jack Russell -- the only one not to be bowled among Waqar's three victims after tea -- and Dominic Cork followed. England lost their last nine wickets for 76 runs, with leg-spinner Mushtaq Ahmed also taking five.

But in my mind's eye, it was the sight of Waqar putting the fear of God into Englishmen that still lingers, and probably a big part of why I am in this job.



After spending the past week in self-isolation, Cristiano Ronaldo finally stepped out of his home in Funchal, taking two of his children around his neighbourhood in strollers, with partner Georgina Rodriguez.

PHOTO: AFP

Fans turn to Belarus to fill void

REUTERS, Minsk



With football at a virtual standstill around the globe, fans in need of their weekly fix are turning to the Belarus Premier League to fill the void as it carries on with matches despite the coronavirus outbreak.

The league, one of Europe's least glamorous competitions, is drawing foreign fans' attention the decision to carry on and allow fans into stadiums has helped the Belarus Football Federation get broadcasting deals with sports networks in 10 countries, including Russia, Israel and India, where fans have been left with nothing to watch.

It has said it has no intention of postponing matches or cancelling the

season it began earlier this month.

While most of its teams, perhaps with the exception of BATE Borisov and Dinamo Minsk, are unknown to the majority of soccer fans, the league is making the most of stoppages to the world's top competitions.

Belarus has so far reported 94 coronavirus cases but has taken few measures to curb the outbreak. President Alexander Lukashenko, who has held power since 1994, has downplayed the need for social distancing and bragged that he continues to play ice hockey and embrace fellow players.

Yuri, a Dinamo Minsk supporter hopes fans will still flip the channel to the Belarusian league when European leagues resume.

"They will not only watch English or Italian leagues, but also the Belarusian one from time to time," he said.

MSC's polls postponed

SPORTS REPORTER

The elections and annual general meeting of Mohammedan Sporting Club Limited, scheduled for April 18, have been postponed indefinitely in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

The announcement was sent to media through an e-mail, with a letter signed by AM Amin Uddin, independent chairman of the club.

"Like everywhere else in the world, Bangladesh is also infected by the coronavirus pandemic. In these circumstances, all activities regarding the pre-announced April 18 AGM and elections of the club will be halted until further decision," said the letter.



PADMA BRIDGE RAIL LINK PROJECT IS BEING BUILT WITH BSRM
COUNTRY'S NO. 1 STEEL EXPERT **BSRM** building a safer nation

GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS
RECORD HOLDER
SHAH CEMENT
World's Largest VRM

Someshwari is being butchered

Violating court order, sand lifters go wild in Netrakona

AMINUL ISLAM, Mymensingh

Violating a court directive, some unscrupulous people continue to illegally lift sand from the Someshwari river, posing a threat to ecological diversity.

However, the local administration turns a blind eye paving the way for the destruction of the Someshwari, considered an abundant source of high-quality sand.

Locals and environmentalists say the once crystal-clear river is nearing its death due to unlawful and unregulated extraction of sand and stone by using illegal "shallow" machines.

The Netrokona district administration has leased out seven spots of the river for lifting sand.

The leased out balumahals (designated sand quarries) are Bijoypur-Bhawanipur (287 acres); Teribazar-Shibganj Bazar (976 acres); Teribazar-Chaitati (287 acres); Birisiri-Keronkhola (341 acres); Gaoakandia (142 acres); Jhanjail-Shankarpur (140 acres); Omargaon-Hashanoagaon-Bishauti (35 acres).

The administration imposes certain conditions for sand lifting -- including that sand can be only lifted from morning to dusk and motorised pumps or dredgers cannot be used in the process.

However, leaseholders continue to lift sand round the clock; at times, up to 200 dredgers can be seen in the river lifting sand, alleged locals.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 3



Planes of local carriers are parked on the apron of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport yesterday as all flights, except one weekly to China, of local airlines have been cancelled.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

US diplomats, citizens head home today

Chartered flight to take them to America

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A group of US citizens, including some diplomats, will be leaving Bangladesh today in a chartered flight arranged by the US government amid fears of coronavirus pandemic, US embassy officials in Dhaka have said.

They have not, however, specified the number of those leaving.

"I can tell you the flight will be full ... They are going because they want to be with their loved ones," an official said in a videoconference with some journalists yesterday.

An airlines source said the number of passengers would around 300.

The US State Department last week issued a travel advisory recommending its citizens not to travel abroad.

And if anyone wants to return to the US, the department would arrange it for them, the advisory said.

In response, some 10,000 US citizens have already returned to the US from 28 countries, the embassy officials in Dhaka said.

All passengers must agree to reimburse the U.S. Government for the flight by signing a promissory note for approximately the amount of a full-fare economy flight, or comparable alternate transportation, to the designated destination that would have been charged immediately before this crisis.

Asked, if the US citizens would feel safer in their country than in Bangladesh amid the coronavirus outbreak, a US diplomat said as per the regulations in Bangladesh, anyone having fever or symptoms of Covid-19 will be quarantined.

SEE PAGE 5 COL 8



PRAYER TIMING MARCH 30

Fajr Zohr Asr Maghrib Esha
AZAN 4-45 12-45 4-45 6-20 7-45
JAMAAT 5-20 1-15 5-00 6-25 8-15

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION

Earnings of Bede dry up

EMRUL HASAN BAPPI

The life of Bede community members in Shariatpur has come to a halt as they are prevented from earning their livelihood by roaming around localities amid fear of coronavirus spread.

The local administration asked them not to go out of their homes without offering any financial assistance, said 35-year-old Bede woman Hasina Begum.

As a result, the day-to-day earnings have stopped putting the community members in trouble surviving, she added.

Showing snake charming, acrobatics of monkey, magic tricks, and selling herbal medicines, amulets, river oyster pearls and talismans in different areas are the traditional income sources of the Bede.

Besides, some males of the community work as day labourers. But all of these have now stopped due to the direction from the local administration.

Hasina said, "Our income sources have completely closed as we do not go outside. We even fail to ensure one meal a day to our families. We will not survive if the government does not help us."

Like Hasina, around 600 people in Domshar and Angaria unions in Sadar upazila of Shariatpur have envolved their lives because of the crisis that occurred due to ongoing 10-day shutdown.

Abdul Sattar, sardar of a Bede

SEE PAGE 4 COL 4

FIRST YEAR OF BANGLADESH BANGABANDHU'S NATION-BUILDING CHALLENGES

Bangabandhu calls for mass education



Bangabandhu talking to intellectuals in Chittagong on March 30, 1972.

MARCH 30, 1972

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

BANGABANDHU'S ADDRESS TO INTELLECTUALS

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman today emphasises the need for mass education in the country. He observes that without mass education, economic problems cannot be solved effectively, nor can socialism be implemented. Addressing intellectuals at the government house in Chittagong, the prime minister says that an education commission is being set up with educationists and scientists. He further says there is no scope for differences regarding the need for a people-oriented education system. He observes that our

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1



Construction of Covid-19 hospital to continue

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The authorities have decided to continue setting up the dedicated hospital for coronavirus patients in the capital's Tejgaon industrial area which was halted for a day due to protesting locals.

Akij Group and Gonoshasthaya Kendra have jointly taken the initiative to build a 301-bedded hospital with modern medical facilities in Tejgaon.

The hospital's construction saw a temporary halt on Saturday when a group of locals staged demonstration against it, saying setting up a hospital for coronavirus patients could cause the virus spread in the locality.

The incident halted the refurbishment works at a building for hours.

Contacted, Ali Hossain Khan, officer-in-charge

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

1/5+ STAY HOME, STAY WELL

Time to teach values, hygiene

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The countrywide school shutdown, enforced to curb further spread of the coronavirus, can be an ideal time for parents to teach their children morality, personal hygiene and share various tales, especially folk.

During the shutdown, it is critical to provide help to children at home, for whom confinement can be a reason to become restless. These students cannot meet with their schoolmates and friends, which can aggravate the problem.

"Usually, parents get little time to teach morality to their children. So, this is the right time for parents to give more time to their kids," said Professor Siddiqur Rahman, former Director of the Institute of Education and Research at the University of Dhaka.

He said once kids and parents have identified the subjects they will study, they make a schedule and display it prominently so that everyone in the family knows what is coming and when it is over.

Most kids work off a schedule in their classrooms, so recreating something similar at home can ease the transition to a different learning environment for the foreseeable future, the educationist said.

Parents can also make time for fun with their children and read stories and poetry to them to enrich their minds, he said.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 4

Ctg admin in aid of the destitute

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

The Chattogram district administration and metropolitan police distributed relief materials to 480 poor and low-income families yesterday.

The families were severely hit by a 10-day countrywide shutdown enforced by the government on Thursday to contain the spread of novel coronavirus.

The Chattogram district administration and metropolitan police have been distributing relief materials in different parts of the district since Saturday.

Deputy Commissioner of Chattogram Elias Hossain, along with his team, yesterday visited some houses who returned from abroad and are in home quarantine at Khulshi, one of the posh areas in the port city.

Masudur Rahman, assistant commissioner of Chattogram district administration, said DC Elias distributed the relief

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Parvin Begum sitting on the pavement of Dhanmondi Road-21. She has no husband or children to take care of her. She used to live on alms but now she is in serious trouble. The 10-day closure to slow the spread of coronavirus has left streets devoid of people, and now she is finding it hard to survive.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Made for poor, eco-friendly too

Biodegradable masks being made from scraps at RMG factories for free distribution in 64 dists

NILIMA JAHAN

Some members of a garment factory alliance have been producing biodegradable general-use masks from surplus fabrics to distribute among the poor for free.

Following the coronavirus outbreak, masks, often made of non-woven materials including plastic, have been in high demand and are selling in the market at Tk 30 to Tk 100.

Under such circumstances, at least nine factories, which are part of Eco-friendly Low-Cost Liquid Absorbent (Ella) alliance, decided to distribute their masks in all 64 districts through the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA).

They entered an agreement with BIDA on March 19, Mamunur Rahman, coordinator of Ella, told The Daily Star.

He said initially they had planned to supply 25 lakh free masks but as the factories are closing down, they might need to revise their target.

"In our textile industry, we have a wide range of good quality fabric scraps and leftovers that can be reused for diverse purposes," said Mamunur, who also founded Ella Pad, a free sanitary napkin produced at a lower cost from textile scraps for workers of Ella's members.

He said the fabric scraps can be used to produce general-use masks in response to the current situation, when there is an apparent shortage of the product in the market.

Ella members have already distributed free masks to the workers of their factories, he added.

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