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Why is it taking so long to make ICUs functional?

Many Covid-19 patients are dying for lack of proper support

It is most unfortunate that many of the 17 dedicated hospitals for Covid-19 treatment in the country do not yet have their intensive care units (ICU) ready to treat the patients. Even though ventilators have been installed in most of these hospitals, the ICUs still could not be made operational for lack of other necessary equipment, including patient monitors, pulse oximeters, oxygen cylinders, etc. Reportedly, 12 types of equipment are needed for the smooth operation of an ICU which these specialised hospitals are lacking. Meanwhile, patients are dying in these hospitals every day without getting proper treatment. Allegations were made to the media by the family members of the deceased patients that their loved ones didn't get any oxygen support in the specialised Covid-19 hospitals while they were having difficulty in breathing, let alone any ICU support.

According to a WHO-China joint mission report released last month, around 20 percent of the Covid-19 patients need ICU care—five percent of them require artificial respiration and another 15 percent need to breathe in highly concentrated oxygen. And without having a fully-functioning ICU, such life-saving care cannot be given to the critical patients.

It is incomprehensible why it is taking so long for the government to prepare only a handful of hospitals with ICU facilities for Covid-19 treatment. Already a month and a half has gone by since the first coronavirus case was detected in the country, with the number of deaths and new infections rising by the day.

Therefore, we urge the health ministry and the Directorate General of Health Services to immediately provide the hospitals with the necessary equipment to make their ICUs fully functional. They should also give attention to the hospitals outside the capital which have a very negligible number of ICU beds ready for the Covid-19 patients. Besides, the crisis of manpower for treating ICU patients should also be addressed. If the government does not take immediate measures to make the ICUs functional, we might see a surge in deaths from Covid-19 in the coming days.

Countries must look after their migrant workers

Govt must play a greater role in protecting their rights

SIXTEEN Bangladeshi civil society organisations have urged UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to request host countries to put a hold on their plans to deport undocumented and imprisoned migrant workers, according to a report in this daily yesterday. Origin countries of migrant workers, such as Bangladesh, have also been put under undue pressure—which includes the threat of revision of labour relations—if they do not submit to these plans. At a time when the entire world is reeling from the shock of a pandemic, with developing countries and countries with weak public health systems shouldering the greatest burden—such demands from host countries, especially the wealthy Gulf states, is nothing less than moral bankruptcy.

The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers clearly lays out that migrant workers are entitled to enjoy treatment not less favourable than other nationals of the state, and that they specifically have the right to receive medical care on the basis of equality of treatment. However, we have already seen reports of migrant workers in the Middle East and Southeast Asia—which includes Bangladeshi workers—being crammed into work camps, losing their jobs and facing high rates of infection, with no way home and no way of continuing to provide for their families. The Bangladesh government has said that migrant workers will be brought home once the lockdown ends, but for now, they are stuck in limbo, with no assurances from their host or origin countries.

There are an estimated 10 million Bangladeshis currently working abroad, who send billions of dollars in remittances back to Bangladesh every year. Our government has a responsibility to ensure the safety of these workers as well as their families. Rights groups have urged the government to create an emergency fund for migrant workers, which would include interest-free loans for their families in Bangladesh. However, rather than responding to these requests, the government has requested OIC member states to retain the jobs of migrant workers and create a "voluntary fund" to fight coronavirus. The expatriates' welfare ministry has also made the rather insensitive announcement of Tk 3 lakh compensation for the families of workers abroad who will die from coronavirus, without detailing any plans of how they will fight the virus and survive.

We urgently request the government to speak for and support our migrant workers, engaging in all levels of diplomacy with host countries as well as international organisations to protect our workers from the threat of deportation and create a safe environment for them abroad, and depending on their choice, to facilitate their safe return home.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

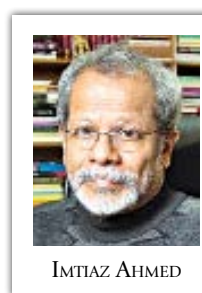
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The joy of giving

A few days ago, I came across a report in this daily titled, "A beggar's love for the destitute" and I was immensely inspired by it. It is about Nozim Uddin, a 70-year-old beggar in Sherpur who donated his three-year savings worth Tk 10,000 to a relief fund in order to support the poor during the crisis caused by the countrywide shutdown.

The generosity displayed by Nozim Uddin proves that one does not need to be affluent to contribute to society, all it takes is a big heart. Taking inspiration from him, I believe we should all come forward to assist the people whose lives have been turned upside down during the ongoing pandemic. And if a good number of people come forward to help the impoverished, a sense of solidarity will prevail in our society which will be a ray of hope for us all.

Jamil Al Masrur, by email



IMTIAZ AHMED

It is unfortunate that Covid-19 came at a time when the conservative or right-wing forces are in power in several of the major countries of the world, including USA, UK, Brazil and India. Given their agenda of guarding their national interests, albeit territorially conceived, and that again, mainly for winning national elections and remaining in power, the spread of Covid-19 found them paralysed beyond description. In fact, as *The Washington Post* reported on April 19, even when more than a dozen US researchers, physicians and public health experts were providing real-time information about Covid-19 to the US administration from Geneva headquarters of the World Health Organization (WHO) when the virus emerged in Wuhan in December 2019, the president of the US remained unaffected, calling it either a hoax or another kind of flu or something that will vanish soon!

Indeed, sealing borders or policies resembling political gimmicking became more important than giving time and resources to understand and contain the virus. Trump, for instance, banned foreigners visiting China to enter the US from February 2, but kept it open to the American citizens traveling from China as late as end March. Not sure why this was done, knowing very well that the virus would not be able to distinguish an American from a non-American.

Nearer to our home, India too was slow in responding to the spread of Covid-19, and then when it started to respond it came out with the idea of cancelling visas to non-Indians from March 13 onwards and calling for a 14-hour all-India "public curfew" on March 22. The first one is easy to implement, but since the virus is fully country-blind the impact would be no different from that of the US.

The second one probably was intended to be more symbolic and a way to build awareness, but then how it would be operationalised defies logic, particularly when New Delhi alone has more than 300,000 street children, while some estimates put the total number of street children in India as high as 18 million. In the midst of all this there was one interesting move on the part of India and that was to call a Saarc virtual meeting on March 15. But then in the backdrop of having no Saarc Summit since 2014, the virtual meeting remains ineffective, if not out of place, not only because it was programmed to contain China's influence in South Asia, which few would

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be excited about at this moment, but also it was too late to stop the spread of Covid-19. More collective efforts ought to have been pursued by the major powers, indeed, as early as January 2020 when news of Covid-19 started pouring in from China and WHO, and not wait till March 12 when WHO came out with a scientific declaration of Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic.

Bangladesh too lacked knowledge and preparation in responding to the pandemic. It had some plans in the beginning when 316 Bangladeshis were evacuated from Wuhan on February 1 and quarantined for 14 days in Dhaka, although none of them tested positive for Covid-19. Bangladesh, however, lost hold of the situation when thousands started returning from Europe, mainly from Italy and Germany, and this continued even after international flights were banned on March 14.

Some estimates put the figure between 450,000-550,000 passengers returning from abroad in the first three months of 2020. Although late in February the passengers were asked to go for self-quarantine in their respective locations for 14 days, but the instruction lacked strict supervision. Returnees too were less enthusiastic in maintaining the quarantine. It may be pointed out here that Bangladesh was relatively slow in dealing with Covid-19 in January

Overcoming the Covid-19 crisis

and February mainly because the whole country was geared towards the centennial birthday celebration of the Father of the Nation, which was due on March 17. The prime minister, however, took the bold decision of postponing the event on March 8. On April 17 the government declared that the entire country is at risk of Covid-19. Now there is no option but to face the virus boldly and smartly!

What is to be done then? Banishing fear ought to be the first thing. This is because fear takes us nowhere, it can only make things worse. Not only because much of it arises from ignorance, but also because, as Ibn Rushd would say, it leads to intolerance and violence. Indeed, by mid-March 2020, social media was full of fearful news, creating panic in the minds of people.

Secondly, taking lessons from the countries who have fared better in dealing with Covid-19 ought to be prioritised. China, South Korea and Vietnam are some of the countries that would immediately come to mind. Apart from getting information from the media and the internet, governmental and non-governmental, even personal, contacts ought to be activated for a

indeed, referring to 1971. This has created a structure which has proven useful not only during natural disasters but also in international peacekeeping, with Bangladesh peacekeepers even managing hospitals in Gbarnga, Liberia, during the Ebola outbreak in 2014. The expertise of the military in disaster management ought to be utilised alongside the civil authority and international agencies to the full. In this context, the military can play a critical role in ensuring inter-district communication, including supply of food and essential goods, besides helping in lockdown efforts.

Sixthly, re-starting the economy. This relates more to the formal sector than the informal sector, although the workforce of the latter probably has suffered more than the workforce of the former. This is because the income of many in the informal sector is on a daily basis, whereas in the case of the formal sector it is mostly monthly. A complete or partial lockdown otherwise is possible in the formal sector, but not in the informal sector. If one looks at the composition of the informal sector then one will find that in all three employment sectors—agriculture, industry and service—the informal employment is overwhelming,

in this sector, mainly because there are countries (Vietnam, for instance), who have managed to restart their RMG sector, and then, there are few other countries (Myanmar, for instance), whose workforce, particularly those who have lost their jobs, is being supported by the European Union with emergency cash fund.

Since Bangladesh has to compete with both Vietnam and Myanmar, for instance, in the RMG sector, it is important that Bangladesh keeps a track of things around the world so that it can best strategise its clothing industry. A change from shopping malls to e-shopping is bound to happen in both short- and mid-terms, the quicker the reorientation is done in the demand-supply channels the better. A proliferation of e-offices will also make virtual business the new norm, indeed, as much in the cities as in the rural areas, where e-entrepreneurs, subject to their availability and training, would certainly make a difference.

There is no denying the fact that a dubious business-political nexus, involved in money laundering, exists in the country. The government needs to keep a close eye on this more than ever. Indeed, a part of the laundered money in



Keeping faith in humans and restoring confidence in them are equally urgent in reproducing social resilience.

PHOTO: AFP

continuous flow of knowledge and know-how. Since some of these countries have opened up special hospitals, even factories producing essential items, it is important to know from multiple sources how that is being done and in what way Bangladesh could replicate it without jeopardising the lives of the people. Bangladesh missions, including the diaspora, can play a critical role in disseminating the knowledge and mapping the requirements so that Bangladesh would know how to save lives, what to produce, and what to supply.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need to reenergise the GO-NGO partnership, which has proven its efficiency and effectiveness in Bangladesh in dealing with both natural and human-induced disasters. The former refers to the periodic floods and cyclones, while the latter refers to the Rohingya, over a million of them, now residing in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Indeed, the partnership need to be activated not only in the much-required health sector, which, I understand, is getting some pace, but also in the advocacy of hand-washing and social distancing, delivering food and medicines, helping farmers, even providing education and supporting community policing at the ward/thana level.

Fourthly, public health ought to be revisited. There is certainly a lot to learn from the regimes that have fared better during the pandemic, from Vietnam, for instance, mainly because, like Bangladesh, it is also a developing country. In fact, in matters related to public health, the democratic-authoritarian dichotomy has become meaningless. Instead, what is required is professionalism in delivering things when it is required in emergencies. One cannot help remembering the words of Alexander Pope, "For forms of government let fools contest; whatever is best administered is best." Public health ought to be mainstreamed, indeed, at levels of education, from kindergartens to tertiary, and not limit the knowledge to medical schools only. Also public health ought to be the subject of the visual and print media, professional courses, both civil and military, cultural performance, indeed, with a larger allocation in the national budget.

Fifthly, making good use of civil-military relationship. Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia where its military fought side by side with the people for the independence of the country during the Liberation War. I am,

indeed, according to the Labour Force Survey Bangladesh 2016-2017, 95.4 percent in the agriculture sector, 89.9 percent in the industry sector, and 71.8 percent in the service sector of the total employment in that sector. This, of course, has advantages and disadvantages.

One critical, if not unfortunate, advantage is that the informal economy will keep on running even in a dire situation. This gives us hope in the sense that a large section of the population, given that they are employed in the informal sector, would continue reproducing their lives in some form or another. Apart from not being able to get employed because of the lockdown and not getting the daily wage, the disadvantage of the informal workforce would be in their getting exposed to Covid-19 in a much bigger way. This is where creative intervention is required in reproducing the informal sector, which cannot be stopped in anyway, of course, without the workforce getting exposed to Covid-19. Washing hands, physical distancing, even testing for virus, would play a major role in reproducing the informal sector.

The matter is different for the formal sector, which needs to be "smart" to bounce back. There is bound to be a short-term downturn, but it is destined to have a quick upturn, provided it can play its part smartly. A cue can be taken from the South Korean tech giant Samsung, whose operating profit in the first three months of 2020, when Covid-19 was creating havoc all over the world, rose from a year ago and beat expectations slightly. The reason is not difficult to understand. Samsung was selling items, mainly memory chips, whose demand went up as more people were working from home and making their purchases online. As Albert Einstein once said, "In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity." Indeed, a thorough knowledge, backed by in-depth research, is required to map the items that would be required in short, mid, and long-terms.

The need for medical items, including PPE, ventilators, sanitisers, gloves, and the like is understandable. Securing the health condition of the workforce, particularly physical distancing, the production of such items ought to be carried out in full speed and, if required, with extra workforce. Given the relative secured space, the EPZs could play a greater role in restarting the production lines. Clothing certainly would be one item that would be required mid-term onwards. A greater smartness is required

Bangladesh is regularly siphoned off to the developed countries, with the latter legalising the illegal money to the full! In fact, one report, published in March 2020, indicates that capital flight from Bangladesh stands at USD 7.53 billion on an average per year, and that again due to misinvoicing during import and export alone. Since those involved in capital flight are from the same nexus, it becomes difficult to stop such transfer of wealth. As one critic pointed out, "Many politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen try to launder money as their children stay abroad." This is where the government, including civil watchdogs, must remain extra vigilant as "fear" at home would make the nexus and many more rationalise their illegal transfer of wealth even more.

Seventhly, education in the broadest sense of the term needs to be reinvented. There is no doubt that during this crisis some have made use of the "de-class space" with the help of the internet through various apps, such as Skype, Zoom, Google, and many more, instead of delivering lectures at the locked down traditional classrooms. But this needs to be institutionalised at all levels, from kindergartens to tertiary levels, with an effort to have education connected globally in real time. Fresh MOUs need to be signed to partner within and outside the country to offer gradable e-courses. But then, the national curricula at various levels need to be revisited as well. Not only for mainstreaming public health, as indicated earlier, but also for mainstreaming knowledge of survival, with a focus as much on the futures, nature and post-nationality as on the civilisational ingenuities.

Finally, restoring confidence in the minds of people with the objective of reproducing social resilience. It is important to keep in mind that humans are not only political and economic beings but also spiritual beings. There is no doubt that some would find solace and get spirited in prayers, some in music, some in poetry, some in plays and films, some in breathing fresh air, and then some just by remembering their mother walking past by them from nowhere. Whatever may be the means keeping faith in humans and restoring confidence in them are equally urgent in reproducing social resilience, without which overcoming the current crisis or any crisis, for that matter, would become difficult if not impossible.

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