

Coronavirus threat: Tea workers' say no to work



PHILIP GAIN

THE tea workers of Shamsheernagar Tea Garden in Kamalganj upazila, Moulvibazar, took matters into their own hands in defiance of the garden management and stopped work from March 27. Owned by Duncan Brothers, Shamsheernagar Tea Garden is a big garden with 2,404 registered workers. Early in the morning of March 27, a group of some 50 members of *panchayets*, elders, and workers went to the manager of the tea garden to tell him that they want to stop work.

"We argued with the manager in reference to the Prime Minister's speech of March 25 and her instructions for everybody to stay at home," said Srikanta Kanu Gopal, general secretary of Shamsheernagar main garden *panchayet*. "But the manager responded with a letter from the Deputy Director of Labour (DDL), Sreemangal, saying that the holiday is not applicable for tea workers. Our lives are more precious than tea. So, we have shut down the tea garden."

While the decisive action of *panchayets* and tea workers in Shamsheernagar Tea Garden did not surprise Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), the lone union of nearly 100,000 registered tea workers, it was an embarrassment to Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), which represents the owners of the tea gardens and the state.

BTA, with a circular of the Cabinet Division and the letter from the DDL in hand, has declined to stop operations of the tea gardens during the lockdown of the country from March 26 to April 4.

Shamsheernagar Tea Garden also resumed its operations on March 30, with work hours up to 2pm. "The *panchayets*, UP members, and tea workers went to the manager to know if they will get wages and benefits if they do not work," reported Asha Ormal, joint general secretary of the *panchayet* committee of Shamsheernagar Tea Garden (main). "Understanding that the manager cannot make this decision, we proposed to work half-day from 30 March while we wait for a decision from the upper level. We do not want the tea workers to starve."

The manager of Shamsheernagar Tea Garden also corroborated this view, saying that the decision is not one that he can independently make, and that "we did not force anybody to work; the workers later joined work again."

On the other hand, the Sylhet Valley Committee of BCSU has shut down all 23 gardens in the district. "We have sent letters to all managers in these tea gardens," said Raju Guala, president of the Sylhet Valley

Committee, "demanding full pay of wages and rations during the shutdown."

The BCSU, relatively weaker at the negotiation table compared to the government and owners, sent a letter to the DDL in Sreemangal on March 26—asking for the state and owners to take appropriate measures to shut down the tea gardens with full pay and ration to the tea workers—when it saw a press release from the Cabinet Division directing all government and non-government offices to shut down. The DDL, Sreemangal, gave a quick response the same day: "According to the press release of the Cabinet Division, these general holidays are

falling prices of tea," he said. "And like the tea workers, we also need help. With production costs going up, it has become a big challenge for us to run the industry." The official said that the BTA will write to the appropriate government offices once the offices resume after April 4.

However, Rambhajan Kairi, general secretary of BCSU, observed that this action will be too late by then. "We, the workers and the communities in the labour lines, are in a state of fear in the current situation."

What is well demonstrated from the action of the tea workers in Shamsheernagar Tea Garden and its four subsidiary gardens is that

labour laws. The water man (*paniwala*) brings mainly portable water to their workplace. Many workers drink water from the same glasses. Some drink water poured onto the palms of their hands, which are not properly washed or even washed at all. What can be more dangerous than this for the spreading of a pathogen?

Second, there is no toilet for the female tealeaf pickers who work all day in the garden. They have to defecate in the open if it becomes necessary. After defecation in the open, they generally do not wash their hands with soap.

Third, proper hand wash, the single

Fifth, *patta*, or selling of local liquor, is seen in almost all tea gardens, and is no less concerning. *Patta* attracts visitors from nearby cities and local Bengali villages. The law enforcing agencies, administration, union councils and BCSU can work together to at least temporarily close all *pattas* and strictly restrict outside visitors from entering the tea gardens.

One may wonder what is right for the tea workers and tea gardens in Bangladesh at this moment. We may check what has been happening in Indian tea gardens at this time of crisis. According to a Times of India report, tea gardens in Assam have decided to shut down all its operations during the state lockdown. "Tea is no more an essential commodity and hence will not fall in the list of exempted services during a lockdown period," said Adviser of North Eastern Tea Association (NETA) Bidyananda Barkakoty in a statement. The Consultative Committee of Plantation Association (CCPA) has also announced that a tea garden lockdown is inevitable. However, essential services in Assam tea gardens will continue on a roster basis. Assam has at least 850 tea gardens employing two million workers, according to government records. While in Assam the owners, state government and trade unions have been working together for the safety of tea workers, what we see in Bangladesh is very sad. BTA, the counterpart of NETA in Assam, has taken a hardline stance on shutting down the tea gardens at the time of a global pandemic. We also do not see enough sympathy in the government agencies responsible for overseeing the wellbeing of tea workers.

What the *panchayets* and tea workers of Shamsheernagar Tea Garden did on March 27, followed by other gardens in Moulvibazar district and finally, all gardens in the Sylhet division, demonstrate the desperation of the tea workers, who experience deprivation and neglect in their everyday life. It will not be surprising if workers shut down many more gardens as the days go by. The government offices are closed at this moment, as well as the BTA and BCSU offices. But we trust they can still discuss matters and take crucial policy decisions regarding shutting down the operations of tea gardens. We hope the tea workers can also be incorporated into the Tk 5,000 crore package announced by the government. A tiny slice from this amount will be sufficient to pay the wages of the tea workers during this emergency. The owners also have a responsibility so that the tea workers do not starve. Tea workers will volunteer to work according to a roster to prevent any permanent damage to the gardens, which is their lifeblood, but their concerns still need to be heard immediately.

Philip Gain is a researcher and director of the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD).



PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

not applicable for the tea workers."

The DDL, on a separate occasion, also said that the press release specifically says that manufacturers, distributors and traders of medicine, food and industries, institutions, markets and shops would run under their own management, and that the BTA said that they would run tea gardens under their own management since the government did not ask them to shut down operations. However, he said that they have asked all to ensure the safety and hygiene of workers during this period.

A topmost official of BTA, unwilling to be identified, confirmed that they are concerned but not prepared to shut down the tea gardens. "We are already beset with the

they do not have enough trust in BCSU's soft move and in the garden management. It is true that the tea gardens are away from our sight, in what seems to be a distant place. But what is evident from the work conditions in the tea gardens and that in the labour lines where tea workers and their communities live is that they must maintain social isolation among themselves, like the rest of the country. The following are some arguments in support of the tea workers, who work six days a week and now want to stay home and protect themselves.

First, the tea workers, particularly the female tea leaf pickers, work in groups. There are no toilets and washing facilities under a shade at the workplace, as provided for by

most significant practice in the fight against coronavirus, is almost non-existent in the tea gardens. I phoned some workers to know about hand wash practices at this time; they report cut pieces of soap have been supplied by the management, but the water that the *paniwala* brings and the soap are both inadequate. They still eat their lunch with hands that are dirty from plucking tea leaf. They also eat their lunch in open spaces and in groups, sitting close to each other.

Fourth, at the time of collection of tea leaves, twice a day, a few hundred tea leaf pickers huddle together with their head-loads of tea leaves. This is still done, during a time when the most feared pathogen on the planet may spread.

Covid-19 and the Rohingya refugee crisis

The first confirmed coronavirus case in Cox's Bazar exposes how our systems fail the most vulnerable

ATHENA RAYBURN

ALL around the world, the numbers are climbing. Each day registers thousands of new cases and lives lost. In Europe, now the epicenter of the pandemic, governments know that the worst is yet to come and are implementing increasingly restrictive measures to enforce social distancing and isolation. In Cox's Bazar, we have been watching the world and holding our breath for the first confirmed case of Covid-19. With reports of the first confirmed case in the local community in Cox's Bazar, it's just a matter of time until the virus reaches the vulnerable population living in cramped conditions in the largest refugee settlement on earth. Thousands of people could die.

One million Rohingya refugees, half of whom are children, have been sheltering in sprawling camps in Cox's Bazar since August 2017, when they were forced to flee their homes in the face of horrific violence. For almost three years, Rohingya refugees have been telling us they want to go home and resume normal life. They want their children to go to school and for families separated by the conflict to be reunited. So

far, international attempts to hold Myanmar accountable for alleged crimes against the Rohingya and improve conditions in Rakhine state have failed spectacularly. In short, it will be years until the Rohingya see justice.

As global life grinds to a halt in a bid to contain the coronavirus, we must remember that for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, their lives have already been in limbo for years; it is their status quo, and it will not end with the containment of coronavirus.

If there is one lesson for refugees that we must take away from this crisis—it must be that refugee camps, and a life in limbo, should never be considered an acceptable long-term solution. We must challenge perceptions that because the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar escaped Myanmar with their lives, they are safe. The coronavirus is a warning to us that there is not endless time to resolve the issues in Myanmar that would finally allow the Rohingya to return home. While the people and Government of Bangladesh have generously continued to shelter the Rohingya for years, life in the camps is not safe.

Children, in particular girls, are at a high risk of exploitation, violence and trafficking. Rohingya refugees do not have access to livelihood opportunities to help them

support their families.

We are now witnessing the impact that coronavirus is having in communities that can social distance, wash hands and have access to strong healthcare systems, yet this virus has still brought them to their knees. In the densely packed camps of Cox's Bazar, options of social distancing or self-isolation are remote, with many refugees living in cramped conditions in makeshift shelters made of bamboo and tarpaulin. Even simple hygiene practices such as regular hand washing become complicated feats of logistical planning when access to clean water is severely limited.

The Government of Bangladesh and humanitarian agencies have sprung into action. Rohingya refugees are included in the Government's national plan to respond to Covid-19, food distribution agencies are developing new ways to distribute food that minimises close person to person contact. Rohingya volunteers are mobilising throughout the camps to spread hygiene and prevention messaging that will protect their families and loved ones. Volunteers from the host community are being trained too, supporting everything from delivering awareness trainings to implementing referral

mechanisms and medical treatment. The humanitarian agencies in Cox's Bazar have already stripped back to essential-only services like healthcare and food distribution. This is a necessary step to ensure we are reducing the chances of transmission and minimising the impact of this disease on the Rohingya community, but, this decision too, will come at a cost. Just two months ago, the Bangladeshi Government approved the use of the Myanmar school curriculum in the camps, but children's education will now have to be suspended to contain the coronavirus. Our child-friendly spaces are closed and may be repurposed for medical use if the need arises. Rohingya children are now not only at risk of Covid-19 but will have to face this challenge without access to their regular support systems or safe spaces to play.

We will do whatever we can to work with the Government of Bangladesh and Rohingya refugees to protect them from Covid-19. But the fact remains, Rohingya children should not be living in these camps. They should not have to fight a global pandemic with the bare minimum needed to survive. They should be at home, at school; playing and learning. At a time when there are more displaced people around the world than ever

before—the coronavirus has exposed how our systems fail the most vulnerable. Our global mechanisms for accountability and the protection of human rights have failed the Rohingya so far—it is absolutely essential that we do not fail them again. This is a global pandemic and the virus is now hitting the most vulnerable communities. We must come together. Only a global response will stop the spread of the virus everywhere. This means the international community must step up to offer medical support, testing kits, share data and provide much needed funding to support the response. But stepping up also means so much more than that. When the dust settles, when planes start flying again and the borders re-open—we cannot go back to "business as usual", we cannot assume we have endless time to resolve this crisis, that Rohingya children can wait. Rohingya children must be afforded a future of hope and opportunity, like every child deserves. We may not have the power to safeguard against another pandemic. But we do have the power to ensure it isn't the most vulnerable that end up paying the heaviest price.

Athena Rayburn is Save the Children's Humanitarian Advocacy Manager, based in Cox's Bazar.

QUOTABLE Quote

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE
(1905-1980)
French philosopher, writer and political activist

If you are lonely when you're alone, you are in bad company.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 "Sexy" Beatles girl
- 6 Lightning home
- 11 Bitter humor
- 12 Self-evident truth
- 13 Subsequently
- 14 Gerald Ford's wife
- 15 Excitation
- 17 "Bali-"
- 19 Keats work
- 20 June honoree
- 23 Acid's opposite
- 25 Go it alone
- 26 Start of a surreptitious warning
- 28 Oxford, e.g.
- 29 Son of Poseidon
- 30 Playing marble
- 31 Auction signal

DOWN

- 1 Pop's daughter
- 2 "Exodus" hero
- 3 "You're telling me!"
- 4 Ruler division
- 5 Skeptical reaction
- 6 Dinner setting
- 7 Skating jump
- 8 Cambridge sch.
- 9 Poker prize
- 10 One of Jo's sisters
- 16 Foolish
- 17 Possessed, in the Bible
- 18 Island greeting
- 20 "I have no ideal!"
- 21 Crazy as -
- 22 Soft
- 24 Finished off
- 25 Enjoy Aspen
- 27 Trials
- 31 Floppy top
- 33 Tear down
- 34 Scissors sound me!"
- 35 Track trip
- 36 Aussie bird
- 37 Crone
- 39 Despondent
- 40 Snaky shape

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

RECAP SPAR
OMEGA SLOMO
BARED TARPIS
ONES GAGGLE
TAB MUG YES
STREAMER
EAST SNUG
STREAKER
MOB ROT ROE
AMAZED BARS
RAGES BEIGE
CHESS LENIN
HALT TREAT

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott