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GOVT RESPONSE

Mired in MISSTEPS

WASIM BIN HABIB and TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

The government's response to the coronavirus outbreak has been plagued by inappropriate decisions, delayed actions and muddled thinking -- right from the beginning.

When the virus began to spread at an exponential rate from China's Wuhan -- the ground zero for the global pandemic -- to other countries in January, responsible ministers and government officials in Bangladesh assured people that "adequate measures" were taken and that "we are prepared".

On January 27, Health Minister Zahid Maleque urged the countrymen not to worry about Covid-19 and said, "We are working so that the virus cannot enter Bangladesh. The government is fully ready to face the situation even if the virus infects anyone."

Then again on February 3, he said Bangladesh took all necessary measures to prevent coronavirus from entering the country. "The situation at present is nothing to panic about. Even if it [the virus] comes, we're fully prepared," he said at a seminar in the capital's Segunbagicha.

Those words of assurance kept flowing even after the crisis began to unfold in the country. On March 20, Information Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud at a press briefing in Chattogram said, "Bangladesh has taken various steps and the situation in our country is still better than many other countries."

Three months down the line, those words appear to ring hollow as the country sees a surge in the number of Covid-19 cases with the measures turning out to be inadequate to fight against the deadly virus.

The authorities got three months. But they could not make adequate preparation and trailed behind in taking decisions like closing airports, sending expats to compulsory quarantine and imposing total shutdown.

There was a clear evidence of lax coordination among the government organisations in most of the steps taken. Many of its efforts now made it clear that the government could not fully grasp the gravity of the situation.

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Policemen suspicious of a drug delivery van's movement asked the driver to open the cargo hold in Nayabazar area of the capital yesterday. Indeed they were right. People illegally travelling in the van to dodge the shutdown came out.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

All Parjatan hotels now free for the health staff

RASHIDUL HASAN AND TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Healthcare employees treating Covid-19 patients may stay in the hotels and motels of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation for free.

The 22 hotels and motels across the country have been prepared to host them as per government instruction, said Ram Chandra Das, chairman of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation.

the government instructed, they have kept prepared all of them.

The health department was looking for residential facilities for doctors and other employees engaged in the treatment of Covid-19 patients.

Local administration will be able to use the facilities for doctors and other health staffers whenever they need, Das said.

BPC's hotels and motels are in Dhaka, Khagrachari,

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Three die in 24hrs, 58 new cases

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Three more people died from Covid-19 and 58 new cases were reported yesterday with the government scrambling to expand testing facilities to grassroots level and set up facilities to treat coronavirus patients.

The total number of deaths in the coronavirus outbreak now stands at 30 and total cases at 482, Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said in a daily bulletin.

One of the three deceased was from Dhaka while the others from elsewhere. They were aged 38, 55 and 74, she said.

The capital continues to remain the worst affected with 14 new cases, bringing the total number of cases in the city to 251, which is almost 52 percent of all detected cases in the country.

Eight of the newly detected cases were reported in Narayanganj.

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Go for mass tests in locked-down areas

Developed countries in Europe, North America, and East Asia, known for their strong healthcare systems, are today grappling to contain the deadly coronavirus. Bangladesh, where the healthcare system is not as developed, too is facing a rising number of Covid-19 cases. How should we go about addressing this crisis? Prof Dr Rashid-E-Mahbub, chairman of the National Committee on Health Rights Movement and former president of the Bangladesh Medical Association, shares his views with Porimol Palma of The Daily Star.

TDS: How do you analyse the present coronavirus situation in Bangladesh?

Dr Rashid: From the situation of other countries, I can say that cases here will reach their peak in the next one to two weeks. But the question is if we are prepared to deal with it. Daily testing capacity has increased significantly, which is good.

But I would suggest the authorities conduct mass screening of people in areas now under lockdown. The government should go for antibody testing, which is based either on detection of proteins from the Covid-19 virus in respiratory samples (e.g. sputum, throat swab) or detection, in blood or serum, of human antibodies generated in response to the virus. Those found positive should be isolated and others should be under observation. The US and India have already approved antibody testing. Also, the government should have a prediction of the number of cases and prepare a fitting plan to address it. The problem we are facing now is that

not all people are realising the need for isolation or home quarantine -- this needs to be enforced strictly.

TDS: The rising number of cases means more ventilators and intensive care units (ICUs) are required. How can we manage with a small number of ventilators and ICUs?

Dr Rashid: Five percent of the cases could require ICU. Government hospitals have some 500 ICU beds. It's difficult to install ICUs overnight, but whatever we have, these can serve well if there are proper technicians and trained doctors. But you cannot get trained technicians and doctors so quickly unless the government has a proper plan and experts are recruited to provide hands-on training. All the ICUs should be functional in order to save lives.

TDS: Under the present conditions, many hospitals or health professionals are refusing patients with Covid-19 symptoms. In some cases, patients have died though

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Some places on self-imposed lockdown

MUNTAKIM SAID

Amid a gradual spread of Covid-19 cases, community groups in different areas in the capital are locking down streets and buildings by their own to ward off the looming crisis.

Bamboo barricades have been erected at the mouth of the streets and alleys in several areas while entry gates to many roads and passages were found to be locked in several areas, including Mohammadpur, Mirpur, Banasree, Niketan, Shantinagar, Dhanmondi and some parts of Old Dhaka.

Among 482 Covid-19 cases reported across the country until yesterday, 251 were from 67 areas in Dhaka city, which is about 52 percent of the total infection.

In such a situation, police are locking down the areas and buildings wherever any Covid-19 patients are found.

But in some areas, building owners and community leaders have stepped up to limit movement without waiting for police and administration.

Although many lauded the initiatives, some said it would hamper several emergency services, including the movement of ambulances, in those areas.

Building owners in Mohammadpur's Iqbal Road and Sir Syed Road have closed five out of six entrances in the area. Only one gate near Mohammadpur Post Office was found open.

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7 die after showing virus-like symptoms

STAR REPORT

At least seven people, including a 6-month-old child, died after showing Covid-19 symptoms in six districts since Friday afternoon.

Meanwhile, two people, including a policeman in Manikganj, and an Italy-returnee in Noakhali, who died on Thursday, had tested positive for Coronavirus yesterday.

Local health and administration officials collected the samples from the victims' bodies and locked down their family members and neighbours to prevent the risk of spreading coronavirus.

In Brahmanbaria, a 35-year-old woman died of respiratory disease at her rented house in the town's Kawtoli area yesterday morning.

In Khulna, a 6-month-old child died of fever, cough and pneumonia at the Corona Isolation Unit of Khulna Medical College

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A homeless family cooking whatever they could gather on a stove made of three bricks on the central reservation of a street in Kamalapur area of the capital yesterday. The Covid-19 outbreak has put the lower-income group in a dire state.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

BORO HARVEST Labour crisis worries farmers

ANWAR ALI, Rajshahi

The labour shortage created by the current shutdown is worrying farmers ahead of the Boro paddy harvest, despite different measures taken by the government to ensure maximum crop yield.

Although the agricultural ministry is making special arrangements for transportation of labourers from different districts to the country's granaries, labour leaders are unwilling to leave home fearing coronavirus infection.

Even the ministry's sanctioning of Tk 110 crore to help farmers buy harvester machines at a subsidy might do little to ease the crisis as small and marginalised rice producers, especially in the haor region, cannot afford such investments.

Harvest of Boro paddy, the principal crop of the country, starts in the haor region in a week, in the Chalanbeel area of the north in two weeks and in other parts of the country in May, agriculturists and farmers say.

Every year, farm labourers from different regions, particularly from Rangpur, Rajshahi, Dhaka, and Barisal divisions, go to the haors to harvest boro before flash floods inundate the area by the end of April.

The labourers then rush to the Chalan Beel area, other plain lands and Barind region for the same work.

But this year, farmer Akbar Hossain from the haor area of Sunamganj district's Jamalganj upazila could not find any labourer with just a week left before the harvest of his boro paddy, cultivated on 50 acres of land.

"No labour leader could assure me of anything. If I can't find labourers, the flood will wash away my paddy," he feared.

Ali Hossain, a farmer of Chalan Beel are in Natore's Shingra, cultivated boro paddy on 31 acres of land. He

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