

Reopening plan may be disastrous if not handled right

Govt should tighten safety rules, expand testing to support reopening

AS economic pain from the coronavirus lockdown increasingly bites the country, the government has decided to reopen the economy partially. Starting May 10, shopping malls, all types of shops and other businesses will be allowed to function from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm every day. The directives came hours after the government extended the ongoing general "holiday" from May 7 to May 16. This is the first step in unwinding the countrywide lockdown initiatives introduced on March 26. The economic argument of the decision is hard to ignore: we are in the midst of what the IMF has described as the "Great Lockdown" that could create the worst global recession in nearly a century. For Bangladesh, this has had a debilitating effect so far: over a crore people have arguably lost their income opportunities. A vast number of individuals and families are facing risks of starvation or worse. So, some sort of a plan to phase into a reopening was expected.

But from a medical point of view, if not followed with supportive measures, the reopening plan may spell disaster for us. Experts say the health cost of a reopening could be huge, especially at a time when Bangladesh is about to enter the peak period of the coronavirus infection. The number of confirmed cases in the country has already crossed 10,000. The numbers of deaths and new infections are rising by leaps and bounds, and we have already seen that after reopening of some factories, some workers tested Covid-19 positive. What will happen if large numbers of people across the country come out on the streets and visit potential hubs of the outbreak, such as shopping centres, or join work at factories? Caution must be taken before we jump the gun to ease the lockdown. Unfortunately, the government's decision seems broad-based as instead of reopening the economy bit by bit, city by city, and business by business, it allows all establishments to reopen. Also, it doesn't provide any solution to cushion the fallout of a reopening such as mass gatherings, neither does it address concerns about the gross violations of social distancing regulations that we are already witnessing.

If the economy must reopen, a sensible decision will be to take supportive measures such as enforcing specific guidelines for each kind of business—and criminalising violations by business/factory owners—as well as having special directives for at-risk zones. More importantly, given the spike in new cases it is likely to cause, the government should ramp up testing and isolation measures. Countries that have gone for easing lockdowns so far, did so only after a significant drop in coronavirus cases. The opposite happened in our case. We must remain extremely vigilant.

Pandemic and the unscrupulous

Govt's economic incentive must not be exploited

ONE notices a malicious tendency in some unprincipled and dishonest people to exploit and misuse relief measures of the government, particularly during times of crisis. We have seen how food grains meant for the poor have been misappropriated for profiteering. How, allegedly, PPE masks procured by the government failed to meet the required medical standards. And now we have the unscrupulous businessmen scampering for loans, taking advantage of a government policy.

The government as part of its incentive package to the businesses and industrial sector during these hard times, had announced the stay of all interest on loans between April 1 and May 31. This is in addition to the decision of the government not to declare any borrower a defaulter for being unable to pay back the loan, till June 1. But as soon as this was announced, there was a glut of applications for loans, which is in stark contrast to the situation in the previous month when all kinds of investments by the business sector were put on hold in the face of the present economic fallout and of a very uncertain future. And interestingly, many of those seeking loans are previous defaulters.

We believe that such a timely measure is meant to help those industries and businesses that have been thrust in very dire straits during the pandemic. And that includes the banking sector too, who are struggling with the downturn in borrowing in recent times. Therefore, banks must exercise strict scrutiny to ensure that those who are habitual defaulters and who thrive on bank loans—and, from time to time on the central bank's magnanimity to either reschedule or get a most favourable term of repayment of loans—do not exploit a noble measure of the government meant exclusively to overcome the crisis period. We are glad that a caveat has been imposed as a result of the sudden rush for loans, which requires the banks to provide the credit support to the borrowers, given their outstanding loans are until March 31. This must be honestly followed.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Proper use of PPE

Are we using PPE in the right manner? I have heard from my peers who are serving as doctors in various hospitals that their authorities are compelling them to reuse PPE due to scarcity. But if that is done—despite it being disinfected—it beats the actual purpose of preventing the spread of the virus. As a result, a large number of doctors are purchasing their own gear from various online stores, and we are not even sure whether those PPE meet the actual safety standards. Also, there are no proper instructions about the disposal of contaminated PPE. It is time we took the proper use and disposal of PPE seriously, or else the consequences can be severe.

Sohel Ahmed, by email



MIZAN R KHAN

CORONAVIRUS is razing the world to the ground, continuing to claim human lives—the latest count exceeds well over 200,000, with the number of infected running over three million. The deadly virus is reported to be mutating, with no prospect yet of getting it under control. The comity of nations, both mighty and weak, stand helplessly before a mortal threat. The US as the most powerful country, militarily and economically, is suffering the most. This virus has condemned the whole human machine to a juddering halt.

Is this moment not apposite for questioning the conventional security paradigm? If security means freedom from want and from fear, for citizens and nation-states alike, we all have to agree that humanity is facing its greatest insecurity in modern times. What is the value of the global defence establishment worth trillions of dollars, engaging the best brains to invent and produce lethal weapons that can obliterate nations and civilisations? Now the military might is meant for establishing supremacy/hegemony, although in crises like this, the military usually helps the civil authorities in many ways. But, at what cost?

The latest trend shows global defence spending is rising by almost 4 percent a year since the last decade. In 2019, the US remained the largest defence spender, with a yearly spending of USD 732 billion. The defence budget increase in the US of almost 7 percent was the largest in ten years, and has increased ever since Trump took office. US investments in weapons procurement and weapons research and development alone were larger than China's total defence budget of USD 260 billion, followed by India (USD 71 billion). Knowing full well these limits, even many low-income economies invest much more in military security than in education or health.

Such military spending, most of which is unproductive, happens at a time when the world witnesses unseen levels of inequality, environmental degradation and climate destabilisation. There are new surges in nationalism, populism, conflict, trade wars, and mounting public health threats. The pre Covid-19 preoccupations with narrowly conceived traditional issues like state security, state/non-state

terrorism, or economic competition, are not unimportant, but we have entered into a "new normal" in our individual and collective lives. This is the time for some collective soul-searching on what national and global priorities should be, with limited resources. If security means primarily the provision of human wellbeing, and protection from different vulnerabilities, what kind of a security paradigm can supply these desired ends?

A report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) claims that climate change affects the social and environmental determinants of health. Climate change is now increasingly recognised by major national security agencies as a preeminent security threat,

health shocks have in common: they hit the poorest and the most vulnerable, the hardest. Acting as a poverty multiplier, they push families into extreme poverty when they cannot afford health care. At least half of the world's population does not enjoy full coverage for the most basic health services. When health disasters hit, which would occur more frequently in a world scarred by climate change, global inequality is reinforced. The poor would be much more adept in coping with and recovering from the lasting effects of storms and floods, if they have a resilient and well-resourced health system in place. Against this fact, the Trump administration has aggressively rolled back not just on the pledge to reduce

cannot help us to deal with emerging global challenges. For this, we have to get multilateralism back on a firm saddle. Political scientist Joseph Nye cogently argues that while the US has led in the production of global public goods since World War II, now global cooperation is needed, because power has become a positive-sum game for achieving global goals.

Second, the change in mindsets may not come overnight, even after this pandemic. So we need increased investments in liberal, health, environment and ethics education. In a democracy, leaders are elected by voters with an average understanding of societal issues. So the task should be to enhance the level of knowledge and awareness and to inform the average voters better, as cosmopolitan citizens.

Third, coronavirus has caught the global health systems totally unaware. All nations must now invest adequately in preparedness and prevention of pandemics. This will require more medical research and development. Promoting universal health coverage must be an effective way to reduce the long-term health impacts from future pandemics, and increase our resilience and adaptive capacity to climate change.

Fourth, the USD 100 billion pledge by the rich countries as climate finance should be realised by this year, with 50 percent of the money going for adaptation for the most vulnerable. As Dr Saleemul Huq argued in a column in this daily, the stimulus packages flowing in trillions now, all over the world, should focus on supporting the poor and most vulnerable in society to enhance their resilience, and to invest in cleaner production to reduce all kinds of pollution. In other words, the support to resuscitate the economy after the pandemic should promote health, equity, and environmental protection. We must recognise that restoring climate stability is our ultimate security.

For all these measures, at this time of economic crisis, no new money can be mobilised. But a chunk of the massive budgets for yearly military spending can be sliced off easily to invest in productive sectors, to ensure and enhance real human, national and global security. At this critical moment, we only need willing leaders to effect such a security paradigm.

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

precisely due to its role as a "threat multiplier" that increases the risks of social disruption, conflict, water and food insecurity, economic crisis, displacement of millions and future pandemics, by amplifying disease vectors. In a hard-hitting report published by medical journal The Lancet, scientists and health experts concluded that increasing climate impacts—from heat waves to worsening storms, floods and fires, already threaten to overwhelm our health systems. Another research shows rising carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are reducing nutrients in cereal crops, raising the risk of malnutrition even for those who get enough to eat.

There is one thing that almost all

carbon emissions, but has axed the National Security Council's global health security office, sought to cut funding to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and has now threatened to cut funding for the World Health Organization.

However, coronavirus has opened a portal into a new world, presenting opportunities to reframe our vision. The following are a few areas I feel can be remoulded into the "new normal" world. First, we need a change in mindset of national and global political and military leaders in reframing the new security paradigm. Holding on to centuries-old lens of sovereignty predicated on a zero-sum game in inter-state relations

Holding the next global climate change talks

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

I had written in a previous column about the fact that the next Conference of Parties (COP26) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which was to have been held in November 2020 in Glasgow, Scotland with the United Kingdom as COP26 President, had to be postponed to 2021 due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. I would now like to provide some ideas for the COP26 presidency as well for Bangladesh to consider undertaking, so that even though COP26 is postponed, it doesn't necessarily mean a loss of momentum.

The first point is that despite the best of intentions, it is unlikely that COP26 will be held in early 2021 or even in the middle of the year, as the situation has to get back to normal not just in the UK but all around the world, from where the delegates will be flying into Glasgow. Hence, we need to be looking for ways to make progress by using virtual meetings as much as possible.

While using virtual meeting platforms as well as social media are proving quite effective in certain things, such as sharing information and campaigning, it is not a suitable format for decision-making across nearly 200 governments. Much of the way that the negotiations are conducted to get successful outcomes at every COP involves informal meetings on the side between some key delegates and countries to resolve a contentious issue, which can then be brought back to the plenary session for formal adoption.

The formal plenary sessions are only used for delegates from each country to make their statement without resolving their differences. The real negotiations take place in informal meetings where contentious issues get hammered out by contending parties. Without the opportunity for such informal meetings on the side, there is almost no likelihood of agreements being reached on major contentious issues. For the formal part of the negotiations, we will almost certainly have to wait for when the delegates from all countries are able to meet in Glasgow next year.

However, not everything needs to be

put on hold until they do meet. Many issues related to the implementation of previous agreements and decisions need not be further negotiated, but can go straight into implementation without waiting for the COP. It should be mentioned that the Paris Agreement made in COP21 in 2015 in Paris has already given all countries the blueprint for taking actions on both mitigation as well as adaptation.

On mitigation, ambitions have to be enhanced to try to reach the agreed goal of keeping global temperatures below two degrees centigrade and if possible,

adaptation can also be taken forward in practice at multiple levels—from vulnerable regions of the world like the Pacific Ocean, South Asia and Africa to the level of individual countries and, within each country, at the local level in the most vulnerable communities. The UNFCCC has already initiated the process for all countries to undertake National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and share their experiences with each other. This process does not have to wait for the COP but can be carried out at local and national levels, even under the current lockdown conditions.

of the CVF during COP26 and there is a great opportunity to discuss how the UK, as host of COP26, could collaborate with Bangladesh to enable vulnerable countries to get a high level platform at the COP. Perhaps a joint meeting with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on the opening day of the COP26 could be arranged.

It is interesting to recall that under the chairmanship of President Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands, the CVF held their meeting as a virtual summit, rolling across the globe with different heads of state coming online in their own time



A balloon in the shape of the Earth is pictured during a mass climate protest during the COP25 summit in Madrid, December 6, 2019.

PHOTO AFP/CRISTINA QUICLER

under 1.5 degrees. While the latter target is getting out of reach with each passing day, it is still possible if all countries take appropriate actions to wean themselves off of fossil fuels, such as coal and petroleum. The current crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic is already slowing the use of such fossil fuels and ways to return to normal without these fuels have to be explored immediately.

The other part of the Paris Agreement on developing a global goal on

In this context, it is good to note that Bangladesh is about to undertake the NAP for Bangladesh after a delayed start. We thus have another opportunity to develop an outstanding product based on our extensive experience in adaptation already.

Finally, we can also initiate the activities of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which Bangladesh will chair for the next two years. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will be the chair

zone for a couple of hours each. Some of the pre-COP26 meetings may choose to emulate this example if they wish.

The bottom line is that tackling climate change remains an important global issue, despite the current Covid-19 pandemic, and ways have to be found to tackle both at the same time using some out of the box thinking.

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