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BANGLADESH UPDATE **306** New cases in 24hrs **2,144** Total cases **84** Deaths **66** Recoveries **GLOBAL UPDATE** **156,076** Deaths **2,273,986** Total cases

THEFT OF SUBSIDIZED FOOD Rogue dealers with political links to blame

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY and RASHIDUL HASAN

Irregularities in distribution of subsidised food items among the poor continue mainly due to political interference in selection of dealers though the government has apparently taken a tougher stance to stop such malpractices amid the coronavirus outbreak.

Most of the dealers selected for distributing food items under the food ministry's Special OMS (Open Market Sale) and the Food Friendly programmes have ties with local ruling party leaders, say a number of government officials.

Though irregularities in food distribution under the two programmes are nothing new, a good number of cases of misappropriation of subsidised food items came to light recently due to the proactive role of local administration and law enforcement agencies in different parts of the country, they said.

The administration and the agencies swung into action following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's strong warning against misappropriation of food items meant for the poor who are going through a very difficult time due to the coronavirus outbreak, they mention.

Besides, many of the aspiring candidates for the union parishad polls slated for early next year are keeping a close eye on food distribution in their respective areas and are informing the local administration of anomalies in the programmes, they point out.

Between March 30 and April 16, law enforcers seized 297 tonnes of rice (5,959 sacks containing 50kg rice each)

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Crowds of people buying perishable goods from vendors near DIT Road in the capital's Rampura despite the risks of contracting and spreading coronavirus. Most of the people are wearing masks but maintaining social distancing is a far cry in such a setting. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Don't despair, tackle crisis courageously

Says PM at shortest ever JS session

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Urging the people to face the coronavirus situation with courage and patience, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said they should not be disappointed with or afraid of the situation.

In her concluding speech to the seventh session of the 11th parliament, the PM said the Covid-19 situation in Bangladesh is better than in many developed countries.

She urged all to stay indoors and maintain social distancing to fight coronavirus.

"I would like to urge the people, including the elected public representatives and party leaders and workers, to obey the directives on health that are being given time and again in view of the Covid-19 outbreak in the country," she said.

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Outbreak keeps gaining pace

9 die, 306 new cases in 24 hours

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The coronavirus outbreak threatens to spiral out of control as the authorities reported nine more deaths and 306 new cases of infection in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday.

The death toll is now 84 and the total number of cases 2,144.

The capital continues to remain the worst affected region with highest 32 percent of the new cases being reported here, said Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

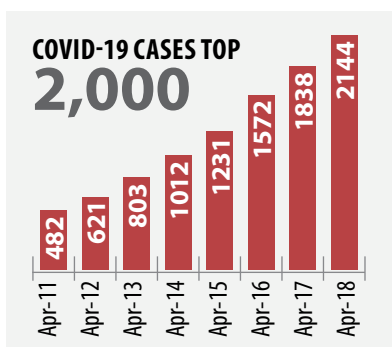
Six of the nine deaths were reported in the city, while two in Narayanganj and one in Savar, she said yesterday in the daily bulletin on the coronavirus situation.

Four of the deceased were aged over 60, one aged between 51 and 60, two between 41 and 50 and one between 30 and 40. Nothing was mentioned about the age of the other victim.

Till yesterday, the number of Covid-19 patients in the country stood at 1,994 while that of recovery cases remained unchanged from Friday at 66, said the IEDCR director.

Of the current cases, 564 were undergoing treatment in hospitals while the others were being treated at home, she said, adding that 27 patients

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BRAC RAPID SURVEY 47pc garment workers yet to be paid

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Forty-seven percent of 159 garments workers, who were interviewed for a study by Brac University's James P Grant School of Public Health, reported not receiving their wages and felt uncertain about their current job status with their respective employers.

After a rapid survey among the workers, the study found that half of the respondents did not know whether they still have their jobs since they were on forced leave without pay.

Only a quarter of the respondents were on paid leave.

Approximately half the respondents also reported complete loss of income -- meaning there were no earning members in their families at the time of the survey, which was conducted between April

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APRIL 16 DEADLINE 370 RMG factories didn't pay workers

REFAVET ULLAH MIRDHA

At least 370 garment factories have failed to pay their workers' salary within the stipulated time of April 16, said the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE).

The DIFE will serve the defaulter factory owners with show-cause notices soon, it warned, adding that if the owners fail to respond, their licences may be suspended for renewal which is scheduled in July this year.

Shibnath Roy, inspector general of the DIFE, yesterday said, "If the owners of the respective factories cannot come up with satisfactory replies, we will recommend the Ministry of Labour and Employment to file cases against the defaulters with the labour courts."

According to the DIFE official, a total of 158,091 workers worked in those 370 factories.

He, however, did not specifically mention when the show-cause notices would be served. Besides, the amount of the due salaries could not be known as most of the units were shut for coronavirus outbreak.

Of the factories, 122 are in Dhaka district, 120 in Gazipur, 30 in Narayanganj, 58 in Chattogram, 11 in Mymensingh, three in Pabna, six in Narsingdi, one in Munshiganj, three in Dinajour, two in Rangpur, five in Cumilla, four in Faridpur, two in Rajshahi and three in Khulna, as per the DIFE.

Meanwhile, some factories went for layoffs to avert the labour unrest, Roy said, adding that the DIFE was investigating whether the layoffs were executed lawfully.

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Half the world locked down

Trump backs anti-lockdown protests, says China hiding toll

AFP, Washington

Coronavirus deaths have surged past 154,000 worldwide with nearly a quarter of them in the United States, where President Donald Trump lent his support to protesters rallying against lockdown orders.

Evidence is mounting that social distancing successfully slowed the pandemic after more than half of humanity -- 4.5 billion people -- were confined to their homes.

Governments around the world are now grappling with when and how to ease lockdowns that have crippled the global economy, even as the Covid-19 death toll climbs further in hard-hit countries.

Demonstrators in three US states rallied in public this week to demand an end to the restrictions, with the largest protest in Michigan attracting 3,000 people -- some of whom were armed.

Trump has largely left decisions on easing lockdowns to state officials even as he laid out guidelines for a staged reopening of the national economy.

But his call to "liberate" Michigan, Minnesota and Virginia in a series of tweets late Friday were quickly rebuked by the Democratic leaders of all three states.

"I do not have time to involve myself in Twitter wars," said Virginia governor Ralph Northam.

The US accounts for nearly a third of the 2.2 million coronavirus infections reported globally.

It has also recorded around 37,000 deaths, more than any other nation,

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NAMAZ-E-JANAZA Thousands gather, ignoring lockdown

Police, admin watch on

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

Defying government orders to maintain social distancing and self-isolation, thousands of people from different areas flocked to Brahmanbaria's Sarail yesterday to attend the namaz-e-janaza of the leader of an Islamic organisation.

Maulana Jubaer Ahmed Ansari was nayeb-e-ameer or vice president of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, an Islamic organisation.

The mass gathering happened although the entire district has been under lockdown since April 11, when one person died from coronavirus and seven others detected positive in a day.

From Jamia Rahmania Madrasa at Bertola village, where the funeral was held, the crowds spilled over the

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Thousands of people ignoring orders to remain indoors join the namaz-e-janaza of Maulana Jubaer Ahmed Ansari, leader of Islamic organisation Khelafat Majlish, in Brahmanbaria's Sarail upazila. Inset, Jamia Rahmania Madrasa at Bertola village where the funeral was held yesterday.

PHOTO: MASUK HRIDOV

UV hope for PPE

Bangladeshi-Australian's initiative may facilitate reuse of PPEs, much to relief of health workers

TANVEER AHMED, from Sydney

With coronavirus seemingly unstoppable, global powers are in a rush to stock quality PPE (personal protective equipment).

And if it is posing such a strain on the world's best healthcare systems, the potential pressure on Bangladesh's hospitals is understood to be catastrophic. The deaths of Dr Moyeen Uddin and dozens others from Covid-19 have already sent chills down the spine of medical service providers.

Amid this grim situation, a Bangladeshi-Australian chemical engineer has come up with a mission to equip Bangladesh hospitals with germicidal ultraviolet radiation (known as UV-C) facilities to rapidly sterilise PPE, allowing its repeated use.

Dr Md Arifur Rahim has assembled a committee in Dhaka whose members are desperately meeting with officials, in an attempt to have the ultraviolet disinfectant facilities approved for usage. The project has already been given the green light by the government's health authorities at what Rahim says was unprecedented in speed. The challenge is now to have it taken up by individual hospitals.

One of the committee members, Dr Mahmudul Faisal Al Ameen is a computer scientist based in Japan attempting to help with the project. Last week, he met with administrators at Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital to allow for a testing of the facilities, as part of a pilot project with several other hospitals in Dhaka. If the trial

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Outbreak keeps gaining pace

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required ICU support.

After Dhaka, the highest number of new cases were reported in Gazipur, a new epicentre of the outbreak, followed by Narayanganj and Kishoreganj.

Of the new cases of infection, 62 percent are male and 48 percent female.

Overall, almost 34 percent of all the coronavirus cases in the country were detected in the capital alone, according to IEDCR website.

Providing additional information on the countrywide infection, Prof Flora said 21-30 was the age group worst affected by the outbreak.

About 27 percent of the total cases are aged between 21 and 30, while 22 percent between 31 and 40, and 19 percent between 41 and 50 years, she said.

On Friday, the IEDCR director had said among the total infected, 68 percent were taking treatment at their homes while 32 percent were admitted to different hospitals.

"Not all the 32 percent Covid-19 patients, who are receiving treatment at hospitals, required hospitalisation," she said, adding

that many had to be admitted to hospitals in face of social pressure.

She emphasised that if a patient was in a stable state, it was best for the person and the health authorities that the individual was given treatment at his home in complete isolation.

In the bulletin yesterday, aired online, Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said 2,114 samples were tested in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday, which brought the total number of samples tested to 21,307.

She said the number of tests increased by 11.01 percent from the previous day.

She also said Covid-19 testing facility was ensured at Jashore Science and Technology University, taking the total number of such testing labs to 19 across the country.

"From now on, samples to be collected from Jashore, Jhenidah and Narail districts would be tested there" she said.

On March 8, the authorities reported first three cases of Covid-19 while the first patients died of the disease on March 18.



A man feeding stray dogs in front of Dhaka College yesterday. Food sources for the animals have become scarcer since people retreated from the streets and restaurants are shuttered.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

UV hope for PPE

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proves successful in sterilising the necessary PPE, there is potential for the UV facilities to be rolled out across major hospitals throughout the country.

"We are very excited for this project to be successful," says Rahim, "but we cannot do without the help of the authorities and we need volunteers to come forward leaving the panic aside."

The sheer scale of the PPE required if there was a surge in coronavirus patients would be impossible to handle. But many lives may potentially be saved if the currently available PPEs could be sterilised rapidly and re-utilised.

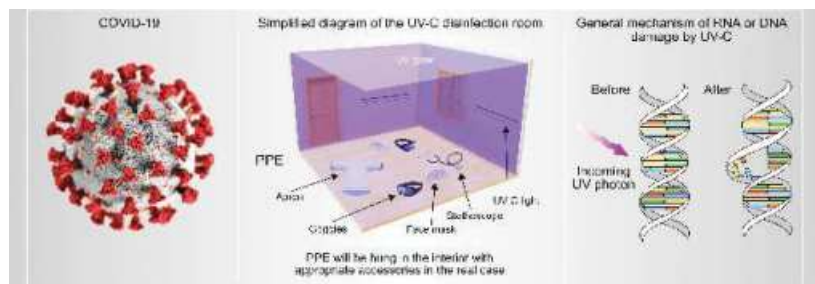
This practice is already going on in many other parts of the world. In China, entire buses are being lit up

Bangladeshi student, raised tens of thousands of dollars to donate PPE. Sultana coordinated with a garment company in Bangladesh that can make a set of PPE for \$4.

Texas-based academic Shafquat Rafee is coordinating food relief efforts of rice, lentils and orange and has posted video of his planned deliveries on social media.

"This is what a large number of people in countries like Bangladesh consume on a daily basis. The absolute poor people really don't eat a lot and they don't have the luxury to eat varieties of food," Rafee told Al Jazeera, "We, the privileged ones can help them get these in this time of crisis."

Meanwhile, the Federation of Bangladesh Medical Associations, a national representative body



by the UV light at night in order to disinfect them. Robots are emitting UV light to clean hospital floors and even banks are using them to sterilise money.

The UV light scrambles the genetic material of viruses and bacteria rendering them dead. While there aren't yet any definitive studies proving its effectiveness against Covid-19, it has been used with success against SARS, which is another type of coronavirus.

The much-publicised death of a British-Bangladeshi doctor, Dr Abdul Mabud Chowdhury, in East London shocked the expatriate community to their core. In the week prior to his death, following Covid-19 complications, he wrote on his Facebook page about the challenges of having adequate PPE, something outlined proudly by his son during a BBC interview the day after his passing.

And, the mission of Rahim is a part of many Bangladeshi diaspora initiatives to help the citizens of their motherland in dealing with the pandemic.

Nazneen Sultana, a Boston-based

for Bangladeshi doctors based in Australia, has raised tens of thousands of dollars, through a social media campaign, to be distributed by lung specialists in Bangladesh. Led by gastroenterologist Dr Ayaz Chowdhury, who has spoken to several of his classmates from Bangladesh working in Covid-19 hotspots around the world, they hope to continue to raise funds for further projects.

Just as the epicentre of the pandemic has shifted to New York, many Bangladeshis have died, especially given one of the worst affected areas was the region of Queens where there is a large community of expatriates.

The lack of PPE is causing a great strain around the world, changing the relationship healthcare workers have with their patients, colleagues and families. Fears are growing among the global communities that there may be an even bigger calamity if active cases continue to skyrocket in Bangladesh.

Rahim hopes his programme exploiting the cheap technology of UV light can help save many lives.

47pc garment workers

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5 and April 13, 2020, and disseminated yesterday

"Respondents reported the need for immediate cash and food support," said Dr Atonu Rabbani, associate professor of economics at the University of Dhaka and senior research fellow at Brac University. The research was conducted by him in addition to Farzana Misha and Amina Amin.

A majority of the respondents also said that they have had to compromise on their dietary needs because of the loss of income.

"About 78 percent of the respondents reported that they have reduced their fish and meat consumption because of the pandemic," said the report. A third of them also reduced consumption of milk and eggs.

In addition, 59 percent of the workers reported that they could not stock up on food because of not having enough money. They reported having enough food in the house for about a week, before facing food insecurity.

Bangladesh Garments Shramik Samhati sent a press release yesterday claiming, "Workers have not received their wages in 2000 factories. Although the government had promised to take action against factories not paying the workers, the factories in addition to law enforcers are turning on the workers instead."

The university's rapid survey team also talked to 51 slum dwellers from Kallyanpur Pora basti, Dholpur, Nama Shayampur, Dakkhin Khan, Helal Market and Chalbhar to find that almost all of them lost their main source of income.

"Out of 51 individuals interviewed, 33 of them had at least 2 earning members in their families. Either all of the earning members or at least one member of these families have lost their income sources," stated the survey report.

"My son works as a day laborer at a construction site. For the first few days of the government announced general holiday, he worked secretly at the site. However, after 4-5 days, the army officers caught the ongoing construction work and closed down the place. Now that it is closed, he has no money and the [construction site] owner didn't pay him for the last few days work. He tried to go to the site to collect his money but police chased and beat him up for getting out of the house," stated the report citing a female interviewee.

This builds on a different report done by Brac last week where they surveyed 2,675 people from all districts of Bangladesh and found that 54 percent of the respondents reported zero earnings since the crisis began.

"14 percent have no food reserved at home, while 29 percent have 1-3 days' food reserved," found the report.

Rogue dealers with political links to blame

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meant for the poor and arrested 49 people in 46 upazilas, according to The Daily Star reports.

They also seized 6,480 litres of soybean oil, 18 sacks of sugar, and 25 sacks of chickpea.

In most cases, local ruling party leaders were found involved in the theft of the food items, the reports show.

Amid allegations of rice misappropriation, the government suspended the Special OMS Programme on April 15, and decided to issue cards for low-income people across the country so that they can buy rice for Tk 10 a kg.

Earlier on April 5, the food department launched the Special OMS programme so that low-income people can buy rice for Tk 10 a kg amid the countrywide shutdown.

The other one, the Food Friendly Programme, was introduced in 2016. Under the programme, 50 lakh families buy 30kg rice a month for Tk 10 a kg.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE
Food items under these programmes are distributed by dealers, and this is where irregularities start.

Though there is a committee, led by upazila nirbahi officer, in every upazila and a set of criteria for selecting a dealer for these food programmes, recommendations from local lawmakers or ruling party leaders are the main "yardstick" for the selection, say a number of dealers and officials.

"Political consideration is certainly there... We get flooded with recommendations from local political leaders once we start the process of selecting dealers for these programmes," said a UNO of an upazila in Barishal Division.

And this is not a secret.

In October 2017, the parliamentary standing committee on the commerce ministry suggested giving dealership of the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh to individuals as per lawmakers' recommendations to ensure "accountability and transparency".

The TCB dealers also sell food items under the OMS Programme, and most of them are either involved with the ruling party or have ties with local lawmakers and ruling party leaders, said local officials.

"Small as well as big traders get dealership, using their political links... Recommendations from local lawmakers are very important here," said an assistant commissioner (land) of an upazila under Rangpur Division.

Local public representatives,

including upazila chairmen, union parishad chairmen and members have links with these dealers, said the official seeking anonymity.

"Whenever any theft or misappropriation of food items takes place, it becomes difficult to deal with.

"They [local representatives] often try to legalise the dealers' illegal activities for their vested interest."

Each union has three to four dealers, and they hold dealership for years unless serious allegations of corruption are brought against them, a secretary of a union parishad in Lalmonirhat told this newspaper.

"Recommendations from local MPs and political leaders are a must for getting dealership."

Babul Das, a dealer in Khulna city's Raigata area, said a section of dealers sell rice, allocated under the government food programmes, in the wholesale market, instead of selling it to low-income people, as it is more profitable.

"A dealer gets 50 to 75 paisa from the sale of per kg rice under the Special OMS Programme. But if the dealer sells rice in the wholesale market, the profits soar exponentially."

A number of government officials said dealers also misappropriate food items by keeping the local food offices in the dark about the unsold goods, and in some cases, they do it in collusion with a section of local food officials.

WHAT FOOD MINISTRY DID?
Instead of looking into the problem regarding selection of dealers, the food ministry and the minister wrote to local administration and police several times, asking them to stop irregularities and take action against the culprits.

But it didn't help, and the ministry had to suspend the Special OMS Programme last week, leaving the low-income people in deep trouble.

Following media reports, the food ministry on April 13 formed a three-member committee, led by an additional secretary, to investigate the misappropriation of a huge amount of rice and give recommendations.

The same day, the food minister asked the director general of Directorate General of Food to probe whether any of its officials were involved in the irregularities.

WHAT AUTHORITIES SAY

Contacted, Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder said they already instructed all deputy commissioners and others involved in the selection of dealers to take punitive measures, including cancellation of dealership and confiscation of security money, if any dealer is found involved in

irregularities in food distribution.

"We have also asked them to replace the dishonest dealers with the good ones."

Asked about the selection of dealers on the basis of political affiliation, the food minister said, "We have asked the authorities concerned to strictly abide by the guidelines while selecting dealers."

The DCs and others concerned have been asked to prepare a list of vulnerable families within five days to provide each family with 20 Kg rice a month, he mentioned.

Besides, the food ministry will continue the Food Friendly Programme in May to provide 30 kg rice a month to each of 50 lakh poor families.

The programme is usually run from March to April, and from September to November.

Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzaque said the government will be tougher, if necessary, to stop irregularities in food distribution.

"We thought no one would resort to foul play at this time of grave crisis. But since some people are doing it even at this time, the government will take harsher action against them."

Mozibur Rahman, convener of the three-member probe body and also an additional secretary of the food ministry, said they found a lack of proper monitoring regarding the food programmes.

A government official is supposed to monitor distribution of subsidised food items in a particular area, but many of the officials failed to do so amid the coronavirus scare, and a number of dealers took advantage of it, he told this newspaper yesterday.

He further said they got complaints of irregularities from all divisions, but could not give the number of dealers facing allegations of misappropriation.

Replying to another question, he said they had not so far found involvement of any officials in these irregularities.

The official stressed the need for strict monitoring and putting the names of all cardholders under the Special OMS Programme on government websites to ensure transparency.

He said they will recommend some changes in the guidelines for running the food programmes.

Talking to The Daily Star, Hafizuddin Khan, former adviser to a caretaker government, said the government must take punitive action against the corrupt dealers, irrespective of their party affiliation, to stop irregularities in food programmes.

Don't despair

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Hasina said isolation units were opened at different divisional headquarters and districts. The government would take measures to set up intensive care units at every district hospital, she added.

She said there was no shortage of Covid-19 testing kits in the country.

The PM said her government would distribute 50 lakh ration cards among the low-income people in addition to the existing 50 lakh so that they do not have problems with food.

"Inshallah, we will be able to take measures so that nobody faces problems regarding food."

Mentioning that Bangladesh had no experience of dealing with such an epidemic, Hasina said they couldn't imagine that such a health-related cyclone would hit.

"But after knowing about the coronavirus, we took some immediate health safety measures in line with the guidelines from World Health Organisation, which include closing of schools and colleges, imposing restrictions on social gathering, shutting airports and land ports and ensuring 14-day quarantine for those returning home from abroad," she added.

The premier said she has already instructed the disaster management and relief ministry to get involved with the government's three hotline numbers so that it can send food aid to the callers.

Yesterday afternoon, the House went into its seventh session for a very brief period due to the spread of Covid-19 in the country.

With Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury in the chair, the sitting started around 5:00pm.

The Speaker said the 11th parliament went into its seventh session amid the Covid-19 outbreak due to a constitutional obligation.

The constitution stipulates that there can be a maximum 60-day gap between the end of a session and the beginning of the next one, she said.

"As the last session of parliament was prorogued on February 18, the next session would have to be held within April 18," she said.

The session was prorogued within an hour after adoption of a condolence motion on the death of Awami League lawmaker M Shamsur Rahman Sharif from Pabna-4. The MP passed away at a city hospital on April 2.

The PM, AL MP Matia Chowdhury, and Opposition Chief Whip Moshir Rahman Ranga, among others, took part in the motion.

Sources at the parliament secretariat said this was the shortest session of Jatya Sangsad in the recent history of Bangladesh parliament.

The seating arrangement was made ensuring social distancing among lawmakers.

The government earlier advised journalists to cover the session through watching it live on Sangsad Television.

A limited number of lawmakers were present at the House yesterday. Lawmakers mainly from Dhaka and its adjacent districts were present.

Most of the senior and front row MPs remained absent as per advise from the parliament secretariat, sources said.

Thousands gather,

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surrounding areas and a 14-km stretch of Dhaka-Sylhet highway.

Some people went to the roofs of nearby buildings to participate.

The authorities in the evening ordered people of Bertola and its surrounding areas to obey the lockdown rules.

The prayer started around 10:00am and went on for over an hour. The large number of people defying social distancing rules have created fears of further spread of coronavirus among many.

"People around the world are maintaining safe distance to combat coronavirus. But people in this area made a huge gathering," said RAM Obaidul Muktaadir Chowdhury, lawmaker from the area and president of district Awami League.

"I guess, they gathered there to invite the virus," he told The Daily Star.

Shahdat Hossain Titu, officer-in-charge of Sarail Police Station, said, "People have come here from different parts of the country including Dhaka. We had no idea such a large number of people would gather here... Actually, we had nothing to do when the people started pouring in."

Deputy Commissioner Hayat-Ud-Dwolla Khan said the district administration contacted the family members of the deceased leader on Friday evening to urge them not to hold a large funeral.

The family members assured officials that the namaz-e-janaza will be held in the presence of a few people, he said.

"But today, we saw a different picture. We did not know such a huge number of people would be here. We are investigating the matter," said the DC.

The Islamic preacher died at his home in Markzpara area of Brahmanbaria area Friday evening. He was 56.

On March 22, Shah Alam, civil surgeon of Brahmanbaria, was made an officer on special duty gatherings at his daughter's wedding.

Half the world locked down

FROM PAGE 1

followed by Italy, Spain and France which have all been ravaged by their own outbreaks.

Many countries are testing only the most serious cases and the number of confirmed global cases is likely only a fraction of the true total.

Virtually no corner of the world has been left untouched, with deaths in Africa passing 1,000 overnight.

Nigeria announced the death of President Muhammadu Buhari's top aide yesterday, the highest-profile person to succumb to the virus in Africa's most populous nation.

And much of the world's 260 million Orthodox Christians were also preparing to mark their Easter celebrations without attending mass.

The Russian Orthodox church has asked the faithful to mark the occasion at home, even though many places or worship will remain open, while services in Turkey will be closed to the public and broadcast on the internet.

COVER-UP CLAIMS
China sharply raised its own death toll to 4,636 on Friday after adding another 1,290 fatalities for the city of Wuhan, where the respiratory disease first emerged late last year.

Trump, who has angrily shot back at claims he reacted too slowly to the virus threat, has accused Beijing of

downplaying the impact of the virus within its borders.

"It is far higher than that and far higher than the U.S., not even close!" he tweeted.

Trump did not offer evidence to back the claim, but pressure has mounted in recent days on Beijing to come clean over its handling of the initial outbreak.

Leaders in France and Britain have also questioned China's management of the crisis but Beijing hit back, saying it had not concealed information about the illness.

Signs that the outbreak could be easing in parts of Europe prompted Switzerland, Denmark and Finland to begin reopening shops schools this week.

Germany's health minister said infection rates had "sunk significantly" after 3,400 deaths in his country, which is now beginning the delicate task of lifting some restrictions without triggering a secondary outbreak.

Some small shops will be allowed to reopen Monday, and some children will return to school within weeks.

Parts of Italy also began emerging from lockdown, with Venice residents strolling around quiet canals.

But Japan, Britain and Mexico all expanded their current movement

restrictions.

ECONOMIC DAMAGE

Signs of the economic carnage wrought by the pandemic are mounting, with China reporting its first contraction in GDP since at least the early 1990s after several decades of breakneck growth.

The Trump administration pledged another \$19 billion in relief for farmers reeling from a massive jolt to the agricultural markets with schools and restaurants shuttered across the country.

Part of the funds will be used to buy up surplus dairy products and produce that farmers have been destroying, unable to get it to consumers or food processors.

"Having to dump milk and plow under vegetables ready to market is not only financially distressing, but it's heartbreaking as well to those who produce them," agriculture secretary Sonny Perdue said.

African state leaders and global financial bodies warned on Friday that the continent needed tens of billions of dollars in additional funds to fight the outbreak.

The IMF also warned the virus could spark another "lost decade" in Latin America and backed debt moratoriums to free up spending for the region's fragile economies.

But who'll run the tests?

No medical technologists appointed at govt hospitals in last 11 years

ASIFUR RAHMAN

With coronavirus positive cases increasing in the country, many are expressing dissatisfaction over the small number of tests being conducted every day and wondering about the possible reason behind this.

The reason is quite shocking. No medical technologists (MT), entitled with the duty of testing and analysing body fluids at laboratories, were appointed at government hospitals in the last 11 years.

According to health professionals, due to the shortage, the number of coronavirus testing in the country is still low compared to other countries. Even those working as MTs at laboratories are not well trained, they added.

There is only one MT against four doctors in Bangladesh whereas at least five should be appointed against each doctor, as per World Health Organization guidelines.

Also, against every 10,000 people, there are only 0.32 MTs, which means only one MT is in charge for over 30,000 people.

The latest health bulletin of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), published in November 2018, reported that a total of 2,736 MT posts (of the total 7,920) are lying vacant at the country's medical college hospitals.

'FEUD DELAYING HIRING'

A feud between DGHS and the Board of Technical Education is allegedly delaying the recruitment for the past 11 years.

A series of inter-ministerial meetings were held, new laws were introduced, two writ petitions and an appeal were filed with the High Court and a verdict was also delivered, but still the process of recruitment remained halted.

As a result, despite the 17 laboratories in and outside Dhaka having the ability to conduct more than 4,000 tests a day; they could test only 1,000 samples, said health officials, seeking anonymity.

"It is not possible to collect samples from community clinics with the least amount of manpower and test those," Selim Molla, former secretary general of Bangladesh Medical Technologist Association, had said in a statement recently.

In this situation, it will be easier to appoint unemployed MTs who passed from various public-private institutions under the Ministry of Public Health to collect and test the samples, Molla told The Daily Star. The health ministry has no such plans.

Additional Secretary (Administration) Habibur Rahman Khan said, "We have manpower crisis, challenges in collecting samples. That's why we are providing online training to health workers. But we

SEE PAGE 4 COL 5



People queue up to buy essentials from a Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) truck at Mirpur's Shewrapara, with little regard for social distancing. The truck sells groceries at a low price, and some people had been waiting since morning for it to show up. The photo was taken yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Take special measures for the marginalised

Development orgs urge govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A coalition of leading development organisations yesterday called on the government and other development actors to prioritise needs of the marginalised by taking comprehensive, inclusive and far-sighted measures to protect them amid the evolving coronavirus situation.

Special consideration needs to be given to 11.3 percent extreme poor population in rural and urban areas, with a focus on geographically marginalised population in haor and char areas of Bangladesh, the coalition "Leave No One Behind" said in a statement.

"The coronavirus emergency is primarily a health crisis, but it has the potential to have severe medium and long term negative socioeconomic impact on every segment of the society. It is the poorest and marginalised of Bangladesh who will be

the hardest hit," it said.

Particularly, women and children of vulnerable communities will severely suffer from the economic and social impacts, it added.

The coalition comprises of Brac, Save the Children in Bangladesh, Plan International, ActionAid Bangladesh, Transparency International Bangladesh, Islamic Relief, international Christian development organisation CBM, and Voluntary Service Overseas.

Praising government's measures to stop coronavirus infections and the stimulus packages, the coalition said it was important to remember the already vulnerable, marginalised and poorest communities are living in the fringes of society.

People with disability, ethnic minority groups, transgender communities, sex workers and people with sexually

SEE PAGE 4 COL 4

Four flights to take UK citizens home

UNB, Dhaka

Four special flights will be operated from Dhaka to London between April 21 and 26 to take back British citizens and their direct dependants.

British visitors currently in Sylhet will also have the option to book domestic transfer from Sylhet to Dhaka ahead of each of these flights, said the British government.

Up to 150,000 British nationals visit Bangladesh every year. There are currently no commercial options available for them to return to the UK due to flight restrictions announced by the Bangladesh government.

British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Robert Chatterton Dickson said in a video message, "I'm very pleased to announce the start of our charter programme taking British visitors home from Bangladesh to the UK."

He said they have worked very hard to keep the cost of these flights as low as they can. "The price per head will be £600, whether you're starting from Dhaka or Sylhet."

Interested British citizens can book these flights through Corporate Travel Management (CTM) or travel management partner.

"I'm very pleased that we've this charter programme up and running. Thank you for your patience, and I'm delighted that you'll now have the opportunity to return home very soon," said the British high commissioner.

The watermelon divers of Kirtankhola

SUSHANTA GHOSH

Like the kingfisher dive-bombs into rivers to prey on small fish, these boys plunge into the Kirtankhola to collect stray watermelons every day of the season.

Flowing from the west bank of Barishal city, Kirtankhola plays host to watermelon traders from all around the region. Every day, hundreds of trawlers from Bhola, Patuakhali, and Barguna anchor at Port Road's watermelon trade hub.

The trawlers are filled to the brim before they set sail, and it's almost expected that a few of the green-goodness will be lost to the river. This is where our boys come in.

Jasim (12) and Ibrahim (10) are siblings from nearby Rasulpur slum area. They go to a local primary school, to fifth and fourth grades respectively. Their father is a daywage worker and mother works as a house help.

During watermelon season, the boys get to work at noon. Like other children of the Rasulpur slum, the brothers know how to swim, and they're not afraid to take on the waves. They get on their styrofoam rafts and pick-up stray watermelons, even if they are floating in the middle of the river. They have done this for so long that they might have really developed kingfisher like scoping abilities -- they say nothing escapes their eyes!

Although the coronavirus shutdown is negatively affecting almost everyone else's lives, for the boys, the leisure is but an

opportunity to grab even more.

Watermelon is a big fruit, so any number they get is a good number. Once they feel like they have enough, they bring it home and share with the family. For a cash-strapped family like theirs, delicacies are hard to come by, and so these melons bring a lot of extra happiness.

In fact, it's not just watermelons. When the melons are out of stock, the boys collect everything from coconuts, lime, betel gourd, pumpkin, guava, lemon. Basically any and everything that plies the river and drops into it.

The river is like a companion to the children who grow up in Rasulpur, the Barishal City Corporation councillor of the area said. So much so, that some of them harbour dreams to spend the rest of their lives with it. Like Jasim, who said he wants to grow up to be a "pilot" of a passenger launch.

"I like the river. If I get to become a pilot, my family can live in more comfort, and we won't have to pick-up watermelons from the river."

But wait, does this mean he doesn't like doing this? Turns out, that's not the case at all.

"No, no, that's not to say I don't like this. It is my pleasure to dive for watermelons and all the other fruits and vegetables. It has become something of a hobby and it brings me a lot of joy," Jasim corrected himself with a smile.



Brothers Jasim and Ibrahim are like apex predators of Kirtankhola, only that they prey on stray fruit dropped by traders' boats. The photo was taken last week.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Law ministry opens legal aid helpline

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The law ministry has opened a national helpline -- 16430 -- to provide legal aid to the poor, especially the labourers, without any cost during the ongoing crisis.

The ministry is providing the service through its National Legal Aid and Services Organisation (NLASO) and its district legal aid offices across the country.

Masuda Yeasmin, assistant director of NLASO, told The Daily Star yesterday that the toll-free number is open 24 hours a day. Anybody can call to get legal advice from NLASO any time during the current coronavirus outbreak free of charge, she said.

Replying to a question, Masuda said several helpless people from across the country communicate with the NLASO office through the helpline everyday and the office gives them legal support and solve their problems either through the district legal aid office or over phone.

Law Minister Anisul Huq is looking over the helpline activities, and also giving necessary directives to the offices concerned in order to ensure the legal aid, she added.

SPAWN OF CARP EGGS

Pollution-free Halda raises breeders' hopes

Worries remain over transportation due to shutdown

MOSTAFA YOUSUF, Ctg

Around a thousand fish egg collectors at Halda river, a unique natural breeding ground for carp fish in South Asia, are hoping for a high yield this year due to drop in pollution following the countrywide shutdown to tackle Covid-19.

However, they are worried about selling their possible haul because of the current situation.

Md Elias (55), a seasoned egg collector from Chattogram's Hathazari upazila, told The Daily Star that they were praying for a late spawning season, ideally in May.

"As pollution and human activity have dropped significantly, we're hoping for a big haul," he said.

He also urged the government to take steps so that the eggs do not get ruined.

Prompt vigilance by local administration, shutdown of key pollution sources last year and the shutdown have helped the river detoxify itself, said Prof Manzoorul Kibria, eminent Halda researcher and zoology professor at Chittagong University.

He said recent efforts and the coincidental shutdown is a boon for the river, raising hopes for a big haul.

However, the first phase of collection (locally known as "joe"), which was from April 7-13, did not see any spawning.

Now, collectors are optimistic of the second joe, expected to run from April 18-24. If gusty winds, downpours and thunderstorms occur during the timeframe, brood fish will lay eggs, as the environment is congenial for spawning.

When the first phase does not see much spawning, the second phase provides good yield, said the professor.

Prof Kibria said due to the shutdown, transportation of eggs might be restricted, so the government has to provide a resolution.

Ruhul Amin, Hathazari upazila nirbahi officer, told The Daily Star that they were planning to set up a temporary egg market, maintaining social distancing, to resolve the matter.

A restaurant-turned-community kitchen

Abinash Bangla feeding dozens of low-income people every day in capital

MATHEWS CHIRAN

As the clock hits 12:30pm, a group of people can be seen busily organising meal-plates at the Mazaa restaurant in front of Mohammadpur Tajmahal Road's Krishi Market.

Seeing this, one might wonder why and how a restaurant is staying open during the ongoing countrywide shutdown to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. One might also wonder why there are a number of people from lower-income groups gathered there.

"Although my restaurant is closed, I keep the kitchen open so that needy neighbours can come have a lunch prepared by volunteers," said Sadaf Hasnaen Manzoor, owner of the restaurant and founder of Abinash Bangla Foundation -- a volunteering organisation.

Since April 4, around a hundred people have been eating at this community kitchen every day, under an initiative called "Madhyanno Bhoj Eksho" (Lunch for a hundred people). At the start



The volunteers do not see this as charity work. They say they're merely looking out for their neighbours.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

of the programme, the Abinash Bangla team enlisted around 25 families of the area to provide them healthy and fulfilling meals.

All of these families depend on incomes from professions that have been severely affected by the shutdown -- tea stores, makeshift vegetable shops, low-cost garment business etc. As the shutdown hit, these traders became jobless overnight.

"We wanted to officially launch

our foundation on April 14 so that we can start our activities on the first day of the Bengali New Year. But as the Covid-19 crisis hit, we decided to start early considering the needs of the less privileged (of the area)," said Mahmud, one of the members of the foundation.

The organisation chose Tajmahal Road as the starting point as most of its 11 committee members live here and have liaison with poor families of the area.

"We know every one of the families as we live nearby. They are our neighbours, who are currently out of jobs or going through a rough patch with their businesses. We are trying our best to help them out during such a time," Mahmud said.

But the initiative is not limited to just these 25 families. Often, people from outside the list -- primarily rickshaw-pullers -- walk in and ask for meals, and the volunteers don't refuse them.

"We know providing one meal a day is not enough, so we are trying to raise more funds. A lot of people are helping us by providing cash or groceries. A lot of individual donors have contributed everything from Tk 100 to sacks of rice," Mahmud continued.

It is mandated that only one person from each family come. "As one person from each family comes collect the meal, we don't have trouble maintaining social distance," Mahmud explained the distribution process.

The diners come in with boxes,

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

Narcotics dept staff sell alcohol, assault journo

Barishal district admin officials recover 180 litres of locally-made liquor from the spot

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barishal

Some employees of Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) yesterday assaulted a journalist while they were selling locally-brewed alcohol at its Barishal office, defying the ongoing shutdown.

Video journalist Kamal Hossain of private TV channel Bangla Vision said seeing a crowd, he entered the DNC divisional office and attempted to record the scene.

"At that time, DNC employees started beating me and damaged my camera and phone," he said, adding that later they fled the scene.

Hearing about the incident, journalists from different media outlets rushed to the spot and demanded punishment for the assaulters. This correspondent was also present there.

On information, Assistant Commissioner and Executive Magistrate of Barishal District Administration Md Saiful Islam rushed to the spot, seized 180 litres of alcohol and ordered to destroy those.

The executive magistrate said he sent a letter to DNC to take departmental action against those involved in assaulting the journalist and selling narcotics creating a crowd during the shutdown.

One of the staffers named by Kamal as an attacker, was reached by this correspondent, but he denied assaulting the journalist. "I just dragged him into the room," he said.

Md Hafizul Islam, additional director of DNC in Barishal division, said some 70 people with alcohol buying permits -- all of them conservancy workers -- gathered there without prior permission.

He said action would be taken against the DNC staff who were involved in the incident.

Sunil, one of the persons present at the premises, said he went there after he was told they would be given their allotted "quota" of liquor.

Another conservancy worker, wishing not to be named, said they buy local liquor from here every month.

Two others present there said Sunil asked them to go there.



Jahanara Huq passes away

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Law Minister Anisul Huq's mother Jahanara Huq died yesterday at a hospital in the capital. She was 86.

Law Ministry official Dr Md Rezaul Karim confirmed the matter.

She left behind her son Anisul Huq and a host of relatives and well wishers.

Her namaz-e-janaza was held yesterday at Water Development Board Jame Masjid in Banani-11 after Zuhr prayers. She was laid to rest at Banani graveyard.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed her condolences at the death of Jahanara Huq.

Jahanara's husband advocate Serajul Huq -- who was a close aide to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman -- died on October 28, 2002.

Her son Ariful Huq Rony passed away in 2017 in Dallas, USA, and her only daughter Saima Islam died in Dhaka in 2018.



People crowd outside a pharmacy, as its collapsible gates are closed as per police directives to ensure safety. The photo was taken from East Basabo in the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

A restaurant

FROM PAGE 3

bowls, or pans to collect the meals. The menu consists of vegetable hodge-podge, rice, and lentils with fish, meat or egg.

As the restaurant's chef was sent on vacation due to the crisis, the organisation arranged for another chef to cook during the shutdown, while volunteers buy the groceries needed, Manzoor said.

He urged other restaurant owners to start similar initiatives. "Restaurant owners usually have good income. If they come forward and organise such community kitchens, no one will need to go unfed no matter how bad the situation gets."

"The government can support restaurants or at least encourage them to take such

initiatives," Manzoor added.

If needed, the organisation can help carry out this task. "In fact, even Abinash Bangla can take responsibility and organise one such community kitchen for every ward (in Mohammadpur), but we need the local leaders' support for that," he said.

But how long does the organisation plan to keep it up, and how long can they keep it going, this correspondent asked Manzoor.

"We want to continue for 45 days from today (Wednesday), but if necessary, we can extend it. For Ramadan, we are planning to provide Seheri meals from our own fund. We also want to offer Iftaar, but that is contingent on raising more funds."

Take special

FROM PAGE 3

transmitted disease are the demographics that are the ones left furthest behind, it said.

In a 12-point recommendation, the coalition called for ensuring inclusive health service delivery for the marginalised with effective testing services, ensuring availability and distribution of medicine, and accessible isolation and quarantine centres.

It called for providing personal protective equipment to officials and workers in service centres, and water, hygiene and sanitation facilities for marginalised communities.

The coalition said special social safety net programmes and food ration cards should be provisioned with a dedicated budget and effective targeting.

It stressed direct cash transfer programme to reach urban floating people and urged to address informal sector unemployment which arose due to the pandemic.

It also emphasised on strong measures to tackle the challenges of governance as well as corruption during the Covid-19 response.

But who'll

FROM PAGE 3

need more medical technologists who can run the testing machines," he added.

WHY THE HOLD-UP

In November last year, an eight-member inter-ministerial committee was formed to resolve the appointment-related problems. It was headed by Rois Uddin, an additional secretary to the public administration ministry.

On December 2, the committee in its report asked the Technical Education Board to stop new admission to MT courses and make an amendment to their laws.

The committee said "Bangladesh Allied Health Education Board" will be formed after amending the Technical Education Board's law and all health educational institutions would be brought under the board to implement its "One Umbrella" concept.

On February 10 this year, the Technical Education Board suspended enrolment by issuing a notice, and Morad Hossain Mollah, chairman of the board, sent a letter to the education ministry to amend the laws, but the gazette in this regard is yet to be published.

"A feud between the ministries [of education and health] started after the Technical Education Board started teaching medical technology courses at different educational institutions back in 2005," mentioned the committee in the report.

The course has been taught by the State Medical Faculty of Bangladesh under the health ministry since 1983.

To resolve the conflict, another inter-ministerial meeting was held in 2007 and it was decided that all health education-related courses will be conducted by the health ministry under the "One Umbrella"

concept.

"In that meeting, delegations from the education ministry, Technical Education Board, health ministry and health directorate decided that students enrolled in the course under the board, who will fulfil the criteria of state medical faculty admission will be brought under the umbrella," said the report.

"But the health directorate issued a recruitment notification in 2013, setting a three-year-long diploma course under the state medical faculty. Aggrieved by this notification, some students who passed the course under the technical education board filed a writ petition," said the report.

The report also said the High Court issued a rule in 2016 directing the health ministry to coordinate with the Technical Education Board and ordered swift implementation of the umbrella concept.

But that too seemed to be stuck in limbo as some students under the state medical faculty filed a leave-to-appeal petition with the HC the same year.

The HC again asked the authorities concerned to implement its previous rules, which never happened.

Asked, Additional Secretary (Admin) to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Habibur Rahman Khan said they have to follow up on this.

"Emergency appointments are not a decision of the health ministry alone, it needs recommendation from the public administration, finance ministry and the intervention of the prime minister," he told The Daily Star recently.

When mentioned about the ongoing crisis, he said, "We can list medical technologists who are working in private hospitals. But we have to think about how they can be adjusted."

Time to kick

FROM PAGE 12

right after quitting. In that case, they should consult a physician. The main thing is mentality. It is better to switch a smoker's mind to recreational activities more, he said.

It usually takes several months for a smoker's lung to heal the damage caused by long-term smoking, but a smoker would notice health improvements within days after quitting smoking, he added.

World Health Organization (WHO) said smokers would be worse suffers of Covid-19 if infected compared with non-smokers.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of WHO, recently said, "Smoking can increase your risk of developing serious disease if you become infected with COVID-19."

A study published in February in the New England Journal of Medicine looked at 1,099 patients in China with Covid-19, showing that of 173 patients who had severe symptoms, 16.9% of them were current smokers and 5.2% had previously smoked.

The medicine specialist Nazmul said as corona attacks on lungs and smoking weakens lungs.

"So, it is observed that smokers are at a higher risk to become seriously ill than the non-smokers."

Ireland

FROM PAGE 12

There have been 530 Covid-19 related deaths and 13,980 confirmed cases of the virus in Ireland according to department of health figures released Friday.

Ireland, like many other countries, had been bracing for a surge in cases, where transmission would peak and hospitals become overrun with patients.

But Holohan said analysis shows the reproductive rate of the virus -- the number of people a confirmed case typically spreads to -- is now below one.

"That means that on average a person who's infected is passing it down to less than one person," he said.

"If you continue on that path, the rate of infection in the population will continue to drop."

Concerns remain over the high number of cases and mortality in residential care homes across the republic.

Around 60 percent of those who die from the virus come from long term residential care homes, Ireland's Health Service Executive reported Friday.

India seeks Bangabandhu's view

FROM PAGE 12

today in Dhaka to seek "advice and guidance" of Bangabandhu on how India should express herself at the talks when issues involving Bangladesh will crop up.

The Indian spokesman says that India is going to the conference table with Pakistan with the basic objective of a lasting peace in the subcontinent.

Since it is an expressed policy of the Bangladesh government that any talks with Pakistan must come after Pakistan recognises Bangladesh, it is expected that India will press for recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan in the forthcoming talks at Rawalpindi.

CABINET DISCUSSES FISCAL POLICY

Bangladesh Cabinet today discusses

among other issues the future administrative set up and fiscal policy, including the import policy of the country. Bangabandhu presides over the meeting. The eight newly appointed ministers also attend the deliberations of the meeting.

CHECK-POSTS ALONG BANGLADESH-INDIA BORDER

The West Bengal government has decided to set up check-posts along Bangladesh-India border to check smuggling in arms and ammunitions. The West Bengal State Minister for Home Dr Fazle Haque informs that each and every incoming and outgoing vehicle will be searched. The Indian border security force and border police have been asked to curb movement of people through unauthorised routes with Bangladesh,

he adds.

OVERSEAS BANGALEE WELFARE BOARD FORMED

An overseas Bangalee welfare board is formed in Dhaka today with Bangladesh Foreign Minister MA Samad as the chairman. The foreign minister, while discussing the problems of overseas Bangalees, says that Bangabandhu felt the need to form a board like this and the present welfare board is being proposed at his behest. The welfare board will coordinate all efforts at government level and other agencies aimed at ensuring proper wellbeing and safeguarding the interests of Bangladeshi nationals living abroad.

SOURCES: April 20, 1972 issues of Bangladesh Observer, Dainik Bangla and Ittefaq

Tests can't confirm immunity

FROM PAGE 12

to recover, although there are no official figures, reports CNN.

KCDC deputy director Kwon Joon-wook said that so far, there's no indication that patients who retest positive are contagious, even though about 44% of them showed mild symptoms.

But he cautioned there is still a lot scientists don't know about the virus, including the issue of naturally acquired immunity.

In the US, antibody tests have just begun to roll out. President Donald Trump has recommended states use the tests as they start relaxing some of the strict social distancing measures imposed to combat the pandemic, which has infected more than 671,000 people in the US.

Kerkhove said WHO officials discovered many countries suggesting these tests would be able to "capture

what they think will be a measure of immunity."

"What the use of these tests will do will measure the level of antibodies. It's a response that the body has a week or two later after they've been infected with this virus," she said at a news conference at WHO's Geneva headquarters. "Right now, we have no evidence that the use of a serological test can show that an individual is immune or protected from reinfection."

Dr Mike Ryan, executive director of WHO's emergencies program, said scientists are also still determining the length of protection antibodies might give a person who has been infected with the coronavirus.

"Nobody is sure whether someone with antibodies is fully protected against having the disease or being exposed again," he said.

"Plus some of the tests have issues with sensitivity," he added. "They may give a false negative result."

Earlier this week, WHO officials said not all people who recover from the coronavirus have the antibodies to fight a second infection, raising concern that patients may not develop immunity after surviving Covid-19, reports CNBC.

"With regards to recovery and then reinfection, I believe we do not have the answers to that. That is an unknown," Ryan said Monday.

A preliminary study of patients in Shanghai found that some patients had "no detectable antibody response" while others had a very high response, Kerkhove said Monday. Whether the patients who had a strong antibody response were immune to a second infection is "a separate question," she added.

Eight killed in lightning strikes

FROM PAGE 12

The men came to Sunamganj from Habiganj as contractual workers to harvest paddy, said KM Nazrul Islam, officer-in-charge of Derai Police Station.

In Shalla upazila, Shankar died as thunderbolt hit him on a road near a local bazar, said Ashrafal Islam, officer-in-charge of Shalla Police Station.

Shipon died as a lightning bolt hit him while he was harvesting Boro paddy with others at Naluar Haor, said Ikhtiar Uddin Chowdhury, officer-in-charge of Jagannathpur Police Station.

Meanwhile, Farid died at Gazir Khal

haor after a thunderbolt struck him while he was feeding cows there, said Harunur Rashid Chowdhury, officer-in-charge of Dakkhin Sunamganj

In Mymensingh, a man and a child were killed and three others were injured in two separate lightning strikes in Madan upazila of Netrakona yesterday morning.

The victims were identified as a farmer Yahia Mia, 25, from Gobindasree Rajanikanda village; and Rahat Mia, 10, son of Selim Mia from Barogunia village in Madan upazila.

Quoting locals, officer-in-charge of Madan Police Station Md Ramizul Haque said Yahia was killed on the

spot and two other farmers --Tapon, 27, and Islam Uddin 22, -- from the same village were injured when they were struck by lightning at Bichural haor around 10:30am. They were harvesting boro paddy, said the OC.

At the same time, Rahat was killed and his friend Durjoy, 11, was injured when they were struck by lightning at Pichher haor in Madan upazila. The children went to the haor to take food for the workers, said the OC.

The injured -- Tapon, Islam Uddin and Durjoy -- were admitted to Madan Upazila Health Complex, he added.

Another dies

FROM PAGE 12

medical officer (RMO) of the hospital.

Samples from his body were sent to the laboratory of Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College for Covid-19 test.

In the afternoon, he was buried at a graveyard in Kanaighat upazila.

The RMO said 13 patients were receiving treatment at the isolation unit of the hospital yesterday. Of them, three were Covid-19 patients.

The 100-bed Shaheed Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital was turned into a corona isolation unit to serve coronavirus patients and also those showing Covid-19-like symptoms.

N Korea flouts sanctions through China shipping: UN report

AFP, United Nations

North Korea sharply stepped up trade in coal and oil products last year in defiance of UN sanctions through the apparent help of China's shipping industry, a UN panel said Friday.

The annual report to the UN Security Council by sanctions experts went online and inexplicably disappeared later in the day, with the text itself noting China's reservations about the findings.

Publishing photographs, shipping logs and submissions from member-states, the panel said that North Korea had violated the total UN prohibition on exporting coal as well as restrictions on imports of refined petroleum.

"The continued violation by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea of commodity export bans not only flouts Security Council resolutions but serves to fund a revenue stream that has historically contributed to the country's prohibited nuclear and ballistic missile programs," the report said.

The panel, quoting data from an unspecified country, estimated that North Korea exported 3.7 million tons of coal between January and August last year, grossing around \$370 million.

Most coal exports were transferred from North Korean ships to Chinese barges, which often sailed up the Yangtze River to make deliveries, it said.

In a new development, North Korea has also been spotted sending coal into the ocean for pick-up on self-propelled barges that are easier to evade detection, the report said.

As North Korea's fleet is not known to include such barges, they are likely from China, with 47 shipments from May to August last year directly reaching ports on China's Hangzhou Bay near the economic powerhouse of Shanghai, it said.

DMP now seeking

FROM PAGE 12

kind of support, including delivering free food to poor and middle-class people.

TEJGAON POLICE SEEKING VOLUNTEERS

DMP Tejgaon division is planning to recruit volunteers to deliver food and medicine at people's doorsteps to make them stay at home.

Biplob Bijoy Talukder, deputy commissioner of Tejgaon division, has recently called for volunteers in a Facebook post.

"If we get volunteers based on different areas, then we would develop a system where volunteers would deliver products upon receiving orders," he said.

SHOPS WITHOUT SALESMAN

To reduce crowd at the commodity markets, DMP planning to initiate shops without salesmen in front of the large apartments across the city.

Such shops have already been set up at different points in the Gulshan area.

Customers pick essential items racked with price tags and drop the price in the cash box.

The Gulshan Division Police with the support of a local volunteer group "Hello Shop" has taken the initiative.

Sakhawat Abu Khair Mohammed, President of Gulshan Society, welcomed the move.

"It would be a great initiative," he said.

DMP DC Sudip said they also launched a home delivery service with the assistance of another volunteer group named "Swapno Chaka".

The volunteers receive orders from 10:00am to 4:00pm every day on two hotline numbers -- 01766622202 and 01766622204 -- and deliver the products after collecting it from nearby stores.

"We are delivering all kinds of products except fish and meat," KM Abul Hasnat, founder of Swapno Chaka, told this newspaper.

370 RMG factories

FROM PAGE 1

Earlier on April 14, in a statement, the DIFE asked the factory managements to disburse the workers' wages by April 16.

The DIFE came up with the statement as the garment workers continued their protest demanding their wage for March, and against the termination of workers from their jobs.

WHAT DOES BGMEA SAY?

In a statement, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) yesterday said 95 percent of the workers' salary had been disbursed.

"We would also like to mention that we are trying heart and soul to achieve the disbursement of the rest of the workers' salary shortly," the statement read.

According to BGMEA, 2,370,917 workers had been paid out of total 2,472,417 as of yesterday, which is 95.89 percent of total workers.

Out of total 2,274 BGMEA member factories, 2,071 disbursed the workers' wages which is 91.07 percent of the total factories, BGMEA added.

LABOUR UNREST CONTINUES

The workers in Ashulia and Chattogram continued their protest yesterday demanding the wages for March.

Around 350 workers of Penta Forth Apparels Ltd in Ashulia's Kathgora area demonstrated in front of the factory.

Workers of the factory said, factory management assured them for multiple times regarding salary but to no avail.

Workers gathered for salary as factory authorities previously assured the workers' leaders that they would pay the salary yesterday. But they alleged that they could not find the authorities of the factories inside when they reached there.

"We are waiting in front of the factory gate. We will not go back to home until we get our salary," the workers said yesterday.

Al Kamran, vice president of Shadin Bangla Garments Shramik Federation, said the top executives of the factory went into hiding although they assured the workers of payments by yesterday.

In another incident, more than 500 workers of a garment factory in Chattogram city blocked Agrabad road area from 11:00am to 01:00pm demanding their last month's salary.

According to the police and workers of Frank Garments (pvt) Limited, workers of the factory were assured by owners of payments by Saturday, but they did not get anything.

Sadit Kumar Das, officer-in-charge of Double Moring Police Station, told the Daily Star, "We conducted a meeting with top officials of the factory around 12:00am and they promised to disburse all payments by April 28."

Sex-based virus lockdowns expose gender divide in LatAm

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Bogota

A coronavirus lockdown policy that lets men and women leave the house on alternate days has exposed a gender divide in Bogota within days of being introduced, while Peru has dropped a similar scheme after finding it made women's days busier.

The Colombian capital this week joined two countries in Latin America - Peru and Panama - in introducing sex-based lockdown rules to limit the number of people leaving their homes and make it easier to enforce the quarantine.

In the first two days of the measure being implemented, there was a 60% drop in the number of people at

supermarkets, according to data by local merchants' association Fenalco.

But Fenalco also found a marked difference in men's and women's behaviour - in one area of the capital, 1,500 women went out on their allotted day, compared to just 900 men.

Women also tended to spend just 15 minutes shopping, while men took 45 minutes.

Mariana Lopez, a shop cashier, was among residents who questioned whether the sex-based rules would work.

"I don't think it makes much of a difference as there are still many delivery people on the streets and cycling around and they are all men," she said.

In Peru, the gender-based lockdown was scrapped after just

over a week following criticisms that it discriminated against women, who usually do most of the shopping and domestic work.

Farid Matuk, a member of the Peruvian government's coronavirus task force, said it had been a mistake to introduce the measure in a "patriarchal world" that resulted in higher numbers of women out shopping on the days they were allowed.

The move to separate men and women in public has also been criticized by LGBT+ rights groups, who cite the case of a trans woman in Panama who was detained by police and fined \$50 for going outside on a day reserved for women.

Row escalates over origin of virus

Trump vows to find out truth; WHO defends China's revised COVID-19 figures

AGENCIES

Tensions between world's top superpowers escalated yesterday as US President Donald Trump said that "a lot of strange things are happening" regarding the origins of the novel coronavirus and China strongly denied any anomalies on their part.

Chinese scientists have said the virus likely jumped from an animal to humans in a market that sold wildlife in Wuhan, but the existence of a high-security biosafety P4 laboratory there has fuelled conspiracy theories that the germ spread from the facility.

The United States has now brought the allegations into the mainstream, with Trump saying that his government is seeking to determine whether the virus emanated from the laboratory in China.

"A lot of strange things are happening but there is a lot of investigation going on. And



that the virus may have come -- accidentally -- from the facility.

US diplomatic cables seen by The Washington Post revealed that officials were especially concerned about inadequate safety standards related to researchers' handling of SARS-like bat coronaviruses in the high-security lab.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian on Friday rejected allegations that the lab was responsible for the outbreak.

"A discerning person will understand at a glance that the purpose is to create confusion, divert public attention, and shirk

their responsibility," said Zhao, who himself promoted conspiracy theories the US army may have brought the virus to China.

Scientists believe the virus originated in bats before being passed to humans through an intermediary species.

But a study by a group of Chinese scientists published in The Lancet in January revealed that the first COVID-19 patient had no connection to Wuhan's infamous animal market, and neither did 13 of the first 41 confirmed cases.

However, France on Friday said there was no evidence so far of a link between the new coronavirus and the work of the P4 research

laboratory in Wuhan.

General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on Tuesday that US intelligence indicates that the coronavirus likely occurred naturally, as opposed to being created in the laboratory in China, but there is no certainty either way.

On Friday's press briefing, Trump also cast doubt on China's death toll, which was revised up on Friday. China said 1,300 people who died of the coronavirus in Wuhan - half the total - were not counted, but dismissed allegations of a cover-up.

The US president said on Friday that many more people must have died in China than in the United States, which is currently the epicenter of the global pandemic and has reported the largest number of deaths in the world linked to the virus.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) said the sharp upward revision in China's coronavirus death toll was "an attempt to leave no case undocumented".

Trump has condemned the WHO for the support it has given to China's approach in the crisis. He suspended funding to the UN agency this week.

Meanwhile, Congressional Republicans have urged Trump to condition US funding for the WHO on the resignation of its chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus over his handling of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The Republicans have accused Tedros of being too willing to believe Beijing and of brushing off a Taiwanese warning on the ease of viral transmission.

Republicans urge Trump to withhold funds unless WHO chief quits

France says no evidence COVID-19 linked to Wuhan research lab

we're going to find out," Trump told reporters at the White House on Friday.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said US officials are doing a "full investigation" into how the virus "got out into the world".

The Washington Post and Fox News both quoted anonymous sources who voiced concern



This photo shows empty Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul yesterday, as Turkish government announced a two-day curfew to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy claims victory over virus in poorer south

AFP, Rome

Italian health officials declared a long-sought victory Friday over the coronavirus in poorer southern regions that were less prepared for the pandemic than the richer north.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte had warned six weeks ago that Italy's ability to conquer COVID-19 depended on whether cases can stay largely contained to its northern epicentre around Milan.

The disease has now officially claimed 22,745 lives in the Mediterranean country of 60 million people -- a toll second only to the United States.

But Italy has still counted itself relatively lucky because the outbreak erupted in provinces with the best equipped medical staff.

Conte decided to gamble early by imposing the Western world's first peacetime national lockdown while the disease was still gathering force.

His team argued that the short-term economic pain would pay off by saving the health care system and allowing the country to gradually reopen in the weeks to come.

Italy's top health officials said Friday that Conte's big bet had paid off. The latest data from Italy's civil protection service offered new reasons for Conte not to extend some of the strictest measures when they expire on May 4.

They showed the number of people currently being treated for COVID-19 rising by only a few hundred for the first time since the outbreak began.

The current number of cases had been going up by at least 1,000 a day for over a month.

However, business leaders charge that Conte is doing unnecessary damage to the economy by extending the shutdown for too long.

The leaders of Italy's northern industrial heartland are pushing Conte to take another gamble and open as many businesses and industries as possible in early May.

Global coronavirus concert to honour health workers

The Rolling Stones was to join a star-studded global television broadcast to honour healthcare workers on the front lines of the battle against the coronavirus pandemic. The two-hour "One World: Together at Home" event, a combination of music, comedy and stories from doctors, nurses and grocery workers, will be broadcast across multiple North American and international television networks. The Stones join a lineup that includes Celine Dion, Billie Eilish, John Legend, Elton John, Paul McCartney, Chris Martin, Andrea Bocelli and Michael Buble. The television broadcast will be preceded by a six-hour live streaming event with appearances by major sports stars and dozens of other singers, actors and social media influencers. Participants will appear remotely.

Iranian teen shocks chess grandmaster Carlsen

A 16-year-old Iranian chess prodigy has upended the chess world by beating World Chess Champion Magnus Carlsen in the final of the Banter Blitz Cup. Alireza Firouzja defeated the Norwegian 8.5-7.5 in the final of the online quickfire knockout contest to claim the \$14,000 prize. Chess fans won't have to wait long to see a rematch between the pair, as they face off once again on April 20 in the \$250,000 Magnus Carlsen Invitational. The competition, hosted by Carlsen, will pit eight of the world's best players against each other for the record prize.

Islamic militants kill 11 Philippine troops

Islamic State-linked militants killed 11 Philippine soldiers and wounded 14 others Friday in the group's deadliest attack in over a year, the military said. The extremists belong to Abu Sayyaf -- a group based in the southern Philippines that has engaged in bombings as well as kidnappings of Western tourists and missionaries for ransom since the early 1990s. They also have ties to Islamic State militants seeking to set up a caliphate in Southeast Asia. Regional military commander Lieutenant-General Cirilito Sobejana told reporters Abu Sayyaf carried out the attack, adding the soldiers were ambushed and had been pursuing security operations against the militants in Sulu province.

SOURCE: AFP

Trump accused of 'fomenting rebellion' after 'LIBERATE' tweets

AGENCIES

Washington Governor Jay Inslee on Friday accused Donald Trump of "fomenting domestic rebellion and spreading lies" after the United States president urged supporters to "LIBERATE" three states led by Democratic governors.

"The president's statements this morning encourage illegal and dangerous acts. He is putting millions of people in danger of contracting COVID-19," Inslee said in a series of tweets on Friday afternoon.

"His unhinged rantings and calls for people to 'liberate' states could also lead to violence. We've seen it before," Inslee added. "The president is fomenting domestic rebellion and spreading lies - even while his own administration says the virus is real, it is deadly and we have a long way to go before restrictions can be lifted."

Inslee's tweets came after Trump apparently encouraged the growing protests against the stay-at-home restrictions aimed at stopping the coronavirus.

"LIBERATE MINNESOTA!" "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" "LIBERATE VIRGINIA," Trump said in a tweet-storm in which he also lashed out at New York Governor Andrew Cuomo for criticising the federal response.

Cuomo "should spend more time 'doing



and less time 'complaining,'" the president said.

The president's tweets marked a different tone from the day before, when Trump said it was up to state governors to decide when and how to reopen their economies. The Trump administration on Thursday unveiled a phased approach to the reopening of the economy, saying governors would be calling their "own shots" while the federal government stood "alongside" them.

Trump has repeatedly expressed his desire to see businesses reopen quickly and claimed earlier this week that he possesses "total authority" over the matter, even

though the lockdowns and other social-distancing measures have been imposed by state and local leaders, not Washington, DC.

Some states did take some of the nation's first, small steps towards loosening restrictions.

In Florida, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis gave the green light for municipalities to reopen beaches and parks if they could do so safely. In Texas, Republican Governor Greg Abbott said stores could begin selling items curbside, non-essential surgery could resume, and state parks could reopen.

But governors of both parties Friday suggested they would be cautious in returning to normal, with some of them warning that they cannot do it without help from Washington to expand testing.

West Virginia Governor Jim Justice, a Republican ally of Trump, said he would listen to medical experts in deciding how to move forward.

The shutdowns have inflicted heavy damage on economies around the world. In the US, the crisis has cost at least 22 million Americans their jobs, pushing the unemployment rate towards levels not seen since the Great Depression in the early 1930s.

Horror at Canada nursing home

AFP, Montreal

Elderly residents left soiled and unfed after their caregivers fled the premises, 31 deaths in the space of a few weeks: a nursing home in Montreal has become the symbol of the terrible toll coronavirus is taking in Canada's long-term care homes.

The bleak situation discovered at the Residence Herron, in the Montreal suburb of Dorval, has triggered an investigation for gross negligence and a national reckoning about the conditions in long-term care homes which account for half the country's more than 1,250 COVID-19 deaths.

"I was sick to my stomach. I was really sick to my stomach," Moira Davis, whose father Stanley Pinnell died at the Herron facility on April 8, told AFP.

"All of a sudden these questions started flying through my head. 'What could we have done differently? Why did nobody tell us?... Why, why, why?'"

Called to the rescue after most of the staff deserted the facility, health authorities found residents dehydrated, unfed for days and lying listless in bed, some covered in excrement. Others had fallen to the floor. Two deaths had gone unnoticed for several days. At least five of the 31 recent deaths at the home have been officially attributed to the virus, with the others still being investigated by a coroner.

For families, shock and anger mixed with the frustration of having been powerless to do anything, kept away by a ban on visits to the home to avoid contamination.

Local health authorities have now taken control of the facility, and a Can\$5 million class action has been launched against the owner alleging "inhumane and degrading maltreatment" for failing to ensure continued and adequate care.



A doctor uses a swab to gather sample from the nose of a homeless woman as she tests her for coronavirus in Miami, Florida, on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC
LATEST UPDATES
OVER 2.25M CORONAVIRUS CASES
 More than 2,251,690 declared cases have been registered in 193 countries and territories since the epidemic first emerged in China in December. Of these cases, at least 497,600 are now considered recovered. In the United States, now the epicentre of the pandemic, the death toll stood at 37,079 with 706,779 infections. At least 59,672 patients have recovered. Italy is the next most-affected country with 22,745 deaths and 172,434 confirmed infections. It is followed by Spain with 20,043 fatalities and 191,726 confirmed infections, France with 18,681 deaths and 147,969 infections and Britain with 14,576 deaths and 108,692 cases.

THAI PREMIER MOCKED
 An appeal to Thailand's 20 richest tycoons for help in easing the impact of the pandemic by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has been mocked online by social media users, who accused the kingdom's premier of running a "beggar government". Thailand's tourism and export-reliant economy has been hit hard by the outbreak, with the state bank predicting growth will contract by five percent this year -- the worst result since the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

SPAIN REPORTS 20,000 DEATHS
 The death toll from the coronavirus in Spain, the country hit hardest by the pandemic after the United States and Italy, moved past 20,000 yesterday, the health ministry said. A total of 20,043 people have now succumbed to the disease, which killed 565 people in Spain in the past 24 hours, slightly down on the 585 reported on Friday. The number of declared cases has risen to 191,726, the ministry said. However, the increase in infections has slowed in recent days while the number deemed cured has risen to nearly 75,000.

HIMALAYAN TREKKERS STRANDED
 Around 1,000 foreign adventurers are stranded in Nepal's capital, stunned to discover the scale of the coronavirus pandemic, after being rescued from their Himalayan treks. The country's lockdown caused authorities to close the isolated trails and trekkers were ushered down to pick-up points and airports. Most of the group are now stuck in Kathmandu's tourist district, where a few hotels have stayed open and some restaurants prepare free food.

SINGAPORE INFECTIONS SURGE
 Singapore announced more than 900 new cases of coronavirus Saturday, a new record high, with nearly all infections traced to packed dormitories housing foreign workers. Around 200,000 mostly South Asian workers live in 43 dorms across the island, forming an essential part of the country's workforce.

UK QUEEN FOREGOES BIRTHDAY GUN SALUTE
 Britain's Queen Elizabeth II will not celebrate her birthday on Tuesday with a traditional gun salute due to the coronavirus crisis, Buckingham Palace said yesterday. The queen, who turns 94 on Tuesday, made a rare national address at Easter, saying that "we know that coronavirus will not overcome us" and that "we will meet again" after the country's lockdown is lifted.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

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| Closed | Closed | \$1,686.50 (per ounce) | \$28.08 (per barrel) | 31,588.72 ▲ 3.22% | 19,897.26 ▲ 3.15% | 2,614.60 ▲ 0.09% | 2,838.49 ▲ 0.66% | |
| | | USD | EUR | GBP | CNY | | | |
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| | | SELL TK | 84.95 | 94.08 | 107.66 | 12.31 | | |



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TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

Nimble-footed RBI shows BB the way to steer the crisis

AKM ZAMIR UDDIN

Adversity brings out the best in man, William Shakespeare once said.

And the way that the Reserve Bank of India, the neighbouring country's central bank, has risen to the titanic challenges brought on, in short notice, by the global coronavirus pandemic, evokes the line written by the great English dramatist some 400 years ago.

Captained by Shaktikanta Das, the RBI's contingency planning began soon after the outbreak of the novel virus in China in January, as a result of which its actions are now seeming dynamic.

To prevent coronavirus from causing much disruption to India's financial system, the RBI has segregated 150 staff of its critical departments such as debt and reserve management and monetary operations. They have been put in a hotel in the vicinity of the primary data centre.

Although the Indian government is yet to declare its full financial package to fight the economic fallout, the RBI has created the ground for them already.

On March 27, Das unveiled a host of financial programmes to inject a total of Rs 374,000 crore into the financial system, including slashing the policy repo rate by 75 basis points to 4.4 per cent.

The auction of long-term repo operation (LTRO) of 3-year papers to the tune of Rs 100,000 at a floating rate will be conducted too.

Cash reserve ratio (CRR) was reduced 100 basis points to 3 per cent for one year -- a move that released Rs 137,000 crore across the banking system.

Accommodation under the Marginal Standing Facility (MSF) has been increased from 2 per cent of statutory liquidity ratio to 3 per cent until June 30 to release Rs 1.37 lakh crore.

MSF is a window for banks to borrow from the RBI in an emergency when inter-bank liquidity dries up completely.

Indian banks have also been permitted to allow a three-month moratorium on repayment of term loan instalments.

Then on April 17, Das unveiled a second set

of measures to ensure better credit flow and enable normal functioning of the financial markets.

With the view to conserving cash, he asked banks and co-operative banks not to make any dividends for the financial year ending March.

On March 26, the Indian government announced a relief package of Rs 170,000 crore for those hit the hardest by the coronavirus-induced lockdown, along with insurance cover for frontline medical personnel.

And it is poised to declare a large financial package to the tune of Rs 9-10 trillion for its industrial and service sector within a day or two. But the RBI's has already taken its preparation for this.

In contrast, the Bangladesh Bank just seems leaden-footed, with its work on softening the fallout from the pandemic did not start until the middle of March, after the announcement of the first confirmed cases of COVID-19.

While it has taken on several programmes, its moves seem reactionary rather than anticipatory.

As part of the move, the BB cleaved CRR by 150 basis points to 4 per cent to inject about Tk 19,400 crore into the economy.

To make funds cheaper for banks, it slashed the policy or repurchase agreement rate by 75 basis points to 5.25 per cent.

The BB also announced quantitative easing and increased the ceiling for loan-deposit ratio.

As per the government announcement, the BB asked banks to give out loans amounting Tk 50,000 crore to large, medium and small enterprises and service sector at a lower interest rate.

It also introduced a pre-shipment credit refinance scheme involving Tk 5,000 crore at a low interest rate. A fresh refinance scheme of Tk 5,000 crore for businesses of the farm sector has been introduced, too.

It has widened its export development fund from \$3.5 billion to \$5 billion and asked banks not to consider borrowers as defaulters for failure to repay instalments until June 30.

Banks will have to disburse the lion's share of the stimulus package from their own sources. But, they are already mired in cash crunch due to the huge cash withdrawal in recent days.

And this is where the BB's role has been found wanting. It has yet to provide any roadmap on how to supply the required money to both the government and the banking sector to implement the rescue packages.

Poor revenue collection has already forced the government



Pedestrians walk past the Asiatic Society of Mumbai library as the headquarters of the Reserve Bank of India are seen in the background. RBI has been acting decisively against the challenges thrown up by the global coronavirus pandemic on the Indian economy.

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to exceed its annual borrowing limit from banking sources seven-and-a-half months into the fiscal year.

Although the central bank has declared to buy back T-bills and bonds, it has yet to finalise any plan on how much securities will be purchased.

The Indian banks will get term loans in the form of LTRO, whose repayment duration is three years. But such a mechanism is absent in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi banks will have to pay back the BB fund, taken using the repo method, within 28 days.

So, lenders may face a fund mismatch in the days ahead.

There is no denying that the GDP this fiscal year and calendar year will come crashing down by as much as 500 basis points to 2-3 per cent, meaning that the BB will have to inject a large amount of money to keep the demand level up.

If the BB fails to operate the money management properly, inflation may be fuelled once the lockdown is lifted.

The RBI has completed all tasks before the Indian government declared the bailout package, but the BB has issued most of the

notices as per the government's instruction.

A good number of BB officials are working round-the-clock, but there has been no coordination among different departments to draw up plans on how to soften the landing.

"The number of monetary experts in the BB is lower than in the RBI. But we should use our limited workforce properly to manage the situation," said a BB official requesting anonymity when informed of the neighbouring country's banking regulator's proactive department.

Perhaps, the BB can follow the RBI's lead, he added.

Govt should join hands with non-state actors in fight against COVID-19

Suggests the Citizen's Platform for SDGs

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government should team up with the non-governmental organisations in its fight against the raging coronavirus as the non-state actors have an appreciable presence across the country, said the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh yesterday.

"While the NGOs are already doing their best in various areas in the fight against coronavirus, the efforts could be significantly scaled up if the government purposefully utilises them," said the platform, which comprises more than 100 non-state actors and their networks and associates.

The government should use this unused strength properly in this national crisis, said Debapriya Bhattacharya, convener of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, in a virtual media briefing styled "Strengthening Effectiveness of the Non-State Actors in COVID-19 Response Activities".

According to the platform, the national strategy rolled out by the government to address the deadly bug that has so far 2,144 and killed 84 does not explicitly identify the non-state actors as partners in dealing with this national emergency.

Although some interactions are coming to pass between the district or upazila and these organisations, there needs to be a policy announcement from the highest level, Bhattacharya said.

"We would like to strengthen the hands of the government," said Shaheen Anam, a core group member of the platform and executive director of the Manusher Jonno Foundation.

Two of the platform's partner organisations started working from the first week of January 2020 to soften the blow of the novel, lethal virus, while most of the partners got engaged by the

middle of March, soon after the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were announced.

An initial estimate indicates that the organisations have committed more than Tk 600 crore to implementing short- and mid-term interventions to deal with coronavirus.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that the unfolding pandemic, along with the immediate visible stress, is going to have a far-reaching impact on Bangladesh's economic performance, social cohesion, environmental sustainability and democratic governance, the platform said in a paper presented by Bhattacharya.

"There is a high possibility that, as a result of this unprecedented pandemic, inequalities and discriminations may further heighten in the country."

These trends may accentuate the entrenched vulnerabilities of the citizens left behind, frustrating the progress made by Bangladesh during the first cycle of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The protracting shutdown, which began on March 26 and is expected to continue until the end of this month, is creating serious livelihood challenges for income-vulnerable groups.

The so-called lower middle-class people are feeling the pangs of acute economic hardship.

The government needs to work out a targeted cash support infusion strategy to deal with this situation, the platform said.

Due to the total stoppage of transportation, there is a breakdown of the supply chains.

The farmers are the direct victims of this situation, as they are not getting the proper price for their produce, while prices remain high in the markets of the capital.

"The government needs to urgently organise

military convoy vehicles to restore the agri-supply chain," Bhattacharya said.

Given the huge amount of public resources being allocated for the marginalised and vulnerable population, it is natural for the government to have the interest to know the level of efficacy of its initiatives, the platform said.

"We are earnestly welcoming all of the stimulus packages. There has to be proper monitoring of the implementation of the stimulus packages but we are not seeing that. So, we doubt whether these assistances would be properly distributed," Anam said.

The coronavirus has unmasked many institutional, social and political weaknesses, said Bhattacharya.

If there were no budget deficit and revenue collection were higher, the government would have been able to give more stimulus.

If there were accountable local government system, rice and wheat theft would not have taken place.

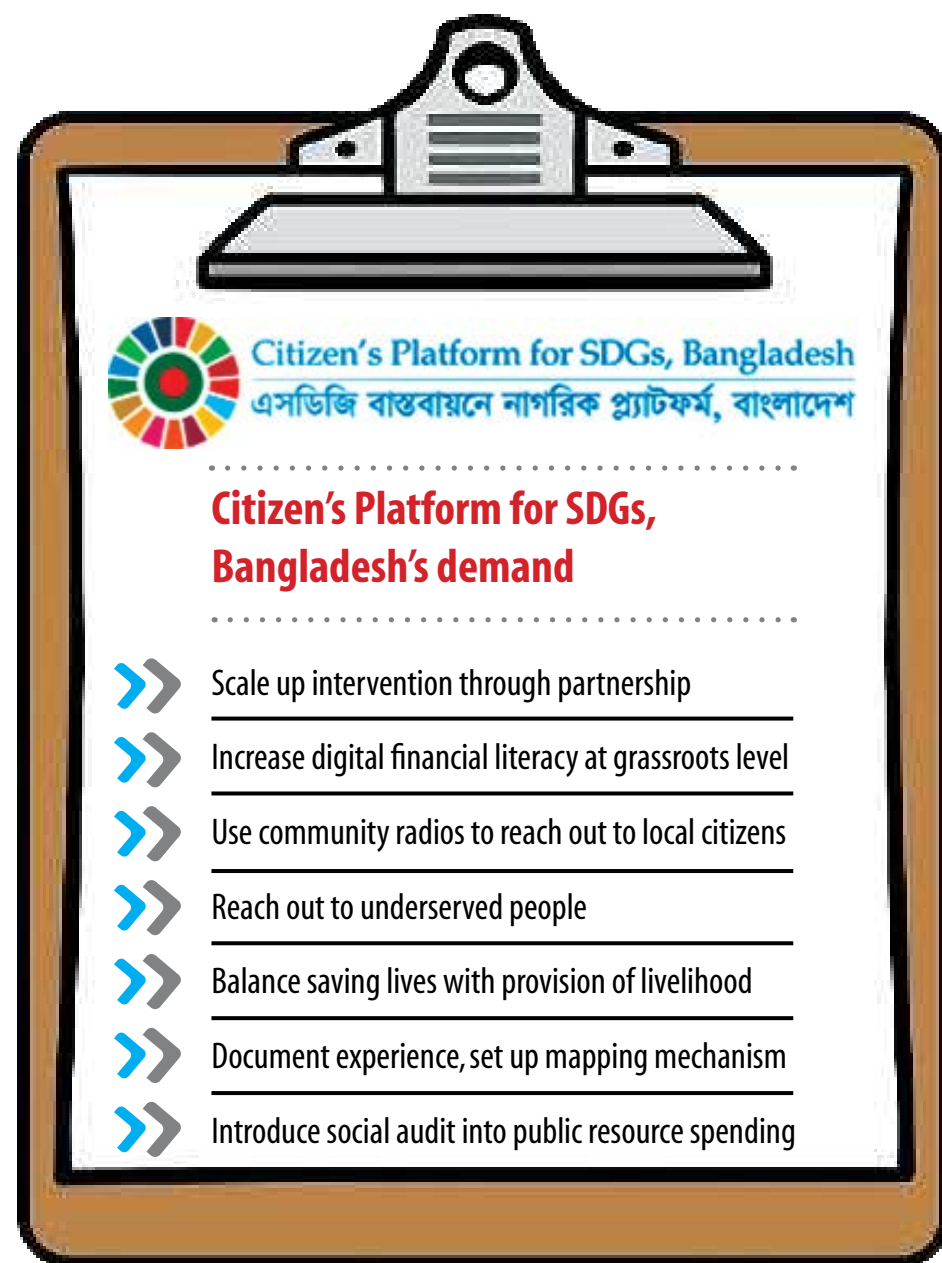
"We are also seeing a lack of coordination in the government. We have to think about the mid-term solutions within the short-term solutions," Bhattacharya added.

Anam also said those who are suspected of getting COVID-19 are also being stigmatised: they are being left unattended and are not being admitted to hospitals.

"We are getting information and news from the field level that returnee migrant workers are being stigmatised."

A common message should be given from the government to save them from stigmatisation, she added.

Rasheda K Choudhury, executive director of the Campaign for Popular Education, also spoke.



Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh
এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্রাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh's demand

- Scale up intervention through partnership
- Increase digital financial literacy at grassroots level
- Use community radios to reach out to local citizens
- Reach out to underserved people
- Balance saving lives with provision of livelihood
- Document experience, set up mapping mechanism
- Introduce social audit into public resource spending

TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

Logistics industry rattled

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA, DWAIPIYAN BARUA and RASHIDUL HASAN

The logistics and freight forwarding business in Bangladesh has been devastated by the global coronavirus pandemic, which has led to a nosedive in transportation of goods by land, air and sea.

Of the 3.5 lakh-odd trucks and covered vans engaged in the transportation of goods between Dhaka, its adjacent districts and Chittagong port, nearly 70 per cent carry textile and garment items, while the rest transport products for other sectors.

And since most of the garment factories are now closed, their business has hit rock-bottom, industry insiders said.

During the shutdown, transportation of other goods like vegetables and construction materials is very scarce, said Syed Md Bakhtiar, executive president of Bangladesh Truck and Covered Van Owners Association.

The average price of a truck or van is Tk 20 lakh and it fetches them Tk 2.5 lakh per month.

"Although we have no income now, we have to pay salaries of the drivers and other staff," he said, adding that they also have to pay bank loans as most of the vehicles were bought on credit.

The 30.5 lakh people directly and indirectly employed in the sector are sitting idle now, Bakhtiar added.

Freight forwarding business has also come to a halt due to the new situation, said Kabir Ahmed, president of the Bangladesh Freight Forwarders Association (BAFFA).

For instance, on a usual day, some 600 tonnes of cargoes are imported via Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport but the quantity has dropped to only 250 tonnes a day now.

About 800 tonnes of goods were exported through the airport on a normal day, but the volume has now fallen to 50 tonnes.

Of the export consignments sent through the airport, 70 per cent are textile and garment items.

The cargo village at the airport is also taking the strain due to slow delivery of goods amid the ongoing countrywide movement control order: though about 250 tonnes goods pile up in the cargo village every day, only 50 tonnes are delivered.

So far more than 2,000 tonnes of goods



have been stockpiled in the cargo village that has a capacity of 800 tonnes.

Subsequently, valuable goods are left under the open sky and unattended, leading to deterioration in their quality, Ahmed said.

The BAFFA is planning to seek faster delivery of goods from the cargo village from the customs commissioner, he said, adding that they have informed the commerce ministry last week that the freight forwarders have incurred losses of Tk 1,500 crore over the last one and a half months.

Moazzem Hossain, commissioner of Dhaka customs house, said they are working seven days a week to deliver the imported goods from the cargo village at the airport.

Many importers are not taking delivery of their goods on time, which has led to congestion at the cargo village, he added.

M Mafidur Rahman, chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, also said they are providing round-the-clock services for faster delivery of the imported goods from the Dhaka airport.

But the backlog doesn't seem to be clearing up fast enough.

SHIPPING INDUSTRY IN A ROUGH PATCH

The container shipping industry that was first dealt a blow in January by an import crunch amid the coronavirus outbreak in China is facing new shocks now.

Though import volume slightly increased since February with Chinese factories gradually resuming production, the sector is bogged down by a dearth of export consignments and container congestion at Chattogram port.

Import of containerised cargo through

the port fell 16.70 per cent to 108,718 TEUs (twenty feet equivalent units) in February from the previous month, according to data from shipping agents.

A total of 134 container vessels arrived at the port in February, against 154 in January.

Since most of the raw materials for the garment sector are brought from China, the supply was heavily disrupted in January and February when Chinese factories suspended production, said Shahed Sarwar, deputy managing director of Chowdhury Group, local agent of feeder operating firms Feedertech and Foremost Maritime.

Vessels hardly get 40 per cent of the expected import cargoes while some vessels had to remain idle.

"We had to drop one of the vessels from our fleet," he added.

Since the last week of March the volume of export consignments has been witnessing a drastic fall as most of the local garment factories remain closed, Sarwar said.

A vessel named Delaware Trader that left the port on April 4 got only 590 TEUs of export containers, while the vessel used to ship 2,200 TEUs to 2,300 TEUs on usual days.

Md Ajmir Hossain Chowdhury, assistant general manager of the ship's local agent Marco Shipping Company (BD), said feeder operators are counting huge losses for carrying such a poor number of export containers.

Slow delivery of imported goods from Chattogram port has created acute container congestion resulting in long queues of vessels. A total of 36 container vessels were waiting at the outer anchorage yesterday.

Vessels are now forced to wait for seven to eight days at the outer anchorage and thus the operators are counting a huge amount of losses since they have to bear an additional charge of \$10,000 to \$16,000 for each day of idle stay, said Ahsanul Hoque Chowdhury, chairman of Bangladesh Shipping Agents Association.

NBR steps in to decongest Ctg port

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Six more types of imported goods can now be stored at private inland container depots before they are delivered to importers, said the National Board of Revenue yesterday as part of its efforts to resolve the acute container congestion at Chattogram port.

Seeds, fibres, pharmaceutical raw materials, yarn, tyre cord, insecticides, fungicide and herbicide can now be stored at the 19 ICDs until June 30.

The NBR also allowed the import containers bound for Kamalapur ICD from Chattogram port to be sent to the river terminal of Summit Alliance Port in Munshiganj until June 30.

The development comes after the Chattogram Port Authority proposed the moves on April 14 to shift about 20,000 twenty-foot equivalent units of import containers from the yards.

Government support is the crying need of the ICT sector now



RASHAD KABIR

This year started with quite disturbing news for the whole world.

The coronavirus pandemic that started from China did not remain confined to that country, but rapidly spread outside, starting from Europe and Iran and now to the US and Canada, which is one of the main target markets for the ICT companies of Bangladesh, especially the companies who are doing outsourcing.

At the time of writing, the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19, spanning 210 countries and territories, stood at 2,249,717 and the fatalities 154,271.

Borders have been closed in most of the countries and those who have symptoms of COVID-19 have been asked to quarantine themselves.

But above all, the most adverse effect that is awaiting us in the coming days is the worldwide economic failure and people of the middle and lower-middle income countries like ours will be the ones who will suffer the most.

After the rebirth of the ICT industry of Bangladesh in 2009, the industry is now also passing the toughest time like the other sectors.

An industry where 95 per cent of the people are young and below the age of 35 is going to be hampered seriously due to current pandemic.

If we segment the work dimension of our ICT industry, we can find three sectors where our ICT companies are currently contributing.

Of the 800 active companies, 175 are now working in the international market, according to the Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), meaning 24 per cent of the total industry is dependent upon the foreign market.

The other 600-plus companies are now working in the local market, catering to both the private and the public sector.

Among those who are working in the local market, 41.3 per cent companies are dependent purely on the private sector market, while 56.7 per cent are working in both the

public and private sector market.

Recently, BASIS surveyed its members regarding the effect of coronavirus on their business and the result we have got is very much alarming.

It has been reported that most of the companies won't be able to run their operations for more than two or three months if the situation continues like this.

Another problem that the ICT companies face more often is not getting proper loan support from banks. As the whole industry is

is not comfortable either. Companies are predicting that the work orders will shrink by as much as 61 per cent in the next three to six months.

Some 69 per cent of the ICT companies surveyed said they can run for a maximum one to two months under this adverse condition, while 24 per cent said they can survive for a maximum of three to four months. Only 7 per cent companies can run for more than four months.

The clients are now cancelling their

Under this adverse condition, the companies have no option other than to cut their overhead and operational cost.

It has been found out that companies are planning to cut down 51 per cent of their current resources on an average in the next three to six months.

It means that the country is going to see half of its highly talented and skilled resources getting unemployed, which will be a serious hit towards the implementation of Digital Bangladesh.



doing intellectual work, the banks are yet to address this intellectual property as an asset.

As a result, the ICT companies are now facing a serious cash crisis as they are not getting loans like the garment and other industries.

In March alone, it has been reported that the companies who are working in the local market have lost 52 per cent of the work orders and those in the international market have lost 35 per cent.

In the last three months, already the companies have lost 74 per cent of their international buyers because most of the companies are working in the EU and the US, the two regions badly affected by coronavirus.

No doubt the situation will be much more adverse in the coming days.

In short, it can be said that the companies working in the international market won't have any work order for at least the next six months until the situation improves.

The scenario of the local private market

current work orders and there is no chance of acquisition of new clients now.

The companies are also afraid that they may not get the rest of the payment of the projects they have already invested in.

The operational costs like paying employee salaries, office rent, office expenses and other overhead costs will become a burden.

This will create a big challenge on employee retention and the sustainability of the ICT industry will be a challenge.

Besides working capital shortage, a serious dearth of cash flow, 30-50 per cent revenue loss, uncertainty in clients' bill payment, the additional cost of arrangement for a home office (devices, internet and cost management) and so on will hamper financial sustainability, which may lead to bankruptcy for many companies.

Communication with the client is getting impossible for the companies who are working in the local market, as everything is shutting down or being locked down.

If they can't survive due to the storm of coronavirus, who will build Digital Bangladesh?

The government has also declared a loan facility for the export-oriented industries at 2 per cent interest. The companies will not get this loan directly; rather, it will go directly to the employees' bank accounts.

There is another loan facility for local companies at an interest rate of 4 per cent under the small- and medium-sized enterprise category.

Already some banks have assured BASIS that they will give loans to its members of up to Tk 1 crore without collateral.

This will be a short-time solution for many companies, but if the crisis continues for more than three months, then it will be not enough.

The companies will need more support at that time to sustain.

Besides, the government has a plan to implement more than 2,600 e-Governance service in the next few years.

The procurement of these services should also be made faster.

Rather than giving one project to one company, joint venture companies should be given preferences so that many more companies can get work from the government, which will increase the capacity of many companies as well.

In a nutshell, it can be summarised that the main mandate of the present government by which they came into power back in 2008 is to digitalise Bangladesh by 2021 and a developed country by 2041.

It's the IT and IT-enabled service (ITES) companies that will be the main partner of the government in materialising the vision of Digital Bangladesh.

No doubt that all the sectors have been affected due to the storm of coronavirus and asking for support from the government.

But the government should give special emphasis on the IT and ITES companies. If they can't survive due to the storm of coronavirus, who will build Digital Bangladesh?

If the government can back up the software companies for the next six to 12 months, I can guarantee you they will give at least 10 times the return over the next decade.

The author is a director of BASIS and managing director of Dream71 Bangladesh, a software company

Rohingyas can't be left to starve at sea

Countries must abide by international law

ON April 16, 396 Rohingya were rescued by Bangladesh Coast Guard after two months of drifting at sea. According to UNHCR, 32 people lost their lives during the harrowing journey, and the surviving passengers are severely dehydrated and malnourished as they ran out of food and water. The trawler, which reportedly set sail from Cox's Bazar for Malaysia, was turned away by the Malaysian authorities and after several failed attempts to land, it made its way back towards Bangladesh.

It is truly unfortunate that local and regional authorities have been able to do little to dismantle the human trafficking network that runs from Myanmar and Bangladesh to Thailand and Malaysia, exploiting refugees' helplessness to trap them into a life that is often as precarious—if not more—as the one they are trying to leave behind.

It is imperative to stop any illegal movement out of the country at this time, and the Rohingya community must be warned of the near death sentence that awaits trafficking victims, with borders being closed and countries like Malaysia proving, time and again, that they have no qualms about pushing sick and starving Rohingyas out to sea.

In fact, Malaysian authorities have turned away a second boat carrying about 200 Rohingya refugees, including children, on April 17, being fully aware of the ruthless consequences of such a decision. These "pushback" actions and policies violate the principal of non-refoulement, which states that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. It is a part of customary international law and binding on all states.

We urge the Malaysian authorities to uphold their commitments under international law and provide at least temporary shelter to refugees in these dangerous times. We also call upon UN authorities to engage with member states to deploy search and rescue missions for starving Rohingyas still adrift at sea.

We appreciate that Bangladesh has rescued these refugees and set up transit camps for them, and hope that other countries will follow suit.

A farmer assaulted for seeking help!

We hope such incident will not be repeated

WE are shocked at the incident that took place in Natore's Lalpur upazila recently where a Union Parishad chairman assaulted a farmer for calling the national hotline number for getting relief. Reportedly, the farmer of Angaripara village was going through a hard time as he couldn't earn a living during the countrywide shutdown and called 333 hoping for some help. This apparently angered the UP chairman who called him to the union parishad office, took him to a room and beat him up. It makes absolutely no sense as to why a UP chairman would attack a poor man for asking for relief when the government has given directives to all the local government bodies to help the vulnerable people across the country during this time of a national crisis.

Providing rice at Tk 10 per kg and launching a national hotline, 333, for providing humanitarian and food assistance to the needy are two important measures taken by the government during this countrywide shutdown due to the Covid-19 outbreak. However, every day we are coming across reports of misappropriation of relief rice by public officials and ruling party men. And then this incident of a farmer being assaulted by a UP chairman. We hope that this is just an isolated incident and will not be repeated in future.

Since police have already arrested the UP chairman in question, we now hope that he will be punished according to our law. The arrest of this man should serve as an example to others that such behaviour by public representatives will not be tolerated by the government. We hope our public officials understand how important it is for them to be receptive, sensitive, and do whatever they can to help people in the time of this grave national crisis.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Great initiative by the youth

While browsing *The Daily Star's* website, I recently came across a report of a social organisation led by the youth, that had the ingenuity to set up a mini booth-like structure, set up with laser sensor that activates when it detects movement and sprays disinfectant on the person walking through it. The installation can remain operational with a two-hour battery backup and is fitted with two sprayers along with a 20-litre tank which has the capacity to disinfect about 120 people.

Even though it is a pilot project and has been introduced in one area of the capital, I highly appreciate the initiative of the youth to come forward with such a timely innovation during the ongoing crisis. I would urge NGOs and if possible, government bodies to look into the possibility of helping the youth organisation to mass produce the device. That way, if every neighbourhood has a few installed, it would help disinfect the people of that neighbourhood, thereby reducing the chances of the infection spreading.

Seema Tahmina, Dhaka



No choice between lives and livelihoods



FAHMIDA KHATUN

OFFICES and businesses are closed. Except for emergency services such as buying food and medicines people are not allowed to step out of their houses. Due to the fear of rapid increase in COVID-19 cases in a densely populated country with inadequate medical facilities, this has been the right decision by the government. The other COVID-19 affected countries have emphasised social distancing as the only way to check the fatality of COVID-19. Bangladesh followed suit.

After over 21 days, as the lockdown has put lives in a standstill, the economy has also felt the pressure in various forms. Disruption in supply chain has compelled farmers to either throw their products on the streets or sell those at a throw away price. Like most years, harvest has been good this year too. But before the farmers could cash in their harvest the pandemic hit them hard.

On the demand side, these three weeks have totally stopped sources of income of daily wage earners, even monthly salaried ones in many sectors. As about 85 percent of total employment is in the informal sector, these people are now without an income. With meagre income they do not have any savings too to survive during crisis period. The list is long. Agricultural workers, construction workers, rickshaw-and van-pullers, three-wheeler and taxi drivers, other transport workers, small shopkeepers, street vendors, barbers, workers in beauty parlours, garbage pickers, domestic help, brick kiln workers, workers in small workshops, roadside eatery workers, hotel and restaurant workers, drivers working for individuals, loaders of goods, woodcutters, delivery workers of e-commerce and many more in the informal sector are penniless right now. Then there are people who have no profession, such as beggars, street children, disabled people, poor women abandoned by their husbands, widows and people from the transgender community.

So, these poor people have become more vulnerable during the lockdown period. For them lockdown may be protecting them from being affected by COVID-19, but they are now affected by poverty and hunger. Lockdown was successful in China and some other countries, because the state could maintain the flow of supplies as well as ensure food security to the low-income people.

This situation has now led many to think along the line of choosing between saving lives and ensuring livelihoods. Of course, addressing the health risks comes first. But as the period of lockdown progresses in Bangladesh, we find significant damage being done to the economy and livelihoods of millions of people. It is feared that many lives could be lost due to hunger. Therefore, the existential dilemma needs to be addressed by providing generous economic relief package to the poor. This is the imperative of time.

What should be the modality of support?

COVID-19 has already pushed Bangladesh's poverty rate to almost 40 percent from 20 percent before the COVID-19 outbreak. So, if we want to keep these people alive there is no other way but to provide large amount of government support. They should indeed

be provided with direct cash support for a few reasons. First, it will give them the freedom to spend on their needs. Second, the management of procurement and distribution of commodities by the local government machinery might become an unmanageable task. Third, the scope of corruption is less in case of direct cash transfer through mobile banking, whereas it is easier in case of rice and other commodities. Fourth, direct cash transfer will not require people to gather and line up with the risk of COVID-19. Fifth, cash support has the potential to create multiplier effect on the economy and help boost the aggregate demand which is much needed at this point in time.

The cash transfer should be at least for three months. It is good to know that the local administration is already preparing lists of people who need support. In case of the existing social safety net programmes, there are inclusion and exclusion errors. That is, those who do not need support, they are on the list and those who need support are not on the list. Moreover, there is no such list for the urban poor. So, the selection of the recipients of support for COVID-19 affected people must be inclusive and comprehensive.

The use of technology can play an important role here. The proposed programme should build a mechanism where the vulnerable people can apply themselves for inclusion. A few hotline numbers should be allotted so that excluded citizens can call and apply for inclusion in the support programme. This updated list of the needy population should be posted online in the relevant websites of the government, such as the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief for transparency.



After over 21 days, as the lockdown has put lives in a standstill, the economy has also felt the pressure in various forms.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

For the maximum utilisation of the support measures, strong oversight mechanism should also be in place. The non-government organisations (NGOs) and local bodies can be involved in the selection of beneficiaries and distribution of the relief which is much needed for the affected people.

Where will the money come from? Given the poor revenue collections, there is little scope for the government to rely on its domestic resource mobilisation mechanism through the National Board of Revenue. The government itself has to rely heavily on the banking sector to meet up its expenditure and it has already overborrowed compared to its target during the current fiscal year 2020. In view of COVID-19, the government has already and rightly started to pursue an expansionary fiscal policy to boost

recessions. But Keynesian economics proved to be more practical. It asserts that fiscal policies are more powerful than monetary policies during economic disasters. America picked up the Keynesian side during the great recession of 2007-2010. At some point, President Nixon jocularly branded all of us as Keynesians. And this is more so now! The US stock market cascaded down even further in the dip, contradicting the Fed's rapid monetary loosening that brought the policy rate close to zero. Monetary policy turned toothless.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

The corona-clenched economy: Changes and policies



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

THE last two months of the budget year, May and June, are again problematic for high heat and storms. In contrast, moving to the calendar year will definitely give two excellent periods of the year at two ends, enabling the government to avail a good start and a good finish needed for productivity and better implementation.

This is the time to rethink about our fiscal corrections. Despite respectable growth, Bangladesh has long been marked as a country of the weakest fiscal capacity in the region. Many countries formed separate ministries for collecting taxes. Our revenue collection under the leadership of a bureaucrat is a blunder we have been making for long under a colonial mindset. A political leadership, which will be accountable to the parliament, at this, one of the most vital public offices, is indispensable. If we can form ministries for such sectors which give less than 2 percent of GDP, why can't we form a ministry for revenue which is 12 percent of GDP—and has the potential to turn into 20 percent of GDP? We should, the sooner the better.

The ex-finance minister in an interview in January unmasked the hollowness of the national board of revenue (NBR) and didn't hesitate to express NBR's untrue statements of revenue collection—which were hyped-up figures. It's a shame! Sometimes, the NBR boss is under tremendous pressure to make up numbers, suggesting that a public representative is essential here to run the lifeline office of the economy. And revenue collection will be the toughest task for the government in the post-corona phase too, when banking will further be floundering in default pandemics. After forming a new ministry of revenue, the ministry of finance will be able to concentrate on sound budgeting by coordinating with the ministries of revenue and planning.

Milton Friedman, after 30 years of the great depression, came up with his theory of monetarism and argued about the effectiveness of monetary policy in

recessions. But Keynesian economics proved to be more practical. It asserts that fiscal policies are more powerful than monetary policies during economic disasters. America picked up the Keynesian side during the great recession of 2007-2010. At some point, President Nixon jocularly branded all of us as Keynesians. And this is more so now! The US stock market cascaded down even further in the dip, contradicting the Fed's rapid monetary loosening that brought the policy rate close to zero. Monetary policy turned toothless.

In contrast, the market rallied up when President Trump announced the largest fiscal package in history—exceeding USD 2 trillion dollars in a USD 21 trillion economy. Good that Bangladesh is also going for direct fiscal actions although they will balloon up fiscal deficits further. The direct payments to the poor and the vulnerable by using both the bureaucratic and political machinery will be imperative. Nobel Laureate Abhijit Banerjee recently advised the Indian government to print money and to hand them out to the poor. No government will be that desperate because inflation

is a potential snake, but the intent of Banerjee's argument is to connect directly to the needy—a task which the monetary authority or banks can't do without satisfying procedural requirements.

Still Bangladesh's central bank has a lot to do particularly to save its balance of payments—the most challenging frontier and more important than domestic credit expansion. India faced its worst financial crisis in the early 1990s when it ran out of its foreign reserves and encountered the toughest blow from its current account balance. Our exports are doomed to plummet. Americans now think about life and death. They have no time or urge to buy garments—no time to be fashionable. Remittances have already gone down and they will be in the decline frenziedly. Bangladesh Bank (BB) now should further liberalise the inflows of capital and remittances. As an irregular remitter, I face so many rules, regulations, obstacles, and sometimes paperwork on top of a poor nonmarket exchange rate. These are enough to explain why migrants resort to *hundreds* or informal channels. BB has to abandon the tangling foreign exchange rules which are the brainchild of the 1956-model advisers. Two percent incentive on remittances still has strings attached to it. Make them free and let the market determine the exchange rate. Of course, BB deserves credit for allowing USD 10,000 cash for travellers. Even that ceiling should be lifted for inflows up. Loans to small and medium enterprises, farmers, and petty businesses should be interest free. And so should be student loans for at least a year.

Once in October 2008, the Fed Chair Ben Bernanke warned President Obama, "Act now, or there will be no economy on Monday." The time now is worse than that. We believe the Bangladesh government will work relentlessly to protect the helpless and at least minimise the damages looming on the horizon.

Biru Paksha Paul is professor of economics at the State University of New York at Cortland. Email: birupakshapaul@gmail.com

Resources from the private sector is also essential during such crisis. While we see billionaires and millionaires of the world have pledged huge amount of money from their own pockets, we do not see such examples in our country. Of course, many in the private sector have been doing a lot. Many are probably supporting quietly. But expectation from them is much more. What we see even in our neighbouring country India in terms of philanthropic activities of the rich, we do not see that much in Bangladesh where the number of ultra-rich is growing at a faster rate than South Asian countries and even China.

International sources should be explored actively. International and bilateral organisations have come up with various packages and support measures and there is a large demand from member countries. Bangladesh should ask for support on flexible terms.

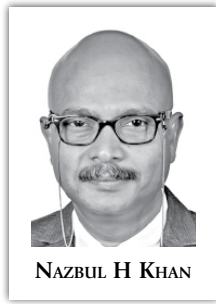
Some have suggested for printing money and spend. This may be an option to boost demand. However, if economic activities are not geared up and employment is not generated, then printing money does not help. It rather creates stagflation. That is, there will be high inflation and people may go to the market with a bag full of money but return with very few products. Because, there is also supply shock and the economy is stagnant.

This is of course a tricky situation for policymakers, because in order to create employment they have to increase public expenditure. Therefore, there needs to be a fine balance in making a choice. And we should not also forget, once stagflation begins it takes a long time to get over it as the history of many major economies including that of the United Kingdom teaches us.

Lastly, NGOs and individuals have also come forward to combat the current COVID-19-induced economic crisis. Their effort should continue to strengthen the hands of the government no matter how little their contribution is. A crisis of this magnitude requires collaboration of all stakeholders.

Eat vegetables, save farmers!

Reflections of a rapid assessment



NAZBUL H KHAN

DURING the lockdown, people stay at home unless there's an emergency. Market places are shut down. Kitchen markets and super-shops are open for a short span. Evidently, the lockdown has compelled people to buy less.

During this unusual phase, two behavioural trends are noteworthy. Consumers are trying to be minimalistic in choosing their priority items. They are less attentive in buying perishable agricultural products. Households are also sceptical of eating fresh vegetables when they are repeatedly told to wash vegetables to avoid health hazards. However, the vegetables and local fruits that are grown to reach the table have very little shelf-life and are becoming a headache for farmers. How far consumers are concerned about those colourful sources of nutrition that could strengthen their immune system?

The supplies of perishable items in the capital, dietary behaviour, and access to the market of harvestable vegetables have put producers and consumers at risk from economic and nutrition point of views. PART II has conducted a rapid assessment with NEXEL Research LTD to highlight the constraints which could be supportive for market actors as well as policymakers. This assessment covered the majority's perceptions of changing dietary patterns during this pandemic and how this will have a negative impact on the immune system and the challenges marginal vegetable producers are dealing with.

As part of the research, a couple of questions were asked to dwellers of Dhaka city. An electronic version of the questionnaire was sent to the city dwellers using web-based platform. City dwellers from 27 areas came back with

their answers. The average age of the respondents is 39 years of which 54.5 percent are female. It is obvious that the participants are all able to use the internet and modern communication tools thus representing the educated middle class.

While they have reduced buying vegetables, 45.5 percent of respondents identified this as due to the unavailability of fresh vegetables in the market, 37.5 percent of the respondents said that they are not finding their preferred items through existing sources.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 51.8 of Bangladesh's people are in agriculture work. 60 percent of these functional farmers are sharecroppers. While sustainability in farming is a major challenge in a fragile market like ours, farmers have been coping with this fragility with their sweat and efficiency by diversifying the crop yields.

Fresh vegetables and indigenous fruits such as banana, papaya, guava, watermelon, mango, and litchi are becoming increasingly popular in agriculture. Especially in the field of vegetable cultivation, the nature of Bangladesh's land is very favourable in size. In the past few years, there has been a significant diversity in the cultivation of vegetables, farmers are getting good prices from summer tomato or capsicum which are high-valued crops. International Food and Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) shows in research (Desirable Dietary Pattern and Actual Food Intake) that during 2011-12 to 2015 average Bangladeshis have increased fruits and vegetable intake (fruits 35 g from 10 g, leafy vegetable 41 g from 38 g) in both the cases desirable daily intake should be 100 g. While this change in diet was making us optimistic, the corona will inevitably interrupt this trend.

The findings from the rapid assessment are quite alarming. During this crisis, when half of the city dwellers are unable to buy their preferred fresh vegetables, at that very moment farmers

are worried about getting into the market with huge harvestable crops in the field. The assessment team interviewed the farmers randomly from four major vegetable growing regions: Jessore, Bogra-Sirajganj, Narshingdi, and Manikganj over the phone through a set of questionnaires.

The calls were made to the farmers, where the primary list was prepared from different farmers' groups. The average volume of sales from vegetables of these farmers from last season was Tk 76,000. The telephone interview was

is the use of a new tool in qualitative research methodology. On April 15 a panel discussion was conducted to validate the data derived from the quantitative assessment. The panel consisted of farmers who participated in the data collection process (Rofikul Islam, Jessore) and outside the process of the aforementioned region (Shoriful, Rajshahi). A nutrition expert (Dr Shaikha Siraj, Country Director, Nutrition International) joined as one of the panellists to provide her professional views.

at least for 30 seconds. She remarked that the way Bangladeshi cuisines are prepared (temperature) is perfectly safe. Dr Saika categorically mentioned that seasonal vegetables and fruits are essential to fight against any outbreak during that season.

Two important issues came up in the live broadcast. Due to the disruption of the supply chain, regional intermediaries and whole sellers (*aaraidar*) are being encouraged to sell the purchased vegetables to the local retailers. By doing so, small farmers who sell their commodities in the local market are facing another level of competition. The other factor is many city dwellers have returned to their area on the eve of lockdown. In that case, some level of demand creation is observed in the local market. However, that volume is not equal to the size of the national supply chain. Both of these findings were not revealed during the data collection process. During the panel discussion, many consumers expressed their concerns about what will happen to the long awaiting seasonal fruits like watermelon, litchis, mango if this situation prevails.

The assessment, conducted within a short period, confirms a couple of hypotheses. Fresh vegetables and fruits are the most dependable option for nutrition and immunity. The farmers of Bangladesh are ready with the supplies. There is no risk if these fresh vegetables and fruits are consumed if proper hygiene is maintained. For that consumers must rethink. Reaching these perishable items to the consumers' table is not too difficult. Many innovative entrepreneurs have begun to work out alternative ways during social distancing.

Outside the established vendors, new actors (online vendors) are overcoming this challenge through innovation. To reduce the health risks, eat fresh vegetables and reduce the economic risks for farmers.

Nazbul H Khan, founder and CEO, PART II.



PHOTO: RAFIKUL ISLAM (FARMER FROM JESSORE)

conducted on April 13 and 14. These farmers were asked about the crops that need to be harvested during the next four weeks in a row (weekly forecast). It is found that on average a single farmer has 415 kgs of the pointed gourd (potol), 16 kgs red amaranths, 117 kgs of bottle gourd, 305 kgs of bitter gourd, 340 kgs of eggplant, and 200 kgs of tomatoes on the field. Many of them have sponge gourd, okra, drumstick, pumpkin. However, on average they have more than 2,500 kgs of different harvestable vegetables on the farm. An important part of this assessment

This panel discussion was broadcasted live on Facebook for about an hour to make it inclusive and validate the findings and the trends. This initiative proved to be very effective when participants and Facebook users expressed their concern about the issues of farmers. It brought the farmers and consumers in a platform where clarifications were given by the nutrition expert about the consumption of vegetables during this amid risk of contamination. Dr Saika reminded us that WHO guidelines say that vegetables should be washed with soapy water

Home isolation in the complex context of Bangladesh

NUSRAT HOMAIRA, SAIFUL ISLAM and ZAKIUL HASSAN

THE number of COVID-19 patients in Bangladesh continues to increase every day. The vast majority (approximately 80 percent) of COVID-19 patients will develop mild symptoms including fever, cough and sore throat. Most countries are advising COVID-19 patients with milder symptoms to stay home and self-isolate themselves. This is a pragmatic decision to reduce the anticipated surge in healthcare use, more so for low- and middle-income countries. However, even people with milder symptoms will have to be cared for, especially when the patient is a child or an elderly household member.

Home caring for patients with infectious disease, can be a complex issue within the cultural context of Bangladesh. The prevalent social norms are when someone becomes ill, family members provide close "physical and emotional" care which expose them to patient's oral and nasal secretions. It is also common to share the same bed with the sick individual. Such practices are exceptionally challenging to address when trying to contain household transmission of disease like COVID-19 which is predominantly spread through respiratory droplets and contact. There is no easy solution.

The first big question is "how and where to isolate a COVID-19 patient within the household?" The WHO suggests possible COVID-19 patient should be placed in a separate well-ventilated room. This is a luxury for many households in Bangladesh. Most households have five or more family members and many houses have only one shared



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

sleeping area. When there is no separate room, the patient can be placed in one corner of the house maintaining at least one metre distance from other household members.

Patient should restrict movement within the household and avoid all contacts, especially with infants, elderly or other family members with underlying chronic conditions

such as heart and lung diseases. Windows of the house should be kept open to ensure ventilation. A medical/surgical mask (not cloth mask), when available, should be worn by the patient and changed every day. The mask should be disposed off safely in a closed bin or bag. If masks are not available, coughing on bent elbows and using a tissue

or a cloth piece to blow noses will limit exposure to infected respiratory droplet. The tissue or cloth must be disposed off immediately.

Second question, "who cares for the COVID-19 patient?" Caring for COVID-19 patient, whenever possible, should be done by specific family member, preferably someone in good health without underlying chronic conditions. If any household member has recently recovered from COVID-19 he or she can also provide care. The carer has to wash hands with soap and water after every contact with the patient. Hands should be washed for at least 20 seconds or in such a way that both the surfaces of the hands including the fingers, the finger gaps and the nail beds including the tip of the fingers are thoroughly cleaned.

Caregivers can also keep their faces turned away from the patients' face when feeding them. When the caregiver has to sleep next to the patient, maintaining a distance of at least one metre and avoiding sleeping face-to-face can reduce the risk of exposure to contaminated respiratory secretion. Third question, "how to maintain cleanliness within the household?" Avoid contact with contaminated items from the patient including toothbrush, utensils, towels, leftover food, drinks, bed linen and wash clothes. Patients' clothes should be washed separately with household detergent and dried under the sun.

It is advisable to disinfect toilets after being used by COVID-19 patients. Most households will have one toilet for the whole family. Additionally, in some settings, households clustered within the same compound

will have family members from multiple households sharing single toilet. Regular cleaning of shared toilets is challenging, but doable.

Low cost soapy water prepared by mixing 30 grams of regular detergent with 1.5 litres of water can be stored in disposable water bottles and used as a disinfectant to clean toilets in shared points. In households using mounted toilets, the toilet lid should be put down after use to avoid generation of faecal droplets through flushing. Regular cleaning of household surfaces (including doorknobs) is also important to prevent household transmission. Soapy water can be used to clean household surfaces and hands as well.

COVID-19 patients should be closely monitored for worsening symptoms such as difficulty in breathing and should be shifted to hospital immediately. All household members will subsequently need to quarantine themselves from the time the patient has been confirmed for COVID-19 till 14 days after the patient has recovered.

Caring practices that are embedded within the cultural context of the country are hard to modify. However, during moment of crisis, the human brain can adapt quickly. The government should continue to engage heavily in evidence-based risk communication with the community so that people can trust public health authorities and make decisions based on science.

Dr Nusrat Homaira, MBBS, MPH, PhD is a respiratory epidemiologist and senior lecturer with the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Saiful Islam is a social scientist and a PhD researcher at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Dr Zakul Hassan is an Infectious Disease Researcher at International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr, b).

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



AMERICAN REVOLUTION BEGUN

April 19, 1775

Launched this day in 1775 with the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the American Revolution was an effort by 13 British colonies in North America (with help from France, Spain, and the Netherlands) to win their independence.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

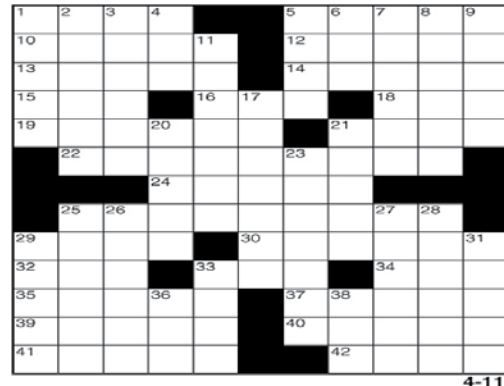
- 1 Some babies
- 5 Castle rings
- 10 Stockpile
- 12 Boredom
- 13 Make fresh
- 14 Paris divider
- 15 Caribou's kin
- 16 Greek vowel
- 18 One of the March sisters
- 19 Vacillate
- 21 Fast runner
- 22 Forgoes spirits
- 24 Concise
- 25 Kitchen cloths
- 29 Cotton pod
- 30 M and N, in pronunciation
- 32 Phone

DOWN

- 1 Uncover
- 2 Diner dish
- 3 Big Apple player
- 4 Toronto-to-D.C. dir.
- 5 Monument Valley sight
- 6 Early hour
- 7 Muppet

drummer

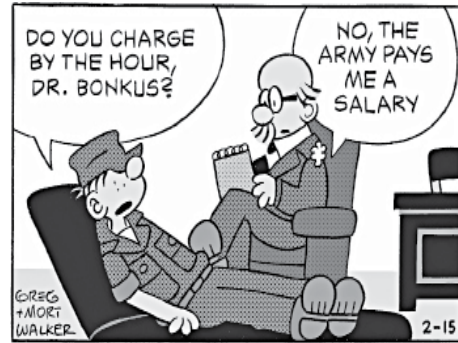
- 8 Radio knobs
- 9 Long attack
- 11 Worry
- 17 Like saddle shoes
- 20 Flower part
- 21 Grant's successor
- 25 Formal headwear
- 26 Border city
- 27 Border city
- 28 Christian of "Mr. Robot"
- 29 Blubbers
- 31 Tic
- 33 Busted party
- 36 Zodiac cat
- 38 Concealed



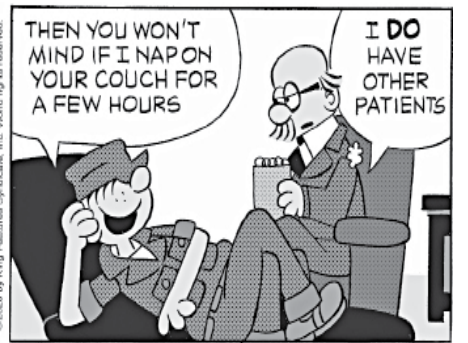
TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

How to cope mentally during the Coronavirus pandemic

DR GOLAM NABI

Everyone reacts differently to difficult situations, and it is normal to feel stress and worry during a crisis. But multiple challenges daily, such as the effects of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic can push you beyond your ability to cope with the situation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, you may experience stress, anxiety, fear, sadness and loneliness. Mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression, can worsen. Worries and anxiety about COVID-19 and its impact can be overwhelming. Social distancing makes it even more challenging. Let us see how to overcome these problems.

Go to bed and get up at the same time each day. Stick close to your typical schedule, even if you are staying at home.

Regular physical activities and exercise can help reduce anxiety and improve your mood. Find an activity that includes movement, such as freehand exercise and walking in a room or on the roof.

Choose a well-balanced diet. Eat plenty of vegetables, fruits and protein-rich diet which will help you to boost your immunity.



Avoid loading up on junk food and refined sugar. Limit caffeine as it can aggravate stress and anxiety.

If you smoke you are already at higher risk of lung disease. Because COVID-19 affects the lungs, your risk increases even more. So this is the best time to

quit smoking. Set aside time for yourself. Even a few minutes of quiet time can be refreshing and help to quiet your mind and reduce anxiety. Many people benefit from practices such as deep breathing, yoga or meditation. Listen to music, or read books —

whatever helps you to relax. Constant news about COVID-19 from all types of media can heighten fear and stress about the disease. Limit social media that may expose you to rumours and false information. Also limit reading, hearing or watching other news,

but keep up to date on national and local recommendations.

A distraction can get you away from the cycle of negative thoughts that feed anxiety and depression. Enjoy hobbies that you can do at home, identify a new project or clean out that closet you promised you would get to. Doing something positive to manage anxiety is a healthy coping strategy.

Do not become overwhelmed by creating a life-changing list of things to achieve while you are at home. Set reasonable goals each day and outline steps you can take to reach those goals. Give yourself credit for every step in the right direction, no matter how small and recognise that some days will be better than others.

If you need to stay at home and distance yourself from others, avoid social isolation. Find time each day to make virtual connections by phone, email, text messaging etc. Enjoy virtual socialising and talking to those at your home.

Keep yourself healthy and stress-free during the transition period, it will all be over soon.

The writer is an Associate Professor of Medicine at Z H Sikder Women's Medical College and Hospital, Dhaka.

PREGNANCY & COVID-19

Coronavirus infection in pregnancy

PROF M KARIM KHAN

Coronavirus can affect anyone, but in pregnancy, it may create anxiety and panic to the expectant mother and her family members. Fortunately, there is no EXTRA risk for expectant mothers. The risk is equal or less than others. But as it is a new virus, further information is needed to make any conclusive remarks.

Usually, it does not cross the placenta, so vertical transmission is not seen. A newborn in China was affected but it was not sure whether it was a vertical transmission or contacted during or following delivery. Coronavirus infection in pregnant mother does not affect the weight of the baby. Only in two cases, the baby was born prematurely with low birth weight, cause of which could not be ascertained. It probably was not related to coronavirus infection.

Prevention is better than cure. So it is better for everyone not to go outside, using a mask if you must go out, washing hands frequently, avoid touching the nose and face without cleaning hands, drink lukewarm water, consume fresh vegetables and fruits, exercise, stay at home and pass a worry-free time. The expectant mothers should take the usual precautions rather than being anxious or panicked.

The author is a Professor of Paediatrics at Community Based Medical College, Mymensingh. E-mail: mmukhkan@gmail.com

COVID-19 obstetric practice recommendations

Clinical recommendations about COVID-19 are quickly developing. The following guidance for obstetric providers supplements Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations.

- Pregnant women should be regularly screened for symptoms consistent with an upper respiratory infection; any symptom should result in testing of a nasopharyngeal swab for COVID-19.

- All women scheduled for induction or caesarean delivery and their support person should be screened for symptoms of COVID-19 24 to 48 hours before arrival at the hospital and rescreened prior to entry to labour and delivery. If the woman screens positive, induction and caesarean should be rescheduled if possible.

- All hospitalised women and their support person should be screened for symptoms daily. If the pregnant woman screens positive for symptoms, she should have a nucleic acid test for COVID-19; and if the support person screens positive, s/he should be sent home. If the nucleic acid tests were sufficiently available, the support person with symptoms of a viral upper respiratory infection would have such testing.

- For pregnant women with COVID-19, Betamethasone administration should be limited to those at high risk for preterm delivery within 7 days and only given between 23 weeks' and 33 weeks and 6 days' gestation. Women at risk for preterm delivery at 34 weeks to 36 weeks and 6 days should not receive Betamethasone.

- If cervical ripening is required, outpatient regimens should be prioritised.

- One support person, appropriately masked, should be permitted at the hospital.

- Neuraxial anaesthesia is an optimal approach to labour anaesthesia. Nitrous oxide should not be used because it might cause aerosolisation of respiratory secretions.

- Labour management and timing of delivery need not be altered during the pandemic. However, pregnant women with moderate or severe COVID-19 that is not improving may experience modest respiratory improvement if they are delivered preterm.

- Healthcare workers who are pregnant should stop face-to-face contact with patients after 36 weeks' gestation.

HEALTH bulletin



WHO issues criteria to lift the COVID-19 lockdowns

Countries should evaluate and meet six criteria before they lift shelter-in-place restrictions for the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). World Health Organisation (WHO) officials said.

Decisions should be based on "protecting human health" and the scientific knowledge about how the Coronavirus is transmitted, said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director General. He outlined six criteria to lift restrictions:

1. Transmission is controlled.
 2. Health system capacity is in place to detect, test, isolate, and treat every case and trace every contact.
 3. Outbreak risks are minimised in special settings, such as nursing homes.
 4. Preventive measures are in place in workplaces, schools, and essential businesses.
 5. The risk of people bringing the virus in from other countries is managed.
 6. Communities are fully educated, engaged, and empowered to adjust to the new normal.
- Countries should put in place comprehensive measures to slow transmission. The risk of additional outbreaks remains high due to global connectivity.
- Michael Ryan, Executive Director of the WHO Health Emergencies Programme said, "Lockdowns must be replaced with some type of strategy, which will change behaviours for the foreseeable future". In the meantime, countries must increase efforts to test, quarantine, treat, and trace the virus.

Understanding the challenges of COVID-19

DR JUBAYER RAHMAN

The outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) started in Wuhan city of China at the end of 2019 but it is travelling around the globe, infecting countries, one after another, and arresting people at the individual level. Initial assessment of COVID-19 regarding the transmission and potency was very sloppy. Though often information was released from China, it really could not convince people outside China about the nature of this pathogen. As a result, significant delays observed in taking necessary steps in countries other than China against COVID-19. When it turned to be a monster, it was late for many countries to protect the people.

Globally, experts could not predict how contagious COVID-19 might be and what population would be the most vulnerable. Amidst all of these confusions, COVID-19 has been very successful to establish as a pandemic for the world. COVID-19 has been very successful and part of the reason is that experts initially thought asymptomatic individuals are not posing the risk of spreading infection. This finally came up as a big mistake where more than 20% of cases could be asymptomatic and can spread infection.

Initial diagnosis of COVID-19 infection is done by mouth/nasal swabs based on a PCR test to detect the presence of viral RNA. Unfortunately, this method is very expensive and requires

biosafety level 3 to prepare samples. Under this circumstance, most countries failed to perform early diagnosis and when they performed, it was restricted to only symptomatic individuals. Though positive individuals were isolated, asymptomatic individuals kept spreading infection. This was the major turning point to make this infection into a global pandemic and resulted in the formation of lots of epicentres.

COVID-19 infection around the world is a huge challenge. The most effective strategy to contain this infection is home quarantine. Home quarantine or 'shelter in place' regardless of the status of any individual either infected or not should set their mind and exercise immediately. Any government that

has not started to instruct people, individuals must do it on their own will. This must be for 3 weeks or longer if not doing simultaneously.

Bangladesh is already experiencing COVID-19 wave and passed the initial phase. At this point forward, it is extremely important to follow 'staying at home' order without a second thought. Any deviation will likely result in the formation of a COVID-19 epicentre, which means likely to see the human cluster of infection in places around the country. If that happens it would be just out of control, same as any country around the world.

The writer is a Researcher of Molecular Immunology at the National Institute of Health, USA. E-mail: jubayer1993@gmail.com



HOW TO HOME QUARANTINE

The home quarantined person should:



Stay in a well-ventilated single-room preferably with an attached toilet



Needs to stay away from elderly people, pregnant women, children



Restrict his/her movement within the house



Under no circumstances attend any social/religious gathering



Wash hand frequently with soap and water or with alcohol-based sanitizer



Avoid sharing household items like dishes, glasses, cups, utensils, towels, bedding



Wear a surgical mask at all time. The mask should be changed every 8-8 hours

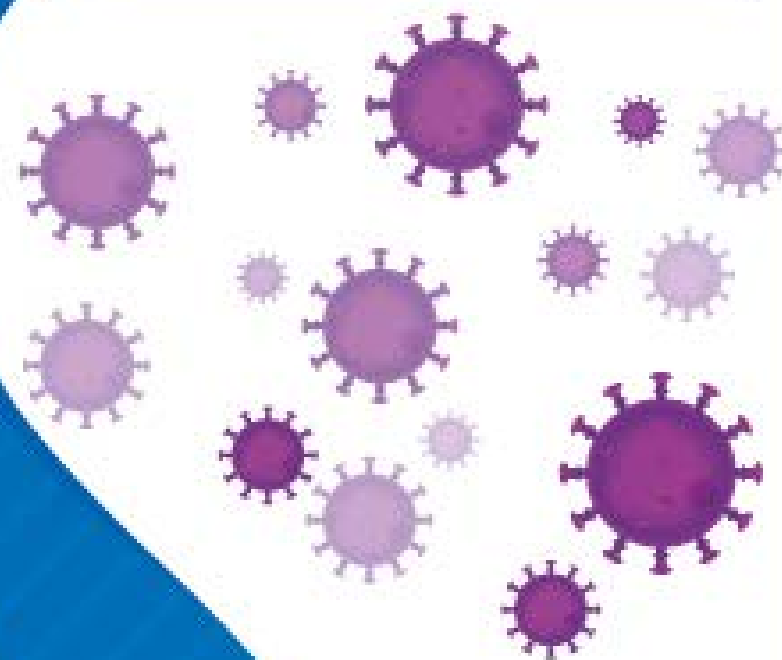


Dispose off used mask in a closed bin and bin should also be handled responsibly



If symptoms appear, he/she should immediately inform the nearest health centre

COVID-19 OUTBREAK



In Search of Excellence





How much will Covid-19 impact BCB's coffers?

BISHWAJIT ROY

Like most other sports, all on-field activities in cricket have been suspended the world over due to the coronavirus pandemic. Nobody knows how long this crisis is going to last and nobody knows how rescheduled would be the fixtures once cricket returns after the pandemic. But one thing that everybody can understand is that the commercial considerations will dictate planning in a post-pandemic world where powerful boards will try to minimise losses from high-value media deals as they stand to make more money from cricket at home than from the share of ICC revenue.

There has been huge financial concerns regarding cricket's probable absence over the subsequent six months, and the Times of India even ran a report with a headline: Covid effect: ICC member boards running 'serious risk' of financial bankruptcy. "Simply put, other than India and to an extent England, the rest of the cricket world will be on a hand-to-mouth existence if this scenario continues," India's leading newspaper reported,

Chowdhury when his attention was drawn regarding the bleak scenario.

"We are lucky that our expenses are not as much and we also have a very healthy reserve. So, you can say we are in a comfortable zone compared to many other countries. Yes, we could face serious consequences if we have a revenue generating event like IPL. On the other hand, our next two home series are not big ones in terms of financial benefit as the revenue depends on the TV production



rights. So, we will get time and there will be no significant immediate impact on us," he continued.

"But many things will depend on future business situation after the pandemic. We have to rely on the big business houses for different sponsorships; how their business is running is important for us," he added.

The BCB CEO also informed that chief executives of Test playing nations will attend a tele-conference next week to discuss the impact of the Covid-19 on the Future Tours Programme (FTP).

Foremost on the agenda will be the inaugural World Test Championship (WTC), with its final scheduled for June next year, but the fate of the championship is now in doubt. The two-year cycle began after the 2019 ODI World Cup, with each team scheduled to play six Test series--three at home and three away. The postponements have left the championship cycle in tatters.

The first ODI league was set to begin in May and serve as a qualifying pathway to the 2023 World Cup, but that too will be deferred. "Basically, the member countries will discuss over the future schedules and ODI league is important as there is question of World Cup qualification," said Nizamuddin.

It is a grim reality and no doubt the biggest question for many boards in post-pandemic world would be: where will these boards earn from?

"Definitely there will be a financial setback due to this [coronavirus]. However, we do not have a lot of revenue generating events in the near future and hence the BCB will be less affected compared to other boards. I think the BCB is in a bit more comfortable position in this regard,"

adding that Bangladesh cricket, in any other case a sustainable property, will sit with no broadcaster and sponsors as soon as their current deal runs out by the end of April.

"Definitely there will be a financial setback due to this [coronavirus]. However, we do not have a lot of revenue generating events in the near future and hence the BCB will be less affected compared to other boards. I think the BCB is in a bit more comfortable position in this regard," responded BCB CEO Nizamuddin

Two-year extension for Day, Watkiss

Uncertainty over contract of youth coaches

ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) wants Jamie Day to scout expatriate footballers from the United Kingdom in a bid to strengthening the national team, with the game's local governing body having already decided in principle to renew the contract with the English coach for the next two years.

Day was initially signed in May 2018 for a one-year contract, and following a fairly successful tenure, his contract was extended by another year, which would expire on May 15. Satisfied with his performance, the BFF is currently in discussion about handing him and his assistant Stuart Watkiss another two years' contract.

"The agreement with Day is almost the same as before but this time we are going to renew it for two years. We are still discussing details of some clauses slowly as we don't know when football activities will resume after the corona pandemic. Due to the uncertainty of football activities, both parties believe to give each other space to complete unfinished businesses, which is the remaining fixtures of Qatar World Cup Qualifiers and upcoming SAFF



Championship," BFF vice-president Tabith Awal told The Daily Star over phone.

Tabith, who is also vice-chairman of the National Teams Committee, informed that they are adding a clause in Day's new contract, which would be for him to scout expatriate talents from the UK to strengthen the national team.

"Though former coach Lodewijk de Kruif wanted to scout expatriate footballers from Europe, we could not do it properly. Jamal Bhuiyan is our only expatriate footballer. This time we believe Day, as a British coach, can play a good role in scouting

flexible such as when he starts to get salary, when he will come, when he will leave because FIFA and AFC are also supposed to deliver some rulings regarding the national team's coaching staff and we can adjust those rulings in the existing contract," Tabith said, adding that they have proposed that the contract would come into effect four to six weeks before the resumption of World Cup Qualifiers.

Day admitted to being in discussion about the new contract, which he said is similar to the last one.

"BFF proposed August and I understand the situation. We still have a few issues to agree on before the two-year agreement is signed," the coach told The Daily Star.

BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag also informed that contracts with two youth team coaches - Bob Ryles and Andrew Peter -- are supposed to expire on April 26 and that both coaches, who are currently in England, wanted to know about their fate.

"We haven't replied them yet as we have to discuss the matter with the high-ups in the coming days. After the discussion, we will let them know about our decision on whether we will renew the contracts or not," Shohag said.



Renowned as a party animal, Neymar has seen his social interaction opportunities seriously compromised by coronavirus pandemic. The PSG star, now confined in his home in Brazil, however, is making sure neither his fitness nor his social skills get rusty, posting a picture on Instagram with the message: "Are you also one of those who trains with an eye on cell phones?"

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM

CONMEBOL WC qualifying in September

AFP, Asuncion

South American qualifying for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, will begin in September, the region's governing body CONMEBOL said on Friday.

"For the moment, the start fixed by (FIFA) for its celebration is September 4-8 in the format already established," said CONMEBOL.

All 10 teams are due to play each other home and away in a round robin format. That amounts to 18 matches, far more than most other continental federations organise.

The first two rounds need to be rearranged but CONMEBOL said any new dates would have to be ratified by FIFA.

Class of '82 to combat coronavirus

REUTERS, Undated

They were rivals on the field in one of the greatest World Cup matches of all time but the former stars of Brazil and Italy have come together off it to help the South American nation fight the new coronavirus.

Italy beat Brazil 3-2 in the 1982 World Cup with three goals from Paolo Rossi helping the Azzurri knock out a Brazil team that featured Zico, Socrates, Junior and Leandro.

Brazilian midfielder Paulo Roberto Falcao has raised more than 4.5 million reais (\$859,270) with the help of his former teammates who recorded a video asking people to donate to help fight the spread of the coronavirus in Brazil's densely populated favelas. Now, players on the Italy team that beat them have recorded their own video.

Falcao, who played with AS Roma, asked his close friend and former team mate Bruno Conti to get the Italian players to each record a message.

Paulo Rossi, Giuseppe Bergomi and Claudio Gentile were among those who agreed to help.

"Italy and Brazil: rivals on the field but united against the coronavirus," said defender Franco Causio.

The players from both sides have remained close since the 1982 World Cup.

De Bruyne unsure of virus

AFP, London

Kevin De Bruyne is recovering from an illness, but the Manchester City star says he is not sure if he had coronavirus.

De Bruyne and his family felt ill for around two weeks, but the Belgian international did not find out whether or not it was the virus.

"I am doing well, to be honest," De Bruyne told Sky Sports on Friday.

"The first two weeks my family was sick so it was a little bit like up and down, but now they are all healthy.

"We don't know if we had it (coronavirus) or not but I think we're doing well now."

With De Bruyne recovered, the midfielder is trying to keep as fit as he can while adhering to social distancing rules.

The Premier League is suspended indefinitely because of the pandemic, but there remains a chance play will resume this season.

"Well, the first two weeks was a little bit weird because I don't know what's going on," De Bruyne said.

"Then I managed to get a treadmill. I was swimming a little bit because I'm lucky to have a pool downstairs.

"I was doing a couple of lengths but now mostly I'm doing a run and I would say every other day I would choose between swimming and doing some exercise, so I'm keeping fairly good for what we can on our own, I guess."

Asked if City are sending through information and drills, he said: "They send us like a fairly big programme."



Plenty of time but not much or at least nothing new to do -- this is the reality for most sports fanatics around the globe who are now confined indoors due to the coronavirus pandemic. But sports enthusiasts find a way to stay connected with the game they love. Such avid sports lovers were seen in the Azampur area in Uttara carrying a board of carrom, a very popular indoor game in the country, as the outdoor games have now been halted for more than a month.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Djokovic and Murray reveal their biggest tennis regrets

REUTERS

Live tennis action is a fading memory during the coronavirus shutdown but 20,000 fans tuned in to watch old rivals Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray chew the fat on Instagram on Friday.

Sitting on their sofas at home, the duo spent an entertaining hour reminiscing about some of the classics in their 36-match series, painful losses and even came up with the perfect tennis player.

The knockabout banter offered some candid reflections on their glittering careers -- both on hold as tennis awaits the end of the pandemic which has claimed more than 150,000 lives globally.

Asked which losses hurt the most, both selected matches against each other.

"For me it was the French Open final against you in 2016," Murray, who has also finished runner-up at the Australian Open five times, said. "Obviously I would have loved to win the Australian Open or the French Open but I think as a challenge for me, because clay was such a tough surface for me throughout my career, that would have been for me my biggest achievement."

The Serb hit back from losing the first set to outplay Murray in that Paris showdown, completing his career Grand Slam in the process.

World number one Djokovic has never won the Olympic gold medal though, a feat Murray achieved in 2012 and 2016.

Djokovic said his semi-final defeats against Murray and Rafa Nadal in the 2012 and 2008 Olympics were two of his toughest losses -- together with his defeat by Juan Martin del Potro in



the first round of the 2016 Rio Games.

"Maybe that match against you in London, or the semi-final against Rafa in Beijing (in 2008)," Djokovic, who won the bronze medal in Beijing said. "In Rio I felt really good but two days before the match I felt my wrist. It started to be more painful. It's no excuse, I got injections, but I felt sad that I wasn't at my best and could work my way in the tournament."

"If I could change any outcomes would be Rio and London."

Three-time Grand Slam champion Murray, trying to salvage his career after hip surgery at the start of 2019, admitted he wished he had enjoyed his successes more.

"After the issues I've had the last few years, I sometimes do wish I had enjoyed those moments more. When you see the end coming you think... I should have enjoyed the wins or even the losses that were great matches." Asked to come up with the perfect

player if they could combine strokes from different players, both picked each other for having the best service returns.

"If I won a free point off my first serve against you I was celebrating like I won a set," Djokovic, who owns 17 Grand Slam titles, said of his fellow 32-year-old.

Both said they would swap for the serves of John Isner or Nick Kyrgios, while Murray said Nadal's forehand was the toughest and Djokovic picked Roger Federer's.

Unsurprisingly they were in agreement on which player is mentally the toughest -- Nadal.

"It's like going on court to face Gladiator," Djokovic said.

Asked by a fan what they would have done rather than tennis, Djokovic picked being a scientist.

For Murray? "Right now it would be cool to be a doctor because you realize what's important in times like this."

