

Relief rice theft amid raging Covid-19 crisis

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At a time when the country is struggling to deal with the coronavirus crisis amid shutdown, some public representatives and Open Market Sale (OMS) dealers have been misappropriating rice meant for vulnerable group feeding and OMS projects.

Law enforcers and local administrations have so far revealed at least 22 incidents of stealing rice in 20 upazilas and recovered 2,832 sacks of rice, each containing 50 kg, in the last 12 days.

Police have so far arrested 24 people, including 10 public representatives, in connection with those incidents. Most of the other arrestees are local Awami League leaders, their relatives and close aides.

Such acts of misappropriating rice during the ongoing crisis have drawn huge criticism from the users of social media.

Yesterday, police arrested two traders for hoarding a huge quantity of essentials, which were meant to be sold by the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) in Rangpur city.

Police also recovered 30 cartons of bottled soybean oil and two sacks of sugar, each sack containing 50 kg.

Uttam Proshad, deputy commissioner of Rangpur DB, said they raided the house of a man around 1:00pm yesterday and arrested him for hoarding the essentials at a toilet of his home.

Police said the arrestee purchased the TCB products at cheaper prices and had been selling those to customers at much higher prices.

On Friday, police picked up a rice dealer and his abettor in Netrakona's Kendua upazila for allegedly stealing 90 sacks of rice meant for selling at Tk 10 per kg. The sacks contained 4,500 kg of rice.

The arrestees are Aminur Rahman Shakil, 45, the dealer; and Saiful Mia, 40, a scrap vendor of Aamlotola village in Kendua. Aminur is son of Boailbari union Awami League General Secretary Abu Bakar Siddique.

In Bogura, police arrested a local

All Parjatan

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Kandaban, Rangamati, Cox's Bazar, Kuakata, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogura, Benapole, Sylhet, Meherpur and Tungipara.

The facilities have around 750 beds, a BPC official said.

"Although we are offering our facilities for a great cause, we are a little worried about the protection of our staff," the official said, wishing anonymity.

He hopes the government would take necessary steps to ensure the health safety of BPC employees.

Some doctors, dealing with coronavirus patients, have started using BPC's Hotel Abakash in the capital's Mohakhali since Thursday, officials said.

"These hotels and motels had been empty since the coronavirus outbreak. If these hotels and motels can be used for the accommodation of doctors and other health employees in this national crisis, it would be of great satisfaction," Das said.

However, experts said the authorities must ensure the safety of the BPC staff first. Otherwise, coronavirus may get transmitted from there.

Bangladesh has been witnessing a sharp rise in deaths and new cases over the last few days. A total of 482 people tested positive for coronavirus until yesterday, of them, 30 had died.

The government has designated several hospitals for the treatment of patients infected by the highly contagious virus. Experts recommend special residential facilities for the doctors and other health staff to prevent infection to their family members and others.

Aminul Hasan, director (hospital) at Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) said coronavirus infected patients are now being treated at five

Some places

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Similar restrictions were seen in Lalmatia areas as the alleys were closed with bamboos.

There were notices at the gates asking people to wash their hands before entering the area.

A gate adjacent to Aarong was kept open for entry and another gate near Dhanmondi Road 16 (old 27) for the exit.

Rasel Shikder, a resident of Lalmatia, told this correspondent that they have initiated the restriction to create awareness in the locality.

The scenario seemed quite similar in Old Dhaka where community groups have beefed up restriction in several areas, including Lalbagh, Azimpur, Bangshal, Wari and Sutrapur.

Many building owners in Mirpur, Banasree, Niketan, Shantinagar and Dhanmondi areas have also restricted movement by their own initiative. Dwellers can't go outside without urgent needs.

No strangers, housemaids and guests are being allowed to enter some residential buildings, locals said.

Even courier services or deliverymen are being barred from entering the

Krishak League leader from Sonatola upazila a few days ago in possession of 50 sacks of rice which was meant to be distributed among the people from low income families.

Besides, 115 sacks of rice were seized in Jamalpur's Melandaha upazila, 90 in Pirganj of Rangpur, 14 in Pabna's Saltha, and 87 in Tarail of Kishoreganj.

The stealing has reached such a level that the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has decided to monitor the situation and bring involved in the misappropriation to book.

Asked about the situation, State Minister for Disaster Management and Relief Enamur Rahman said it was really unfortunate that a section of people was getting involved in such activities despite the warning from the prime minister.

"No rice meant for relief has been stolen yet. The incidents revealed so far showed that OMS and VGF rice had been misappropriated. We have instructed all district administrations to monitor the situation strictly," the state minister said.

Meanwhile, the local government ministry in a statement yesterday said stern actions would be taken against those involved in corruption in relief distribution.

Dr Ifekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TI), said such a national crisis was expected to bring out the best of human virtues -- empathy, solidarity and philanthropy, which are seen around in many ways.

But most regrettably, the worst of human vices also came out now, which was not unexpected at all, he added.

"No words are enough to condemn that many of those involved in abuse of power, misappropriation and other forms of immorality and illegality are public representatives and OMS dealers who are also often politically linked."

The TI executive director said those people must be brought to justice.

On March 31, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said she would not tolerate any corruption in relief distribution.

hospitals in the capital.

The hospitals are Kuwait-Bangladesh Maitree Hospital, Kurmitola General Hospital, Sheikh Russel Gastro Liver Institute and Hospital, Dhaka Mohanagar General Hospital (Naya Bazar) and Maternal & Child Health Training & Research Institute, Lalkuthi, Mirpur.

Over 50 doctors working at Kuwait-Bangladesh Maitree Hospital are staying at a private hotel and a prominent media reported that some cooks and employees fled the hotel fearing coronavirus infection.

Aminul Hasan said, "We are looking for hotels for the accommodation of doctors and other health staffers."

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) of the World Health Organization, said as per the ideal practice, doctors and other health employees treating Covid-19 patients, must be quarantined to prevent transmission of the virus.

The authorities would ensure residential and other essential services to the doctors at the hospital where they would work and none of them would go outside, he said.

There should be four teams of doctors, of which one team would remain as reserve force and after working for 14 days, the four teams would be replaced by four other teams, he said.

Then the previous four teams would be in quarantine for 14 days before meeting their families and would join work after one or two weeks, he added. Hospitals treating Covid-19 patients, must have the facilities, he said.

"If making residential facilities at hospitals isn't possible, they [doctors] can be kept at hotels, but similar safety measures must be taken there," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

buildings.

"We are facing this trouble for the last few days," he said a deliveryman at Foodpanda.

The first lockdown in the capital was put in Mirpur's Uttar Tolerbagh area after a 73-year-old man died in Covid-19 on March 21. The next day, a local community group locked down the area by their own and restricted the movement.

According to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, Tolarbagh is one of the hotspots for coronavirus in Dhaka and there are 19 Covid-19 patients now.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police put 54 areas under lockdown following the virus outbreak. All kinds of shops except pharmacies were kept shut.

Police said such initiatives from the community is laudable.

"It's good if the community becomes aware and goes into self-imposed lockdown to contain the virus outbreak. But we have to be careful so that no emergency service is hampered," Masudur Rahman, deputy commissioner (Media) of DMP, told The Daily Star.

Mired in missteps

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Let's take a look at the steps the authorities had missed and how it mishandled the situation.

In January, when countries like China -- epicentre of the virus at that time -- and South Korea responded with drastic measures, cutting themselves off from the world, the authorities in Bangladesh let flights from China and other Covid-19-affected countries to fly in.

The flight operations continued in Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka until March 29.

At that time, the authorities claimed that they had scaled up screening and testing measures of the incoming international passengers at airport.

The airport authorities, in fact, had only one operational scanner in January and February. Finally, in mid-March, they got six scanners. What they actually had done in the name of "testing" was checking body temperature with handheld infrared thermometers.

Then came the quarantine fiasco. The government was right to place more than 300 Bangladeshis stranded in Chinese city of Wuhan under 14-day quarantine at Ashkona Hajj Camp after they returned on February 1.

But it did not follow the same protocol when thousands of returnees from many European countries especially Italy, another epicentre for coronavirus, flew to Bangladesh in middle of March.

Without putting them in mandatory quarantine, the government just let the returnees go home, asking them to maintain self-quarantine. But there was no monitoring mechanism whatsoever.

More than 2 lakh people entered Bangladesh since March.

As there was no effective monitoring, these people roamed freely around in

their localities and did other chores along with his family members, leaving people in their localities exposed to the virus.

When the reports surfaced in the media, the authorities asked civil surgeons to take help from local administration to force the expatriates to keep in home quarantine properly.

By this time, it was too late. A number of confirmed cases are now being reported from different districts. Madaripur became one of the biggest hotspots in the country as a large number of Bangladeshi expatriates returned to their homes in the district.

As there was a surge in the number of positive cases, the government in its desperate bid to stem the spread of virus came up with major decision of closing down public and private offices.

On March 23, it announced a general holiday to be effective from March 26. The next day, it suspended train, launch and air services, but kept the public transports open until March 26.

As a result, tens of thousands of people left Dhaka in crammed buses and other transports after having possibly been exposed to the virus.

Experts at that time labelled government's efforts as piecemeal in nature and not carefully coordinated as it did not take adequate measure to dissuade people to stay home before announcing holiday.

They believe that such an exodus of people could help spread the highly contagious virus to the remote places of the country.

Then came another severe blow to the already fragile situation.

Thousands of garment workers, who went home in hordes as soon as the holiday began, returned in similar fashion on April 3 because the garment owners announced to open their

Go for mass tests in locked-down areas

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they did not have coronavirus. How do you explain this?

Dr Rashid: This problem has been there since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. People with cold and respiratory troubles went from hospital to hospital but were not treated or admitted until they were declared free of coronavirus.

I would suggest to have designated hospitals for such patients in all the divisions -- district hospitals or medical college hospitals can be dedicated for them. They should be quickly diagnosed and isolated, if found infected.

However, doctors, nurses, and healthcare technologists, who will come in contact with them, will need to have special arrangements including PPE [personal protective

equipment], as well as food and accommodation in a separate facility. They will need to work in turns -- for example, one group will work for seven days and then will stay in institutional quarantine for 14 days while the other group works. A lot of healthcare personnel will be required to execute this plan.

TDS: There is a sense of fear among health personnel, who are on the frontlines attending Covid-19 patients. How can this fear be addressed?

Dr Rashid: Boosting the morale of health professionals is very important. The government has declared special incentives for the healthcare professionals, which should have been done even earlier. Nevertheless, it is good; it was necessary.

However, more important for the health professionals is their protection,

Labour crisis worries farmers

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needs 25 labourers for seven days for harvesting his paddy at the end of this month.

"I am very worried. I have become tired of calling the labourers. None assured me of coming to work," he said.

Labourer Abdus Samad from Pabna's Chatmohor wants to go to Shingra for the harvest but could not find any vehicle.

Labour leader Bhabani Kanta Sen of Patgram in Lalmonirhat district is also facing the same problem. He has been travelling to haor areas of Sylhet division during every boro harvest for the last one decade and leads a group of 20 farm hands for the last couple of years.

"I never witnessed a situation like this. Most of us are afraid of visiting the haors of Sylhet as we think that area is risky [for virus infection]," he said.

"We can't go out of our village [under law enforcers' watch]. No vehicles are plying on the roads," Bhabani said, adding that they also do not have the money to travel.

Each labourer of Bhabani's group used to earn around Tk 30,000 working for 25 days during the harvest. But this year, Bhabani is willing to let go of the income.

"Lives are more valuable than money. We can earn money if we survive," he said. MEASURES BY MINISTRY

Officials of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), however, said they are providing safe transportation to agricultural workers.

Director General Md Abdul Mueyed of DAE informed The Daily Star that in the second week of April they have already transported around 200 labourers from Rangpur and Pabna to the haor areas of Sylhet following health safety measures by keeping them at distance in buses and providing them with masks.

But Md Safar Uddin, DAE deputy director of Sunamganj district, said the initiative for transporting labourers from outside the Sylhet region was discouraged in a meeting on April 6 to stem coronavirus spread.

The district administration officials noted in the meeting that maintaining social distancing would be difficult if the DAE ventures to bring labourers from other districts, he said.

However, it was endorsed that the currently unemployed labourers of stone and sand quarries as well as coal labourers can be engaged in agricultural work, he added.

Secretary Md Nasiruzzaman of the agriculture ministry also feels that local non-agricultural workers, who have become unemployed due to the shutdown, will fill the labour shortage gap.

and their sense of pride. Till now, some blame has been placed on health professionals, but this is not the time to discuss that. PPE has to be ensured.

TDS: What else should be urgently addressed?

Dr Rashid: There are efforts to increase hospital beds for Covid-19 patients but I think things are not moving fast enough. As the number of patients goes up, more beds will be required for their treatment. If necessary, members of the armed forces should be assigned to prepare hospitals for this purpose.

Apart from this, strong coordination of all those involved in fighting coronavirus is a must. Also, the government has to maintain transparency in what it does and about the evolving situation. There is no alternative to free flow of information.

Talking to The Daily Star, he said, labourers, who work at the cities and returned home following the Covid-19 outbreak, are basically from agriculture sector.

They will work in crop fields in their locality as the cities have no jobs for them, he said.

Regarding labour transportation from other districts, Nasiruzzaman said local administrations were asked to allow movements of vehicles carrying agricultural labourers when harvest begins in different regions.

"We are identifying the labour leaders and asking them to hire labourers," he said, adding that for the uninterrupted movement of labour during the shutdown labour leaders shall be provided with a certificate detailing their travel destinations and number of workers under them.

The ministry of agriculture issued a circular in this regard on April 9.

The ministry also allocated Tk 110 crore to help farmers buy 800-plus combine harvesters, and 400 reapers and transplanters with subsidy this year. Of those, 180 new harvesters and 137 new reapers would be given to farmers in haor areas, that already have 362 harvesters and 1056 reapers.

A combined harvester can harvest paddy from 1.2 acres of land in an hour while a reaper is capable of harvesting 0.4 acres of land per hour.

Farmers would buy the machines while the government would provide 50 percent of the cost with the sanctioned money, the agriculture secretary said.

"Farmers of haor region are usually not interested in buying harvesters as they need it only once a year. So we will bring the machines from other districts to support them," he said, adding that similar steps will be taken in other regions.

CASH CRUNCH Despite such assurance from the agriculture ministry, farmers in haors, Chalan Beel and the Barind regions cannot relax.

Jyotimohon Das of Sunamganj haor area cultivated boro on 6.8 acres of land and is worried about paying labourers' wages.

"Every year I borrow to pay off labourers with cash as they don't accept paddy in payment for difficulties in transportation. This time the lenders are not willing to provide loans. They say they don't have money," Jyotimohon said.

Jahangir Alam Shah, a farmer who opened a farming library in Naogaon's Manda, said small and marginalised farmers often sell paddy directly from the field to pay off the labourers and lenders.

However, he is anticipating a fall in

factories.

But as they trudged back to Dhaka in the evening, many of them found their factories closed.

Although the government extended the holiday to April 14, the apex body of the garment industry gave no message to the workers. Instead, they waited for the government to announce the decision of closure of garment factories.

While many of the workers returned and many others stayed in Dhaka, the police closed the entry and exit points of the city.

Finally, the government ordered closure of all garment factories until April 14. But by this time maximum damage may have been inflicted.

When many counties including Saudi Arabia ordered its citizens to say prayers at home, the authorities in Bangladesh kept allowing people to go to mosques.

It took the authorities four weeks since the first case confirmation to come up with an order that allowed only those employed by mosques to offer daily or Juma prayers there.

Even now they seem not to be fully in control. A lack of coordination among government bodies continue to pose a major challenge in implementing the plans.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque, who is the chief of the National Committee on Covid-19, had to express his helplessness, saying nothing other than the health issues were discussed with them.

People are still crowding market places and thoroughfares ignoring the risk of getting infected while screenings to find out coronavirus positives and isolation units across the country are still not adequate.

Meanwhile, the country continues to see a steady uptick in coronavirus cases.

14 percent in low-income group have no food left

Finds Brac survey

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Some 14 percent of the country's low-income group people saw their food stock turned down to empty amid countrywide shutdown enforced by the government to contain coronavirus spread, according to a Brac survey report.

Besides, the extreme poverty rate in the country also increased by 60 percent amid the emerging situation, Brac said, issuing a press release on Friday.

The survey was conducted on 2,675 people belong to low-income group in all 64 districts from March 31 to April 5.

Low-income people are suffering great losses in their earnings since the enforcement of shutdown, it said.

Brac Advocacy for Social Change Programme conducted the survey with support from its Microfinance and Urban Development Programme as well as Partnership Strengthening Unit.

According to the survey, the average household income of the respondents was Tk 14,599 before the pandemic.

Of the respondents, 93 percent respondents reported a decline in income due to the outbreak.

In March 2020, their average income stood at Tk 3,742, which represents an average 75 percent decline from their family income of last month.

The report also said due to the shutdown, 72 percent respondents reported job losses or reduced work opportunities.

Eight percent of the respondents who are still employed have not received their payments, it said.

Non-agricultural wage labour experienced 77 percent more loss of income than wage labourers in agriculture sector.

A total of 51 percent of rickshaw-pullers, 58 percent factory workers, 66 percent hotel or restaurant workers, and 62 percent day labourers in non-agricultural sectors reported their income had reduced to zero in the current month.

The survey also found that most people did not have any idea about the directive that one should not directly go to any health facility with symptoms of the infection.

"Only 29 percent said they would ask the patient to call the helpline," it said.

Recommendations The survey came up with a number of recommendations to overcome the crisis.

It said large-scale awareness campaigns on prevention, management and treatment should run on TV and social media.

"Food assistance must immediately reach the millions of households across the country suffering from acute food shortage. Otherwise they will be compelled to leave home to earn their living in violation of the social distancing measures, increasing the risk of spreading coronavirus," it said.

The survey finds that people who have returned to villages from urban centres are not enrolled in any social safety net programmes and so need proper delivery mechanisms to get food aid immediately.

UP member shot dead in Rangamati

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

A union parishad member was shot dead by unidentified criminals in Jurachhari upazila of Rangamati on Friday night.

The dead Hemanto Chakma, 32, son of Lokobidhu Chakma, was a member of Bonjogichhara Union Parishad.

7 die

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Hospital around 1:00am yesterday.

In Madaripur, a 45-year-old woman died after showing similar symptoms at the isolation ward of Kalkini Upazila Health Complex around 11:00pm on Friday.

In Dhaka, an 82-year-old man died at his home in Dhamrai upazila's Batulia village around 12:00pm of Friday.

In Laxmipur, a 57-year-old man died of Covid-19-like symptoms at his home Jajira area in Kamalnagar upazila on Friday afternoon.

A 55-year-old man died after showing the same symptoms at his residence in the same upazila's Charmartin area on Friday night.

In Manikganj, a 60-year-old man, who was in home quarantine, died with breathing problems at his village home under Sadar upazila yesterday.

In Noakhali, a 45-year-old Italy-returnee from Sonaimuri upazila, who died on Thursday, tested positive for coronavirus yesterday.

Meanwhile, a police man and a trader, from Shivalaya upazila and Harirampur upazila, have tested positive for coronavirus.

(Our Correspondents from Brahmanbaria, Khulna, Faridpur, Savar, Manikganj and Noakhali contributed to the story.)

[Dwoha Chowdhury from Sylhet, S Dilip Roy from Lalmonirhat, Dipanker Roy from Khulna, Mostafa Yousof from Chattogram, Aminul Islam from Mymensingh and Susanta Gosh from Barishal contributed to the report]