

When will Bangladesh's curve peak?

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AFTER a month of corona-induced lockdown, Bangladesh's infection rates and death records are proportionally still lower than many other countries, according to official data. Credit must be given to the government for taking firm steps and the population deserves kudos for complying with the stiff restrictions. However, according to World Health Organization, the global situation hasn't reached a peak as yet. This is also true for Bangladesh, when it finds itself in stage 3 of the corona spread (out of 4 stages), while China, Europe and the USA are coming out of peak.

In order to understand the overall corona-driven situation of Bangladesh, we have identified a set of 11 indicators, distilled from global experience. The indicators set out below are either available in the public domain or can be calculated from available data. Generally, there is a dearth of data in Bangladesh and decisions taken in such circumstances could be seriously flawed. Let us put forward the health-related indicators in order to determine the timing of the "flattening of the curve" after the peaking of coronavirus infection cases.

Cumulated number of infections: Based on John Hopkins University's real-time online data, Bangladesh's infections figure (April 23) appears negligible (4,200) considering the population size in comparison with other affected comparable countries. It is even proportionately lower than that of Pakistan (11,000) and higher than India (23,000). Calculated per million Bangladesh, Pakistan and India have 25, 47 and 17 infections, respectively.

Cumulated number of deaths: The number of total deaths in Bangladesh (127) observed on April 23 appears much lower as in the case of number of infections (India: 721,

Pakistan: 235).

Cumulated number of recoveries: The recovery rate is low (Bangladesh: 108, India: 5,012, and Pakistan: 1,378 based on data dated April 23), which is a source of huge concern.

Daily increase/decrease of infections: The daily infection increase data, which is widely published, provides significant information. If the number of daily increase over time rises steeply before peak is reached, it is a source of serious concern. In such a situation the healthcare system will come under huge pressure. Unfortunately, the data from April 16 to 23 indicates a steep upward rising curve, doubling the number of infected persons within about four days. It will be premature to draw any firm conclusion by just looking at the decreasing infection figures of three days (April 21-23). In comparison to India and Pakistan, the shape of the Bangladeshi curve is disturbing, even though the total number of infections remains low.

Mortality rate (cumulated deaths/cumulated infections * 100): The mortality rate illustrates the effectiveness of our healthcare system to diagnose, treat the infected, and save the not-yet affected. The data available so far (April 23) shows the mortality rate in Bangladesh is 3 percent, which is on the lower side (India: 3.1 percent and Pakistan: 2 percent).

Recovery rate (cumulated number of recoveries/cumulated number of infections * 100): The recovery rate is much lower than the neighbouring countries (Pakistan: 21 percent and India: 22 percent) and one of the worst among the affected countries. This shows that our healthcare system is already under stress, even at a time, when the total number of infections is relatively low.

Potential spread multiplier (number of household members who could be infected if



Bangladesh's infections figure appears negligible considering the population size in comparison with other affected comparable countries.

PHOTO: AFP

one member is infected): This is not a reported indicator but created to reflect the reality in Bangladesh. It shows the extent of potential spread if one person is infected in a family. Unlike other heavily affected countries, where about 30 percent of households (e.g. USA) have only single member and an average family size of 2.4, Bangladeshi household size is around 5-6 (estimated), which includes a household aide. If one person is infected, it may affect others, assuming that these persons weren't tested on time and declared unaffected, healthcare service wasn't accessible, and family members didn't practice physical distancing given limited living space and social values. In the context of slums and refugee camps, the situation

will be naturally worse, and the multiplier will be a bigger number. The existence of this multiplier could be one of the reasons behind the steep daily increase.

Access to tests: The percentage of people tested is considered to be an important tool to identify the infected cases. Countries with a high rate of testing, accurate counting of new cases and effective contact tracing have shown better results due to availability of accurate information. Bangladesh has conducted a total of 322,600 tests (198 tests per million) while India and Pakistan have conducted 362 and 563 tests per million, respectively. The limited number of tests undertaken casts doubts about the real picture of infections prevailing in Bangladesh.

Access to immediate healthcare services, if infected: What is the status of hospitals, which are expected to handle corona cases? Do they have test kits, PPE, and ventilators? The situation may be improving with new hospitals getting enlisted to deal with corona patients, but it is far from satisfactory. The relatively high mortality rate and low recovery rate in Bangladesh lead to the inference that the percentage of people who are infected and have access to suitable healthcare facilities is extremely low.

In the absence of reliable data, it is difficult to visualise a clear picture based on the aforementioned indicators. However, it can be deduced that Bangladesh is facing the prospect of a steep curve and that Bangladesh will not reach the peak soon—it will be weeks rather than days. Some experts fear that a huge spread of corona in Bangladesh cannot be ruled out, particularly due to the existence of this indicator—potential spread multiplier, as discussed above. We urge the policymakers to take cognisance of the aforementioned indicators when deciding on the duration of the lockdown period. They should also make the lockdown far more effective as news reports from different parts of the country draw a very disturbing picture. Will Bangladesh become another case of "too little too late"? Despite the fact that Bangladesh is caught between the rock (coronavirus) and the hard place (economic meltdown), political leadership has to step up and take some very tough and bold decisions before it is too late. Otherwise the sacrifice and sufferance of the last few weeks, particularly by the poor, will be in vain.

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Expectations of a post-pandemic patch up

ZOBaida NASREEN and GOPA BISWAS CAESAR

"MAAM, could you possibly tell me when would the university go back to its usual routine?" When you meet 10 such "rhetorical" queries per day, it is not unusual that you answer curtly with a straight "no", then add a customary precautionary phrase "DO NOT roam outside"; and finally, genuinely mean "stay safe!"

On the completion of almost one month of class suspension, next, what you hear oozes dismal melancholia and angst, "I am worried, not that I will die of corona. But what if I live on the other side of this pandemic. I am tensed about my future. Probably, I will lose all my tutoring gigs. It will be a lot more difficult to find new ones then. My father was never in a position to support me. What will happen then?"

All you could manage to say at the end of that semi-monologue is, a not-very-assuring template, "We will try our best to address your issue. This too shall pass!"

This can be called a précis of many conversations that almost each of us are having with the students these days. The beauty of public universities in Bangladesh is that it holds a beacon of hope for students from even the humblest of backgrounds and diversity has always been a dominant feature in here. Thus, a huge portion of these students earn not only their educational expenses but also contributes to their families by giving tuitions or by doing part-time chores. Solely for this reason, many of these students were simply not interested to leave their dormitories even when a strong campaign for suspending classes and complete shut-down was going on in different university campuses following the detection of the first positive case of COVID-19 in Bangladesh on March 8.

Both the teachers and the students of Dhaka University agreed on the fact that it will be a cataclysm if any DU student/teacher/staff get infected as the campus is densely populated. When the authority was still away before the official announcement came up, some DU students went on fast-unto-death for complete shut-down as fear had already gripped general students over the global outbreak of coronavirus. Classes were deserted; mid-terms were cancelled and with dorms closed, when the entire country was

gradually walking towards an eventual lockdown, some were still calling us up to know when could the classes resume!

These queries do not stem from their recklessness or insensitivity, rather from dire nightmares of looming starvation and uncertainties of semester fees to be paid. Even our students studying abroad have been facing a similar challenge, as many of them lack a steady source of income. For example, Australia seems to have chosen to shoo away the "extra" populace. The Aussie Prime Minister Scott Morrison has already asked the struggling international students to go

of now.

After World War I, humans first realised the concept of home or being safe at home did not exist anymore. By then, they had seen that even kids could get bombed in their cradles amid lullabies. Poets came up with "fancy" words like angst, ennui or alienation to describe the time of that "wasteland". When, hyperbolically, many are mulling over whether this pandemic has the stature of WWIII or not, we cannot deny that it has a similar take on "home". We are not getting over the frenzy of the phrase "stay home" any time soon. But, what about those who



PHOTO: FERAZ AHMED

home as he believes it is time for his country to focus on its own citizens and residents. Similarly, USA already has arranged three special flights to take their citizens off from Bangladesh to show their responsibility to their citizens. On the other hand, with all these incoming crowd who were previously employed elsewhere, Bangladesh is going to face serious crises in the upcoming days. Corona crisis might leave by the end of May or September, as per popular speculations, but the scar it will leave behind economically, socially and culturally will keep taking its toll for a very long time.

Amid these, all our "assuring" replies to our students falter and fall apart, because we barely have any contingency plan, at least, as

do not have one? This is a most cogent question that our professor emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury has aptly asked. Let alone the homeless lot, a big chunk of our menial workers live in crowded spaces in dingy slums. Thus, "being home" cannot simply be a euphemism for "being safe" and we must not forget that, it is a privilege to be able to practice "social distancing" that many do not have.

While scrolling through homepages, we all have come across philosophical quotes like "things will not be the same again" or "life before corona and life after corona", etc. That makes us wonder how different it is going to be at the other end of this pandemic. According to World Employment and Social

Outlook report of 2020 of ILO (International Labour Organization), about 40 million people will be jobless this year, solely in South Asian countries. In a time when, number of corona cases are rapidly rising, and institutionally quarantined COVID-19 patients are fleeing in trawlers, after bribing the security guards with Tk 50,000, with zero inhibitions, saving lives is the only reality.

Being unsure about whether it is the right time to get alarmed about post-pandemic crises is not unusual. Nevertheless, this hesitance might cost us heavily as we will exhibit severe lack of preparedness once again. And, we must not forget that our severe lack of preparedness in handling an outbreak of this stature is what has made us into "hilarious" living memes, flooding the social networking sites on a daily basis. No wonder a widely-shared report by Global World Index, featured by World Economic Forum, showed that our Gen Z (age group 8-23 years) are spending most of their time online by sharing memes and streaming audiovisual contents rather than caring about corona-updates while the millennials are the confused lot, oscillating fiercely between cooking recipes and online news portals.

As millennials, we have come across a report by Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention which showed 0.2 percent of children and teenagers died compared with nearly 15 percent of people over the age of 80 which invariably led to speculations that the pandemic will leave the world with a younger demographic to wade on. Along came the idea of selective elimination which is nothing new to human history. In countries like Italy, France and even United States, the medical professionals are choosing to spend their limited resources "wisely" on those who are more likely to survive, namely the younger demographic. While, a senior citizen is gradually withering away like the last leaf of autumn, they are bound to focus on some young blood. Even in Italy, one of the senior citizens requested the caregiver to transfer his ventilator to a young boy who had shortage of breath while stating "he needs it as I already have had a fairly long life". Now, the question is "what gives"? What would a post-corona world look like to a young survivor?

From our points of view what it looks like is scary. Inevitably a significant number of students will drop out from schools.

Unemployment and a looming famine might hit our agro-industrial-economy way below the belt, the first priority for all will be to eat three square meals with their family rather than paying semester fees to sit for mid-terms. And all students, ranging from primary levels to undergraduate levels, might undergo this struggle to choose between a well-fed family and a month at school.

Several DU teachers as well as departments have already made announcements to lend a hand to those in need, but they are all afraid that it will not be enough. Without institutionalised coordination and systematic distribution, all aiding efforts might just blunt off a potential weapon to fight the post-pandemic crises. Many agree that scraping off all the poor funds right away might not be a great idea, either. Rather, putting aside a certain sum to help out the poor students who will run risks of dropping out because of lack of fund could prove to be useful.

Even though each of the departments have one or more designated student advisors dedicated to look out for the students, we are still falling short. Not because we lack will, but because we lack preparation. We are not designed to handle a crisis of this stature, yet. On top of that there are no directives that we can follow. On a broader scale, it could be said that Bangladesh Ministry of Education as well as University Grants Commission are no exceptions either. We, altogether, desperately need to figure a way out.

During such a pervasive situation, we all should carry out our due roles. It would be a stupid idea for a ward councillor to get trigger happy with a baton in Tangail or wearing PPEs allotted for doctors without being one just to look like an astronaut in Facebook selfies. While forming a Central Committee to prevent corona, having doctors and researchers on board should be a priority, not the red-tape bureaucrats. Similarly, the intellectuals of the nation have their role to play as well, especially to secure the education sector in coordination with the Ministry of Education and UGC. This is their time to tear apart the torpor around the education sector and weave yarns for a post-pandemic patch up!

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR ACCIDENT

April 26, 1986

A devastating environmental catastrophe occurred early this morning in 1986 when an explosion and fire at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine released large amounts of radioactive material into the atmosphere.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

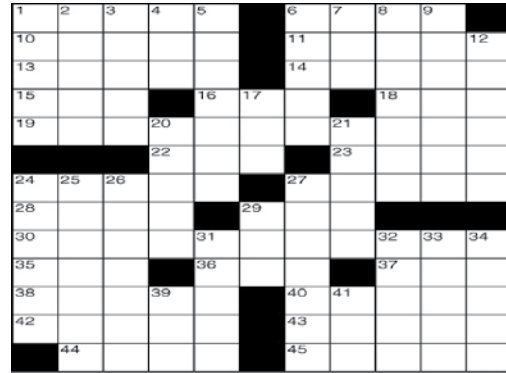
ACROSS

- 1 Leopard features
- 6 Jeans joint
- 10 Flat
- 11 Book of maps
- 13 French farewell
- 14 Sell tickets for profit
- 15 Skillet
- 16 Cheering cry
- 18 "Fifth Beetle"
- Sutcliffe
- 19 Nocturnal wanderer
- 22 Director Spike
- 23 Sunrise site
- 24 Audibly
- 27 Dance's de Mille
- 28 Role for Craig
- 29 Nabokov novel
- 30 Expert at

DOWN

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- 2 Bike part
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- 4 Golf peg
- 5 Drank noisily
- 6 One of the

- Obama daughters
- 7 Series-ending abbr.
- 8 Nome native
- 9 Blue-gray cat
- 12 Bursts of energy
- 17 Stunned wonder
- 20 Steer clear of
- 21 Court-related
- 24 Ridiculous
- 25 Clubs, in bridge
- 26 Here
- 27 Made suitable
- 29 Money machine
- 31 Hawk's grasper
- 32 Singer
- Carpenter
- 33 Put in office
- 34 Takes ten
- 39 Had supper
- 41 Anger



TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

PALLO ALTO
BORON BEEPS
AUDIE ATRIA
DRESSES ENS
GIN TRESSES
ENTREE EASY
OPART
SAPS DESIGN
PRESSES NEO
OAT CRESSES
IBIZA ALIKE
LITER LODES
CEDE SEED

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



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