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FOUNDER EDITOR
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The spirit of Ramadan during Covid-19 crisis

Let us be the best we can be

AS we begin the holy month of Ramadan with devotees around the world observing it with fasting and prayers, we must acknowledge that it has come at a time when we are in the midst of an unprecedented crisis that challenges our very existence. But a crisis like this also gives us the opportunity for introspection and self-evaluation regarding what kind of person we are. The spirit of Ramadan also encourages such introspection and urges us to exercise restraint, leave aside our differences, make sacrifices and be generous with our fellow human beings. It also directs us to be the best we can be as individuals.

This means thinking of the safety of others by staying at home. It means helping those who are vulnerable and who will bear the brunt of this crisis the most.

Each of us has a part to play. Traders, wholesalers and retailers must vow to keep prices of essentials at an affordable level with no attempts to hike them or hoard goods, as is the common practice during Ramadan months. We must all share our food and resources with those less fortunate, those around us and those afar. We have seen the remarkable generosity of private groups trying to reach food to the hungry and helpless who have been severely affected by weeks of lockdown and loss of earnings. Others have been engaged in making masks and PPEs and distributing them to hospitals. Let such initiatives be multiplied across the nation.

The government is trying hard to mitigate the losses of income and revenue by announcing large stimulus packages and distributing essential food items. But these efforts will be futile if the assistance does not reach on time to those who need it and if unscrupulous individuals are allowed to pilfer the provisions as we have seen in a few cases. Honesty, sincerity and efficiency in all these activities are crucial in order to lessen people's suffering and help them cope during this terrible crisis.

We must extend our support to the frontline heroes—our doctors, nurses and other medical staff who are risking their lives every day to save the lives of others. We must also show our solidarity to other heroes—police, army, volunteers, cleaners, household help, kitchen market workers, journalists, among others—who are also at risk as they try to keep essential services going.

As we struggle with this formidable enemy—Covid-19—let us all embody the spirit of Ramadan and bring out the best in ourselves.

Fish farmers in need of support

Financial assistance is crucial to tide them over

BANGLADESH has had the distinction of ranking amongst the top inland fish producing nations in the world. But the Covid-19 crisis, which has forced shutdown of economic activities, has put fish farmers in a difficult position. According to a report by this daily, fish farmers in Kishoreganj, Mymensingh and Netrokona are unable to harvest fish and sell them to different parts of the country—including Chattogram, Dhaka and Sylhet where they sell year-round—due to the dearth of buyers and an almost complete suspension of inter-district transportation. As a result, they are incurring heavy losses. On top of that, the farmers have to continue feeding the fish, instead of starting a new fish-rearing cycle.

Farmers are also facing trouble finding labourers willing to harvest the fish as they are reluctant to come out and work due to the fear of the virus. According to a district fisheries officer, if the current situation prevails, fish farms in Mymensingh alone—with approximately 112,000 farmers—may suffer a loss of Tk 400 crore. Many farmers are facing the additional challenge of having to repay the money they had borrowed to invest in fish farming.

There are around 300 hatcheries and 900 nurseries in Bhaluka, Gouripur, Muktagachha, Phulpur, Tarakanda and Trishal upazilas; 250 nurseries and 12 hatcheries in Netrokona; and approximately 26,000 fish farmers in Netrokona and 27,000 in Kishoreganj. If the present situation continues, it will have a big impact on the overall food security of Bangladesh. The prime minister has already warned about the possibility of a global food scarcity as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

Even though a list of the fish farmers is being prepared by fisheries officials to be sent to the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock for the financial assistance offered under stimulus packages declared by the PM to address the Covid-19 fallout, the outcome of it may be delayed. Needless to say, farmers of all sorts play an integral role in ensuring food security. Therefore, they must be given all necessary assistance promptly. We suggest that loan repayments for the fish farmers should also be deferred as of now. Removing the barriers for the farmers is extremely important and the authorities need to intervene in order to guarantee the continuity of fish production and survival of the fish farming communities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Watch out for dengue!

The number of mosquitoes seems to be growing every day. Amidst all the commotion because of the coronavirus, one may be forgiven for forgetting about last year's dengue outbreak which began somewhere around this time. What will happen if it resurfaces this year too? With the pandemic already wreaking havoc on the country, how will our fragile healthcare system handle another deadly disease?

It is extremely important that the authorities as well as the general public do whatever is possible within their means to stop the potential spread of dengue fever. That way, the lives of many citizens will be at lesser risk and our hospitals can remain free from additional pressure. I urge the responsible authorities to take prompt action because prevention is surely better than care.

Irfan Emon, Tangail

DS BOOKS AUTHOR SERIES

Art has always been both a mirror of and a balm for human experience through disaster. In this short series, an author of Daily Star Books—our book publishing imprint—will periodically explore a facet of this link between literature and our ongoing battle with Covid-19.

London's 17th-century plague and our global pandemic



FAKRUL ALAM

LEAVING death and despair in its wake, the coronavirus courses its way through the globe, reminding one of a Biblical line—"There is no new thing under the sun." History has recorded pandemics raging across the world over time and terrible infections periodically devastating regions and lives. Several great books have been written about such catastrophes; one particularly apt recalling now is Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722).

The actual pandemic Defoe writes about is the Great Plague of London. Actually a bubonic plague virulent from 1664 to 1665, it spread quickly to outlying areas of the city. Eventually, it impacted other parts of the British Isles. Defoe himself was only five years old when it hit Londoners and spread across the island, but when he wrote about it, he was already the author of several political pamphlets, a journalist who wrote prolifically on anything and everything, a writer of books on trade and commerce, and of course the creator of pioneering works of fiction such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). He could claim, as had Francis Bacon, that he had taken "all knowledge as his province." Defoe had an eye for what the reading public wanted and would churn out books for them, but many were well-researched. He was, therefore, ready to write about London's bubonic plague, the type of unwelcome visitor he felt Londoners should always be prepared for.

Take, as an example, his observation on the way the plague spread. He noted "for the use of posterity" that it was not only obvious cases of visibly sick people infecting others that one should guard against; even more worrisome were cases where the infection spread through people without outward symptoms, who were unaware that they are virus carriers. Such people "breathed death in every place, and upon everybody who came near them; nay, their very clothes retained the infection, their hands would infect the things they touched, especially if they were warm and sweaty, and they were generally apt to sweat too." Human "effluvia" is seen to be the most potent means of spreading the disease. It is clear that old

and sickly people as well as pregnant mothers and the very poor were the most susceptible groups as far as being infected was concerned.

These observations remind us that medical science has known about such highly infectious diseases at least as far back as the Great Plague but has been unable to come up with effective solutions to such dreadful visitations till now. What the *Journal's* narrator—identified only as H F—said in 1722 is still relevant: "A plague is a formidable enemy, and is armed with terrors that every man is not sufficiently fortified to resist or prepared to stand the shock against."

Indeed, I was struck throughout the narrative by how H F's record of the more than year-long plague is relevant to our times. For instance, the plague virus, like the novel coronavirus today, is an import. The London one apparently came from the Eastern Mediterranean via Italy and Holland; ours perhaps originated in Italy, although the first signs of the pandemic emerged in China.

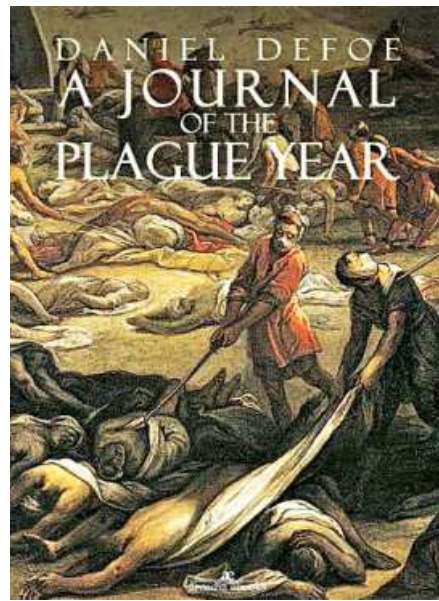
H F records meticulously the increase in the deaths occasioned by the plague from January 1664 to when it peaked at year-end. He offers statistical information of the exponential increase in fatalities based on computation of the "weekly bill of mortality" of representative parishes. The numbers given are shocking and yet perversely addictive for readers—witness, for example, how we are glued to TV screens in home confinement watching the news ticker reporting the number of deaths day after day—the fascination of the abomination, so to speak!

H F's journal narrates how the mood of Londoners fluctuated, alternating between alarm and hope. Sanguine at one point, they are unaware that the plague was taking a breather in late spring 1665 but would accelerate in September of the same year. We learn that the plague came in two waves, peaking at one point and then receding for a while, only to reappear with more devastating force again. H F describes rich Londoners fleeing to country homes or self-isolating in well-fortified city houses stacked with abundant provisions while the poor were stuck in their ghettos. This reminds me of the way people with means left Bangladesh before flights were suspended, or the relative security that some of us can take advantage of in our apartment buildings, compared to the vulnerability of people helplessly confined to tiny rooms in crowded neighbourhoods in

parts of Dhaka now.

H F himself decides to stay in London, despite the option of leaving that people of his class had, trusting in God more than reason in so doing. The city he describes could be easily ours—empty streets, anxious faces, and grieving relatives in houses where inmates had died. The booming, bustling London that Defoe's narrator knew about becomes desolate. Trade—local, national and international—stops. As he puts it after the second viral wave, "This time it was terrible."

H F tells readers how religious fanatics felt that the plague manifested God's judgment on a wicked city and how doomsday men and false prophets



Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) deals with the Great Plague of London.

suddenly emerged with explanations for the dreadful visitation. He himself is inclined to see things rationally and dismiss such explanations as "blind, absurd and ridiculous stuff." Not an unbeliever though, he approves of public prayers organised by the government to seek God's mercy.

Defoe's narrator decries the false cures of quacks offering "cheap remedies". Instead, and throughout the narrative, he details and commends prudent measures adopted by the London mayor and fellow city administrators, measures worth adopting even now. H F describes the elaborate measures taken—what we now call "lockdown" and "self-isolation"—

deploying the forces of law and order fully, isolating infected medical personnel, restricting movement in and out of houses reporting infections, marking them, keeping streets clean, banning public gatherings, adopting strict measures for the burial of the dead, garbage disposal, etc.

But there are other noteworthy measures detailed—the appointment of "searchers" to identify infection carriers and monitor movement of people, ensuring the presence of physicians, and setting forth procedures for the disposal of the dead and their clothes and belongings. He commends the way the Lord Mayor and others lead from the front by patrolling the streets. H F also admires the way the administration ensured "provisions" for all and tried to keep prices stable throughout the plague months. He is all praise for the physicians and attendants who succumbed to the virus in carrying out their duties. The only complaint he has about the administration is that it was able to set up only two "pest houses" for housing the infected.

Nevertheless, some Londoners kept transgressing whatever measures were imposed, either out of necessity or boredom. Even the strict measures imposed often couldn't keep everyone at home, as is the case now. "Desperation" is a word that keeps recurring in the *Journal*. We realise that the tragedy was a human one, and all human beings don't react in the same way to emergencies. Indeed, H F records a range of emotions on display—agony, despair, grief, morbidity, self-doubt, paranoia, cruelty, callousness, greed, selfishness, complacency, compassion, kindness and courage.

By February 1665, the Great Plague left London to the great relief of all Londoners. Expressions of joy and smiles return to their faces after almost two years and celebrations begin. Defoe concludes his narrative with a "coarse but sincere stanza" to mark its end: "A dreadful plague in London was/in the year sixty-five/ Which swept an [sic] hundred thousand souls? Away;/ Yet I am alive!"

Let us hope the coronavirus will leave people everywhere—near or far—soon and we, too, will be able to celebrate its demise and our survival without too many more fatalities!

Fakrul Alam is UGC Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka. His book *Once More Into the Past: Essays, Personal, Public, and Literary* was published by Daily Star Books in February 2020. Follow Daily Star Books on Facebook and @thedailystarbooks on Instagram for updates.

How best to survive the coronavirus

The contrast between Germany and US



ASHFAQ SWAPAN

HERE we are, in the middle of a global pandemic, desperately trying to figure out how to survive. The US now has the dubious distinction of being the world's leading nation both in terms of number of deaths and identified cases. As this lethal virus wreaks havoc around the world, there are some important lessons.

Uncontrolled contagion can lead to a horrendous surge in illnesses and death. Absent a vaccine or a cure, social distancing and meticulous hygiene are essential to control deaths and infections.

Now comes the tough part. As millions and millions of people lose jobs, understandable disquiet is growing over the fact that the economy is in suspended animation.

What is to be done? It's essential to avoid the trap of the false binary of pandemic vs. economy. If the pandemic isn't controlled, the economy won't recover. Period.

The US response has been so catastrophic that it has quickly passed China, Spain and Italy to lead the world in coronavirus deaths. It would do well to take a page out of Europe's greatest success story.

Germany is currently randomly testing 3,000 households, part of "an aggressive approach to combat the virus in a comprehensive way that has made Germany a leader among Western nations figuring out how to control the contagion while returning to something resembling normal life," *The New York Times* reported.

"Other nations, including the United States, are still struggling to test for infections. But Germany is doing that and more. It is aiming to sample the entire population for antibodies in coming months, hoping to gain valuable insight into how deeply the virus has penetrated the society at large, how deadly it really is, and whether immunity might be developing."

Germany's approach has been smart

from the get go. The pandemic hit the nation hard, but Germany's fatality rate has been remarkably low. Part of it is statistical distortion. The more you test, the more positive cases you identify (including asymptomatic cases) and so the number of deaths is a smaller fraction of total cases. But there are solid reasons as well. "There are... significant medical factors that have kept the number of deaths in Germany relatively low, epidemiologists and virologists say, chief among them early and widespread testing and treatment, plenty of intensive care beds and a trusted government whose social distancing guidelines are widely observed," *The New York Times* reported.

community," NPR reports.

I have anecdotal reports from Georgia and South Carolina that it's hard to get tested even if someone has symptoms of being infected.

The biggest contrast between the US and Germany is leadership.

"Maybe our biggest strength in Germany is the rational decision-making at the highest level of government combined with the trust the government enjoys in the population," Prof. Hans-Georg Kräusslich, the head of virology at University Hospital in Heidelberg, one of Germany's leading research hospitals, told *The New York Times*.

The US is led by President Donald Trump. Suffice it to say that rational



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/ANDREAS GEBERT

The Odeonsplatz square during a partial lockdown in Munich, Germany.

When you compare the US response to the pandemic, the contrast is scary. Testing continues to be a debacle here. While it has gone up considerably, it's still way beyond the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation. "You want a [low] percent of your tests to be coming back positive," William Hanage, an epidemiologist at Harvard University, told the National Public Radio. "Why? If a high percentage of tests come back positive, it's clear there's not enough testing to capture all of the infected people in the

decision-making is not the first thing that springs to mind when one thinks of Trump. Instead of the thoughtful, considered leadership that the nation desperately needs (New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and California Gov. Gavin Newsom come to mind), he holds daily pressers which resemble a zany circus-like cheesy reality show. Substantive content is thin. Instead, Trump serves up a buffet of falsehoods, self-contradictory remarks and extended digressive riffs on his pet peeve(s) *du jour*, liberally peppered with uncouth

insults of reporters.

His press conferences sometimes get so out of line that newspapers struggle to report it with a straight face. An exasperated *New York Times* deapanned on April 9: "Mr. Trump does not need adversaries to dispute his statements—he does that all by himself. In the course of his daily briefings on the coronavirus pandemic, the president has routinely contradicted himself without ever acknowledging that he does so."

Focus is simply not his thing. The administration's digressions are beginning to have the suspicious look of campaign-year bait for the base. The rants against China, WHO, freezing immigration, tough words on Iran have one thing in common—they aren't going to move the needle one bit in fighting the pandemic that has cost the US over 50,000 lives so far and is crippling the economy.

Many of his Republican Party chums have kissed reason and science goodbye. Republican governors in some states are ignoring public health experts and easing stay-at-home orders vital to keep the virus at bay. Florida Gov. Ron Santis has opened beaches in a state which has a large, vulnerable elderly population. Texas Lieutenant Gov. Dan Patrick has declared that the elderly should sacrifice themselves for the economy. "There are more important things than living," he has said. (I'm not making this up.) And here in Atlanta, where I live, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp has drawn widespread criticism for opening up small businesses like restaurants, massage parlours and barber shops. Do you have any idea how to get a massage or a haircut while practicing social distancing? Neither do I.

Meanwhile, funded by well-heeled conservative groups, "spontaneous" protests against strict social distancing are popping up in several states.

I fear what this ignorant defiance may bring. Singapore, which has recently seen a surge of new cases, offers a cautionary tale.

The coronavirus is neither Democrat nor Republican. The science behind it is unforgiving. Defy it and it will kill you. Literally.

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