

Workers came in droves due to confusing signals

Keep factories closed but pay the workers

THE reports and visuals of thousands of garment workers coming back to Dhaka from their villages all over the country, cramming into ferries, pickups, trucks or walking on foot, are extremely concerning as such an influx and crowding of people are the perfect recipe for a rapid spread of the coronavirus. It completely defeats the purpose of the government's shutdown and directives of social distancing. The reason why these workers came back is simple: they wanted to keep their jobs and they wanted to collect their salaries. Many were called back by their employers. We simply do not understand how, if there is a shutdown, some units in the garment sector should remain open so that workers are compelled to come to work.

Obviously, there has been some ambivalence regarding the shutdown in the case of the garment factories. The BGMEA has requested all factories to remain closed until April 11. But the fact remains that all these people have come into the city in droves significantly increasing the risk of contracting the infection themselves and spreading it to others. Now that many of them will probably go back home, there could be another phase of spreading of the virus. So why did this happen?

It happened because the BGMEA did not give a clear direction before that all factories must be closed down. The workers were not given the assurance that they would still have their jobs and that they would be paid their wages during their absence. Such assurance was crucial to ensure the shutdown would be maintained. In fact, there were rumours that factories would be laying off workers causing further panic. According to a report in this paper, the government's Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment (DIFE) repeatedly said that the factory authorities could keep their units open, but they needed to ensure adequate safety measures for their workers. How can safety be ensured when practically it is very difficult to have social distancing and safety gear for all workers inside the garment factories? A vice president of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association has said factories working to meet work orders could run their units and those without work orders can reopen on April 10.

Covid-19 lockdown affects daily wage-earners the most

Food and financial assistance must reach all marginalised groups

WE, and indeed the rest of the world, are going through unprecedented times pulverised by the onslaught of Covid-19. The only way open to our government to thwart the spread of the virus is to clamp a country-wide shutdown. Admittedly, such a measure has many attendant and unintended consequences. With the economy virtually at a standstill, the worst sufferers are the daily wage-earners and those involved in the informal economy. And there is a large number of them, who are without work and without food, and most of them are slum-dwellers living in various pockets in the capital city. Such a situation that we face today in the capital has never been experienced before—the capital at a virtual standstill.

It was very heartening to hear the PM assure the nation that these people would not be left unattended, and we have also noticed efforts by the administration to distribute food stuff to these people. But that has been sporadic at best and the aid has not reached a great majority in this category of people. Efforts by individuals, various social and cultural organisations and business houses are commendable but not adequate. And for many of the needy—especially women, the elderly and the infirm—it is difficult to contest with the others for his or her share of the dole. A report in this paper yesterday depicts the sad plight of these daily wage-earners living in Dhaka city. And the picture is not much different in other parts of the country.

We believe that the situation is very akin to what we have faced during any natural disaster, and would have to be tackled as such in respect of relief distribution. Private and government efforts should be coordinated through a comprehensive and sustainable plan. A list of the needy people including the floating population should be drawn, starting at the ward level in the capital, and the distribution should be managed by the ward commissioners and "members" under the supervision of the military. This should also be replicated in other parts of the country. Now is the time for the people's representatives to prove their mettle and their worth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Don't ignore safety measures

It was shocking to see workers of garment factories returning to Dhaka from various places in the country to resume work, despite an ongoing "lockdown". Many were seen walking for miles, in close proximity, while many more travelled in crammed pickup vans and trucks. I understand that they returned due to the fear of losing their jobs. Many felt forced to return because of the factory owners who left them in the dark. But the concerned authorities are dealing with the matter and as far as I know, the government has stepped forward to aid the struggling industries and their employees. Why then put these workers—and the general public by extension—in danger of exposure to the coronavirus? If the virus infects them in their workstations, it is bound to spread to other places. Who will take responsibility for that?

Nishita Sanaul, by email

The Spectre of Coronavirus: Lessons to Be Learned

SADEQUIL ISLAM

TO borrow a famous phrase from history, a spectre is haunting the world—the spectre of Covid-19. Albert Camus, in his novel *The Plague*, considered plagues a simile of wars and thought plagues and wars always found people surprised and unprepared. Indeed, the world today is the plague-infected city of Oran (the setting of *The Plague*) writ large.

The coronavirus has generated twin crises: a public health crisis and an economic crisis reminiscent of the Great Depression. The economies of major countries including the United States are facing negative demand as well as supply shocks. Because of social isolation and travel restrictions, many industries in the service sector, such as travel and tourism, sports, entertainment, retail outlets, hotels and restaurants, are facing rapid declines in demand. The supply shocks are induced by disruptions of supply chains in an interdependent world economy and, in some places, by closure of factories.

Forecasts of many organisations predict a severe impact of the virus in the short run and in 2020. The OECD predicted that under the best scenario, the growth rates in 2020 will decline to 4.9 percent in China and only 1.9 percent in the USA. In a more recent forecast, Goldman Sachs predicts a gloomier picture: In the second quarter of this year, the US economic growth will decline, at an annualised rate, by a whopping 24 percent, a figure comparable to that during the Great Depression in the 1930s.

The human toll of the virus can be gauged by exploring the effects on labour markets. According to a recent report of the ILO, the number of workers in the world who could lose their jobs ranges from 5.3 million (under the best scenario) to 24.7 million (under the worst scenario). According to a projection of Goldman Sachs, the number of unemployment insurance claims in the United States may jump to 2.25 million because of the coronavirus. In Canada, the number of unemployment insurance claims recently surged to half a million compared with just 27,000 last year. It is also evident that the coronavirus is widening the divide between low-income and high-income groups. Many low-income and "gig workers" in the service sector, for example, workers in restaurants, delivery workers, "contingent" workers such as Uber drivers, can't afford to work online from their homes.

Advanced countries have been forced to respond with massive expansionary monetary policy and fiscal policy. Central banks in the United States, Canada and elsewhere, have reduced their policy interest rates to near zero levels. Fiscal policies have included billions of dollars of government expenditures to provide financial support to low-income people, laid-off workers, and business companies crippled by the coronavirus. However, policy makers already realise that it is not easy to stimulate a quarantine economy. Indeed, the coronavirus presents a *quadrilemma* for the virus-ravaged countries: 1) Should the government

focus more on reducing the mortality rate by increasing the resources at hospitals by increasing the number of hospital beds and production of medical equipment such as ventilators and other materials such as masks, gloves, and protective gowns for frontline healthcare employees? 2) Should the government focus more on reducing the transmission rate, known as R_0 (the number of persons affected by an infected person), by testing and enforcing social isolation and social distancing? 3) Should the government lock down cities and communities to protect public health, risking severe economic recessions?; and 4) Should the government bail out workers and low-income people rather than business companies? The responses and resolutions of the *quadrilemma* have varied across countries depending on the economic and political systems and the capacity and motivation of ruling governments.

because of improvements in hygiene and sanitary conditions. Many in the West with excessive optimism had declared, in the 1960s and later, the end of the era of infectious diseases and plagues. Still, in many developing countries, infectious diseases continue to cause serious problems. Deadly and invisible pathogens like coronavirus have no national citizenship and carry no passports. The emergence of SARS, Ebola, Zika virus, the Swine Flu, the bird flu, the West Nile virus, Dengue, and now the coronavirus demonstrates that no country is immune to the sudden outbreak of infectious diseases.

Many epidemiologists in the West have, for years, warned about the emergence of pandemics like the coronavirus. Mass migration from rural to urban areas, poor public health infrastructure, high mobility of people, deforestation have created imbalances in the eco-system involving human beings, plants, and animals, creating fertile grounds for *zoonotic*

priorities. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), world military expenditure in 2018 was more than USD 1.8 trillion. A 10 percent reduction of this amount will generate about USD 180 billion which could be diverted to worldwide health programmes and research related to infectious diseases so that medicines are available at affordable prices. Furthermore, all countries should realise that a relentless pursuit of material progress based on short-term profits and private interests at the expense of the environment, health and human development would be self-defeating in the long run.

Finally, Bangladesh thus far hasn't become a hotspot of the coronavirus. However, as a densely populated country with high shares of slum-dwellers in major urban centres, Bangladesh is vulnerable to infectious diseases. Bangladesh can learn from the success of countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan in managing the crisis through testing, raising awareness of the health crisis, tracing infected people, social isolation, and treatments in early phases. Bangladesh needs to improve its public health system and invest more in preparedness and responses to pandemics. Bangladesh may not be able to produce medicines and ventilators overnight for coronavirus, but certainly it can produce masks, gloves, and protective gowns for frontline health professionals. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), government expenditure on public health as a percentage of GDP in Bangladesh has declined somewhat in recent years and was only 0.4 percent in 2017.

Furthermore, out-of-pocket payments as a percentage of total health expenditure in Bangladesh has increased in recent years and was 74 percent, which is higher compared to many other developing countries. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.8 of the United Nations calls for universal health coverage by 2030. According to a report (WHO, 2017), the Universal Health Coverage Index was only 46 in Bangladesh, significantly lower than in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Cuba, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka. The burden of pandemics on poor people will be lower if a country can provide universal health insurance.

The coronavirus may be over in a year if not in a few months. Yet the world shouldn't be complacent. A new epidemic may threaten the humanity again. As Dr Rieux, the narrator in the novel *The Plague*, cautions the jubilant crowds in the city of Oran at the end of the plague: "the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years... that it bides its time... that the day would come when... it roused up its rats again and sent them to die in a happy city." Of course, Albert Camus had a broader meaning of an epidemic which can be not only physical diseases, but also political and moral diseases.

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General view of a temporary hospital for Covid-19 patients in Madrid, Spain, on April 3, 2020. As the virus rages through the world, it is evident that countries including Bangladesh need to improve their public health systems and invest more in preparedness and responses to pandemics.

PHOTO: AFP

What are the lessons that need to be learned by countries from the coronavirus pandemic? First, health is a "global public good", not a "private good." Good health provides social benefits to the local community, the nation, and the world that exceeds the private benefit to an individual. On the other hand, ill health generates social costs to the community, the nation, and the world. The example of the coronavirus clearly indicates how sickness caused by a virus, whether from bats, wild animals, "wet markets", or unknown sources, in one part of the world can upend the physical health and daily lives of people and economic health of the entire world. Accordingly, solutions of the public health crisis caused by pandemics require the collaborative efforts of local communities, national governments, and international agencies.

Second, as levels of incomes have increased in the world over the years, the prevalence of infectious diseases relative to non-infectious diseases has declined

transmissions of viruses from animals to human beings. According to the Centre for Disease Control, Atlanta, 60 percent of known infectious diseases and 75 percent of new or emerging infectious diseases occur through zoonotic transmissions. Accordingly, countries, whether developed or not, can't afford to be blind to the potential outbreak of infectious diseases.

Third, health being a public good can't be left to market forces. The quality of the public health system and preparedness for and management of a pandemic like the coronavirus require an active government that is trustworthy, anticipatory and proactive rather than reactive. It is a false argument that western countries are slow to impose social restrictions and lockdowns because these are democratic and open societies. A truly democratic country must be able to mobilise national resources to manage a pandemic quickly and effectively on a war footing, if necessary.

Fourth, in the post-coronavirus world, countries will have to reconfigure their

Breaking the chain of Covid-19

MOHAMMAD TARIQUR RAHMAN

COVID-19's conquest to spread, infect, and then to claim human lives around the world has sparked many discussions on its current and future trajectory and impacts. We have all been flooded with information. So far, however, the death toll is far less than what turned out in the recent history of causalities such as the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq, and Syria, as well as the famines in Yemen and Africa. Yet the global pandemic continues to inflict panic and has paralysed much of the world.

Meanwhile, there has been enough castigation of the failure of the policymakers to curb the spread of the virus. Hiding the truth at the onset of the outbreak in Wuhan, ignoring the potential threat, and the unilateral decisions and action plans taken by each country without any visible coordination among global or even regional leaders—none has escaped criticism by the mainstream media.

The reality is that we don't yet have any drug or vaccine to cure the infection or prevent further spread of the virus. The only option that many countries are counting on is to remain locked down from within. More than 100 countries have restricted regular operations to cease any non-essential movement of the people. We have no definite answer for the countries that will remain under partial or complete lockdown and for how long the lockdown would last. Perhaps, that is until we are confident that we have successfully broken the chain of the deadly contagion.

We are sanguine about breaking this chain. However, will breaking the chain bring an end to the unprecedented challenge that the living have to muddle through?

Personally, I am frightened by the statement of US President Donald Trump about the possible greater loss of lives due to the economic crisis rather than the viral infection. I sense a similar forecast coming from many other global leaders, albeit in a different tone.

The focus now is on the economic and

social consequences of the pandemic. Industries such as transportation, tourism, entertainment, hotels, and restaurants have already received the brunt of the corona heat. Perplexed employers and owners of SMEs are on the edge of the perilous cliff of their corporate venture. Shopping malls have ceased to operate, as rarely anyone today is fancying or willing to purchase daily commodities, garments, cosmetics, electronics, or stationeries. At the bottom of the pyramid, a grotesque number of low- and middle-income individuals are on the verge of losing their livelihood.

This "slowdown" or "standstill" will

Even if any government is able to provide such a package, how long will it work and how many will survive in the end?

In the education sector, from primary to tertiary level, classes and academic activities have come to a standstill. Teachers are struggling to adopt online teaching and assessment. Not all local or international students at home and abroad might have access to the internet in order to adapt to the transition. Numerous numbers of conferences and seminars have been cancelled while the research in laboratories is put on hold. Hundreds and thousands of research assistants and



We don't yet have any drug or vaccine to cure the infected or prevent further spread of the coronavirus.

PHOTO: AFP

leave governments with a monumental deficit in tax-based revenues. In political or economic terminology, all these are signs of an inevitable recession. "That recession could be at least as bad as during the global financial crisis or worse," the Sputnik news agency quoted IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva as saying. In the middle of such a recession, despite the mammoth deficit, each government is expected to provide a matching economic stimulus package as "ventilators" for a gigantic number of SMEs who are racing for corporate ICU.

research projects have come to a halt. How soon will these academic activities—the key to moving forward—resume their regular venture?

No one has a definite answer to any of those questions. If anyone could come up with an answer, that would be no more than a calculated guess at this stage. It is because what we are going through and what is about to come have no historical precedent, and there are also worries about the digital-savvy generation that need to be tackled.

We opted to foster a generation with

advanced knowledge and technology who are basically unaware of the skills and tools needed for basic livelihood. If the hundreds and thousands of businesses that are directly or indirectly dealing with tech-based products are closed, the tech-savvy generation will not only be jobless but also be clueless about any alternative avenues for their livelihood.

We are about to see the onset of a chain of reactions that will start with the loss of jobs, the scarcity of livelihood, malnourishment or even starvation. Will it then increase the political instability, corruption, and crime rate?

Stability, growth, peace, and harmony in any nation will be a far-fetched dream if Trump's prediction comes true. In fact, that prediction is not only applicable to the USA but also to the rest of the world. As IMF and World Bank in a joint statement acknowledged the potential impact—"the coronavirus outbreak is likely to have severe economic and social consequences for IDA [International Development Association] countries, home to a quarter of the world's population and two-thirds of the world's population living in extreme poverty." Pakistan, for example, has requested more than a billion dollars of aid from IMF to support corona-threatened industries. Yes, the Covid-19 pandemic will surely have global consequences. Let's hope that Trump's prediction on the possible numbers of death due to starvation and suicide will be wrong, like many of his other predictions.

The important question is: how to prevent the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic on the political, economic and social realms on a global scale? Surely, world leaders are thinking about the challenges ahead. Will the global leadership offer a prudent and just solution to the crisis? This is yet to be seen. No doubt that the current world is desperately looking for leadership that will guide mankind to peace and stability on a global scale.

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