

COVID-19

# Can this be the war to end all wars?



A CLOSER LOOK  
TASNEEM TAYEB

**W**ARS and epidemics make the perfect bedfellows. Wars create the perfect wombs where murky diseases can gestate and then combust, wiping out entire populations as they spread around the world. While infectious diseases are democratic in nature—they do not discriminate between their victims based on their social or financial status—the worst hit is usually taken by the displaced who are more susceptible to catching the attention of these grim reapers: forced to live in sub-human conditions, often without food, water and access to basic sanitation facilities—malnourished or undernourished, with their immune systems compromised.

According to a study titled, "Conflict and Emerging Infectious Diseases", authors Michelle Gayer, Dominique Legros, Pierre Formenty and Maire A Connolly argue that "Conflict may lead to the displacement of large populations into temporary settlements or camps with overcrowding and rudimentary shelters, inadequate safe water and sanitation, and increased exposure to disease vectors during the acute phase of the emergency. In protracted and post-conflict situations, populations may have high rates of illness and mortality due to breakdown of health systems, flight of trained staff, failure of existing disease control programs, and destroyed infrastructure... These conditions, which are encountered during or after war and conflict, favor emergence of infectious diseases."

At the time of writing, covid-19 has claimed 37,831 lives worldwide, according to Worldometer, and 786,459 people across 199 countries and territories continue to battle this pandemic. As per UNHCR data, there are currently 70.8 million displaced

people around the world, of whom 41.3 million are internally displaced and 25.9 million are refugees, including the 1.1 million Rohingya refugees living in Cox's Bazar.

In view of this reality, the current UN Secretary-General António Guterres' call to stop wars to fight Covid-19 together—"I am calling for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives"

The area hosts more than three million people, 1.5 of whom are estimated to be displaced, thanks to the nine-year-long bloody civil war.

The long standing war in the country has not only uprooted people; it has significantly destroyed the infrastructure of the country and damaged its public service facilities, including its healthcare system—once considered to be one of the best in the region. And things have gotten worse for the people of Idlib since fresh

especially among those living in camps. "If we face this situation here, I think it will be endless," said Mohamed Twaish, a field coordinator for Relief Experts Association, a humanitarian organisation working in Idlib province, while talking to Betsy Joles for a report published by Vox. According to Joles, "Fear that the virus is already festering has been growing for weeks among humanitarian organisations in Syria's northwest, where the capacity of health care facilities to test and monitor

alleys of war-torn Idlib, the residents can only pray that this time they will be spared the excruciating pain of death, loves lost and dreams of a better life shattered forever.

Only recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) has decided to send over 2,000 test kits to Idlib, and it is the least that they can do for the helpless displaced. But the question remains, in an overcrowded area of three million people, where social distancing, let alone isolation is almost impossible, will test kits be sufficient?

The WHO has also suggested that three hospitals with intensive care units have been turned into isolation units equipped with ventilators. They have also mobilised nearly 1,000 healthcare workers and are expecting delivery of protective gear, including 10,000 surgical masks and 500 respirator masks.

With other organisations, including Early Warning and Alert Response Network (EWARN) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) sending more test kits and hygiene packages, the only consolation is that some of these ill-fated Syrians might be saved from the dark clutch of Covid-19, if not all of them. If hospitals in developed countries like the UK and US grapple to get the situation under control, one can only imagine what it would be like in Syria if there is a Covid-19 outbreak.

And then there is the irony of the UN Secretary-General's call to end wars to fight Covid-19 together. As if the world needs a disease to end all these meaningless, futile wars.

But it is amidst fire, fury and follies we live and we die, be it in sparsely planned cities or cramped camps and dark alleys. It is how it is, how it has been, and based on available objective evidence, how it will continue to be. The question: does it have to be, remains just wide-eyed naïveté.

Perhaps we do need a massive jolt to the system to break this cycle of eternal returns after all.

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A Syrian boy poses for a picture last week during an awareness workshop on coronavirus at a camp for displaced people in Atme town in Syria's northwestern Idlib province.

PHOTO: AAREF WATAD/AFP

—comes as no surprise.

When a host is infected by a super-spreader like Covid-19, they turn into a mobile carrier of the virus, spreading it among others through various means, especially where distancing or isolation is difficult.

The north-western Syrian province of Idlib, for instance, makes for an ideal breeding for the ravaging Covid-19.

attacks by the Russian-backed Syrian government started from December 2019, in an attempt to retake control of the area from rebel forces.

With nine confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the country and one death, health workers and medical professionals working in Idlib are now more worried than ever about the potential spread of the disease,

suspected coronavirus cases is especially limited."

Caught in the middle of the infighting between Turkey-backed rebels and the Russia-backed Assad regime, and in the middle of nowhere, the prospects of Idlib residents to combat the disease look pretty grim. Amid apprehensions that the disease might already be lurking in the dark

## Homebound: The first eight days

MUSHTAQUE CHOWDHURY

**T**HE country, and the world at large, has changed at an unprecedented pace over the last eight days. All 193 of the UN member countries have reported the existence of Covid-19 within their borders. We remain homebound, along with a third of humanity. No other global crisis has reached so many countries and people in the past, not even the Spanish flu in 1918. It is levelling socioeconomic gaps. Rich, poor, the powerful and the disenfranchised – all are susceptible.

My wife and I decided to give in to the mounting pressure from our children and finally stay home from March 18, 2020—incidentally the day the first Covid-19 related death was announced in Bangladesh. At the risk of sounding insensitive, the first hit for us was in our apartment building. The caretaker left his job without notice. The cleaner became irregular. I decided to take over some of their jobs, including distributing newspapers to different apartments. As a precaution for all involved, we gave paid leave to our help.

Now that we are on our own, I'm letting the inner optimist out and approaching this from a glass half-full perspective. I finally have time to do things that I don't normally do or am not allowed to do. Yesterday, I decided to cook *bhaji* with *shalgom*. This particular winter vegetable is normally used as an ingredient with fish or meat, not as a *bhaji*. My wife appreciated my cooking with a grain of salt—"delicious but it has too much oil." I have re-taken charge of cleaning, which I used to do while abroad. Watching

movies is another popular pastime. Like many others, we re-watched the 2011 hit *Contagion*, which is very similar to what is happening in the world today. I also read Jajabor's epic *Drishtipat* after many decades.

Staying at home and the additional cleaning and apartment duties has not prevented me from my "other work". Many academics and researchers are taking the crisis as an opportunity to engage in research on the pandemic. As part of several virtual working groups, I have had the opportunity to connect with some very insightful people, which is furthering my thinking. Similarly, I am spending considerable time each day on conference calls with colleagues and friends from around the world who are concerned about the crisis and its potential responses. In one such meeting convened by a local group and attended by leading health specialists and some with close connections to the government's Covid-19 responses, it was abundantly clear that a grim future would be inevitable unless effective and decisive steps were taken without any further delay.

The additional time has allowed me to become more socially active on social media platforms as well, where my friends and I keep tabs on each other. I was recently surprised to know that some were still meeting up for breakfast and *addas*. I have recently written about this lacklustre response we are seeing to the requests of "social distancing" and how it remains "foreign" in our culture. Thinking further, I am also disturbed by the lukewarm actions taken by our mosques and the powerful Islamic Foundation in restricting congregations.

When mosques in most Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia have forbidden congregations, we are continuing as if nothing or very little has happened—this can be fatally sloppy, careless and irresponsible. I may not be an authority on this, but wouldn't endangering the lives of your fellow *musalli* go against the grain of Islam? In times like these, the government must effectively lead and look beyond politics to make difficult choices.

*We must also keep in mind our elders. Isolation, especially for them, can be debilitating. I have been trying to do my bit by chatting with elderly relatives and my own teachers. I recently called Professor MG Mostafa, a former Chairman of the Statistics Department of Dhaka University. His wife, also my teacher, passed away many years ago. He is alone in his apartment in Uttara, and I could sense how happy he was to receive such a call in these days of distress and uncertainties.*

Of late, the government has taken a number of positive steps. However, while the country is now in a near "lockdown" condition, why are we not calling it so? The government offices have been given *chhuti*, and to many, as we have seen, this is interpreted as "holiday". In such emergencies, it is always critical to be clear, transparent and decisive—call a spade, a spade! In such situations, it is always the poor

who suffer most, particularly those who live hand-to-mouth and depend on meagre wages. The Prime Minister, in her address to the nation, announced a package of financial assistance for those who would be hard-hit by the crisis. These include an incentive package worth Tk 5000 crore to help the export-oriented sectors. This, as she said emphatically, would be used to pay for workers' wages. She also announced a few other measures for the rural poor. However, it is not clear whether these

a new kit by Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK) was exciting. I started wondering what BRAC was doing. In any previous disasters, be it floods, cyclones, civil strife or refugee crisis, BRAC was always at the frontline. As part of this, BRAC and Channel-i have already initiated a joint communication programme on Covid-19. I understand the new Chairman of BRAC is also planning to convene a (virtual) meeting of leading NGOs to coordinate the response efforts.

The show of voluntarism across the country is also very encouraging. Many civil society groups are active in producing protective gear and creating awareness. I feel very proud that the alumni of my school in Sylhet have been extending such help to those needing them. There are many others like this.

We must also keep in mind our elders. Isolation, especially for them, can be debilitating. I have been trying to do my bit by chatting with elderly relatives and my own teachers. I recently called Professor MG Mostafa, a former Chairman of the Statistics Department of Dhaka University. His wife, also my teacher, passed away many years ago. He is alone in his apartment in Uttara, and I could sense how happy he was to receive such a call in these days of distress and uncertainties.

This is the time to stay at home, but we must remember to not shut all doors, figuratively speaking. We have to stay active and innovative and extend whatever assistance we can to face this unparalleled crisis together.

Mushtaque Chowdhury is adviser and founding Dean of James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**CHINUA ACHEBE**  
(1930-2013)  
Nigerian novelist, poet, professor and critic

*While we do our good works, let us not forget that the real solution lies in a world in which charity will have become unnecessary.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Home run, in slang
- 6 Refers to
- 11 Less than right
- 12 seize by force
- 13 Satchel part
- 14 Singer Mel
- 15 Malleable metal
- 16 Francois's friend
- 18 Writer Anais
- 19 Genesis name
- 20 Scathing review
- 21 Terminus
- 22 Show shame
- 24 Mid-month time
- 25 Agony
- 27 Tennis great
- Arthur
- 29 Patriot's tune

**DOWN**

- 1 Winery worker
- 2 On the go
- 3 Made a fresh start
- 4 Seventh Greek
- 5 letter
- 33 Find a sum
- 34 Quarterback
- Manning
- 35 Ravine
- 36 Hair goo
- 37 Earth color
- 38 Make a speech
- 40 Superior group
- 42 Daughter of
- Lear
- 43 Passover meal
- 44 Skilled
- 45 Canary chow
- 23 Buck's mate
- 24 Bank acct.
- addition
- 26 Infinite
- 27 Soft yarn
- 28 Blackened
- 30 On cloud nine
- 31 Ore workers
- 33 Bond, for one
- 39 Keg need
- 41 Spike of film

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

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

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott