

## Right to freedom of expression is in mortal danger

Cases filed under Digital Security Act continue to pile up

A cartoonist, a writer and an activist were among the four latest victims of arrest under the draconian Digital Security Act, which it seems is being used to indiscriminately shut down anyone who criticises the powers that be or disagrees in the slightest with their narrative. The four were arrested allegedly for making anti-government posts on Facebook. But we must ask, since when has it become normal for multiple vehicles full of Rab personnel to show up in the middle of the night and pick someone up from their home for posting something critical of the government on social media? Isn't it all a bit too much? What is the purpose of this? Is it to intimidate people into silence? That is what legal experts and rights activists are pointing to as being the real concern here.

According to the human rights body Article 19, between January 1 and May 6, a total of 60 cases have been filed against more than 100 people, including 22 journalists, under the act. There were 34 cases that were filed under the act in 2018 and the following year, that number rose to a total of 63. This shows an increasing trend in the number of cases being filed under the act—with this year's number nearly reaching last year's sum total already.

This stifling of free expression that we have been witnessing completely violates the basic principles of democracy, and the targeting of journalists simply creates confusion by depriving people of accurate and complete information. In this moment of crisis, if the government is truly concerned about true information reaching the public, it should be assisting that process, not hampering the free flow of information and creating a general sense of fear by arresting anyone it sees as having committed the smallest transgression.

We once again call on the authorities to reconsider scrapping the widely unpopular and extremely questionable Digital Security Act and be more tolerant towards free expression and those exercising their constitutional right to it.

## Reopening the businesses amid highest risks

Maintaining safety guidelines will be the biggest challenge

AS the government has decided to reopen shopping malls, all types of shops and businesses on a limited scale from May 10 ahead of the Eid, not all people related to the businesses are sure that they should do so now when the number of new coronavirus infections is rising every day, even under lockdown. Two of the biggest shopping malls of the city have decided not to reopen considering the risk it will pose to the shoppers. But others have decided to go ahead as the economic losses have become too much for them to bear.

The difference between us and other countries that are reopening their economic activities is that they have decided to do so under strict guidelines and have only taken the decision when new infections and deaths in their respective territories have shown a downward trend. Unfortunately, our government has decided to reopen when the numbers are rising. Of course, the economic hardship that our people have been going through is not comparable to those of the European countries, as already over a crore people have lost their jobs due to the shutdown here and the government's stimulus packages are just not being enough to feed the hungry people across the country for a few more months.

Since the decision has already been taken to reopen, we think the government, business owners, law enforcement agencies and other authorities have a huge responsibility to maintain social distancing and other safety guidelines. The directives given by the home ministry—that there should be sanitisers at the entrances of the malls, no one will be allowed inside the buildings without gloves and masks, and there will be a banner in front of malls saying that disregarding the health directives will cause life risk—should be strictly maintained. The shop owners will also have to ensure sanitisers and masks for their employees, appoint volunteers to help maintain the safety measures, mark places where shoppers will stand, as well as have disinfection rooms inside the buildings. The police have also come up with some directives, such as restricting people's movement into their respective areas' shopping malls and making all carry their NIDs with them, etc.

We urge the market authorities to take proper precautions in the remaining days before reopening. We also hope the public will comply with the directives of social distancing and other safety guidelines. Considering the rush of people during this time before Eid, ensuring all the guidelines will no doubt be a big challenge for the authorities. The government should enlighten us about how it is planning to monitor that everything goes as per its plan. Because if the safety measures are not followed by all, the result of reopening could be disastrous for the nation.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Potential drug a ray of hope

It is indeed heartening to learn that six local drug makers are now ready to produce the experimental antiviral drug remdesivir, developed by an American biopharmaceutical company. According to reports, its potential to help Covid-19 patients is based on the ability to disable the mechanism by which certain viruses, including the new coronavirus, replicate themselves and potentially overwhelm their host's immune system.

Even though the drug is yet to prove fully efficient in eradicating Covid-19, it is promising nonetheless. And to know that of the six companies, two are already in the advanced stage of their preparation, is surely a ray of hope in these dark times. I would like to urge the authorities to assist the companies in every possible manner so that the drug can be made available as early as possible for the wellbeing of the nation.

Nahian Zaman, Dhaka

# Shifting universities to non-physical platforms

Collaborative efforts will be the way forward



ADNAN M S FAKIR

AFTER much confusion, the University Grants Commission (UGC) on April 30 provided the directive to hold online classes in all public and private universities.

Given that the PM has directed universities to remain closed till September, if the situation does not improve, we face at least 4-5 months of such distance learning. Setting aside the ethical and moral dilemmas and the students' mental health issues (topics on their own merits), the central query is, then, how do we make such a nationwide transition suddenly? Given that a considerable percentage of students do not have access to the necessary facilities/technology, to what extent is this feasible?

I think the first step in that direction should be conducting university-specific surveys to identify: (1) non-tech savvy faculty members who are unable to conduct classes in the online platform, and (2) students who do not have access to the internet and the necessary tech equipment, including a (reliable) smartphone. Emphasis of the prior sentence falls on accepting and utilising smartphones as a (short-term) learning tool. While apt (ironically online) training can be provided to non-tech savvy faculty members (peer to peer, if not centralised—admittedly a difficult task at which a number of universities are failing), the student survey will provide important information on the prevailing status of the student body. The surveys can be done centrally by the admin or by course-specific faculty members/RAs, online and over phone calls, for those not reachable online.

The reasons why incorporating smartphone-centric learning is important are simple. First, in Bangladesh, mobile phone penetration is higher than broadband internet connectivity, and a larger percentage of students have access to smartphones rather than computers. Second, almost all online classroom platforms (Zoom, Google Classroom) are easily accessible from smartphones. Faculty members should record their sessions and upload them on a common platform (such as personal faculty channels in YouTube, if Blackboard features are unavailable) for students to access later (not as alternatives to interactive online classes). The real catch is in accommodating two sets of students. The first set are students without smartphones and/or internet access, who will be unable to attend online classes. This concern, plaguing other South Asian countries as well, is further aggravated by the fact that many students returned to their village homes, in some cases in remote areas without constant electricity or proper internet infrastructure. Here are a few of the ideas floating around regarding bridging the gap:

#### The internet issue (for those with access to at least smartphones)

In India, the southern state of Kerala announced that it would provide extra bandwidth across the state to cater to such needs. In Bangladesh, students who are now in remote areas (and many in

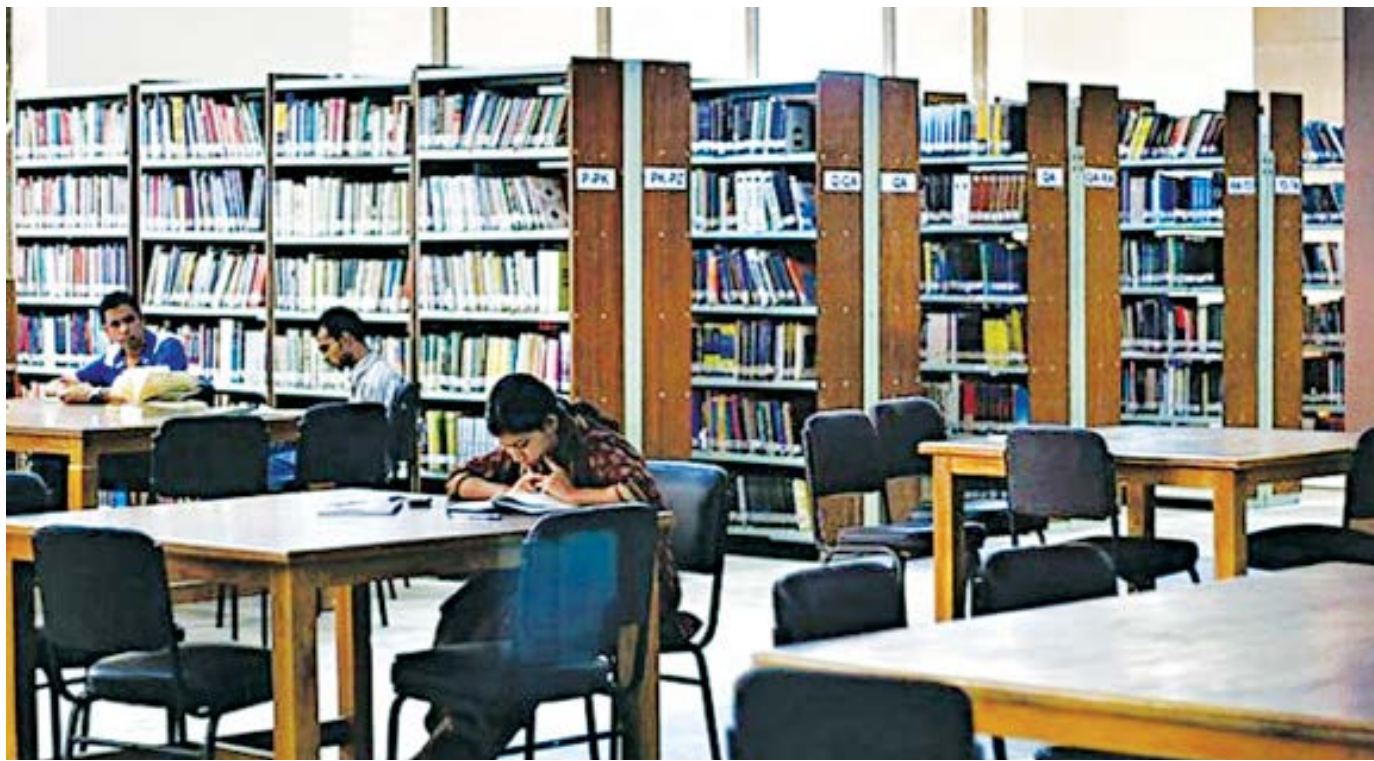
urban areas) are unlikely to have access to broadband internet. However, those with smartphones should have access to telco-specific internet. This is where the telecom industry in Bangladesh can step in. Many students will not be able to buy the amount of data required to attend such classes online (the survey can identify them). Telco-university collaborative measures can be taken to offer "internet education packages" for these students. Ideally, these packages can be managed and provided by universities to the students, renewed biweekly (easier planning for students in terms of usage) and, if deemed necessary, can also be targeted for using learning-specific applications. The American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) is taking a similar approach. While students without a 4G connection or with low network availability may still be unable to partake

who are doing practical lab-based work. These courses require physical presence which I believe has no pragmatic alternative. These will, sadly, have to be delayed. The idea of replacing lab-based work with "theory labs" is akin to condemning the student with a low-skilled setup.

Oddly, now seems an ideal time to remind ourselves that exams are not the best way to assess students. Term papers (plagiarism checked), application-based essays, and case studies with critical reasoning better fit an andragogy framework, corresponding to the different stages of Bloom's taxonomy of thinking. Those without access to a PC/broadband internet can hand-write on paper, take photos using a smartphone and email the photos to the faculty using the smartphone and mobile internet (we have been entertaining this approach for

in online classes (if relocated for such purposes). I shall leave that question for another discussion.

Surely, the aforementioned approaches do not ensure integration of every single student. The idea is to transit to a system that can integrate most students across the country. In the end, I do not believe we will have a fully equitable solution within such a short time span, but we can try our earnest to ensure apt learning transfers take place. The biggest contention of not being able to integrate everyone is that it will exacerbate inequality in a scenario where many universities are already unable to equip students with the necessary skillset for the job market. The haves remain shielded even in attaining knowledge. But a successful transition can help many students to not lose time, especially when alternative solutions are a possibility.



Smartphone-centric learning can be an important part of the shift to online classes.

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in it, many others will be able to.

#### The smartphone issue

In an ideal world, we would be able to provide temporary access to smartphones/laptops to students who need them, as being done in several western universities. But suggesting such an attempt in Bangladesh feels like too much to ask for. If no other mechanism can be accommodated to bridge the gap, the controversial and non-equity decision would be to give such students the option to defer the remaining (and future lockdown period) semester (exempt of any enrolment fees).

#### Peer-to-peer learning partners

The simple idea is to partner a student with proper resources (laptop, good internet) with another student with weaker resources (smartphone, weaker internet). It is the responsibility of the better-equipped student to aid and keep his/her learning partner regularly updated on class proceedings. Such collaboration is essential for learning and would immensely help in present times.

The second set of students are those

students in Australia without a laptop). If, however, exams must be taken, there are online platforms (such as Examplify) where students can sit for exams online using smartphones. The UGC can step in and provide subscriptions to the more premium platforms (as they have done for Zoom). If cheating is a concern, these platforms enable you to randomise your questions and the order of appearance. Collusion is, unfortunately, something we cannot avoid entirely but the lockdown itself should minimise that. Now is not the time to aim for perfection in assessment, rather a time to focus on empathy and integration. It is also important to remember to provide extended adequate time to students for these online exams, and opportunities for re-sits or alternatives.

Finally, there is the dreaded issue of tuition. Should students enrolled in online sessions have to pay the same tuition fees as physical classes under the current circumstances? Reduced tuition fees may enable students to attain improved connectivity to perform better

Overall, the entire situation has to be dealt with ample empathy for the students' circumstances and on a university-to-university, course-to-course basis. The mental health of the students also needs to be kept under constant consideration. Coordination by the management and faculty members—ideally with a monitoring system in place—will be the key. Understandably, such a transition will be difficult and will require time to acclimatise; till then, a lot of the classes will be of sub-par quality. Some students may not even be able to adapt to such a drastically different learning experience; their needs will have to be catered to as well. This will be a learning curve for both the faculty members and the students, where all stakeholders will have to put in ample effort. These are extraordinary times, which requires us to excel in extraordinary (and hopefully temporary) measures, and I believe collaboration will pave a cleaner path.

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# Three priorities in the fight against Covid-19



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THE WHO South-East Asia Region is entering a new phase in its pandemic response. In recent weeks, the spread of Covid-19 in the region has slowed, due in large part to the unprecedented

physical distancing measures that countries implemented early and aggressively. Several member states are now preparing to safely transition towards a "new normal" in which social and economic life can function amid low disease transmission. To do that successfully, countries must continue to be bold, decisive and mobilise the full power of their whole-of-government, whole-of-society approaches.

Our challenge is immense. Across the globe, the spread of Covid-19 continues to cause disease, death and disruption. It has pushed even the most advanced health systems to the brink. The crude mortality ratio for Covid-19 is estimated to be upwards of 3 percent, but can change from country to country, and even within countries. Key variables include access to care and the availability of testing.

The Region's member states must continue to take evidence-informed action and conduct careful risk assessments prior to making decisions on winding back public health and social measures. Among other factors, due consideration should

be given to the local epidemiology of Covid-19, including identified hotspots and clusters, and the capacity of systems and responders to find, isolate and care for cases, and quarantine contacts.

Whatever a country's current transmission scenario, there can be no illusions: We are in this for the long haul. In what will be an ongoing struggle against Covid-19, member state strategies must be clear, comprehensive and cover immediate and long-term needs. Three priorities must chart the path ahead: control and suppress spread, strengthen and maintain health services, and support each other to stay safe, healthy and well.

To control and suppress spread, we must take the fight to the virus. Active case detection, isolation, testing and contact tracing can control the virus. Should community transmission occur, these are vital to suppressing it. Strengthening surveillance and contact tracing in particular will help national and local authorities to rapidly adapt to evolving outbreaks, whether moving from one case to a cluster of cases, or from a cluster of cases to no cases.

Agility and innovation will be crucial, especially at the sub-national level, across borders and with mobile populations. For areas with limited transmission, responders must focus on finding and isolating all cases, providing them with appropriate care, and tracing, quarantining and supporting all contacts. Where sustained transmission occurs, they must aggressively slow and reduce it to manageable clusters, for which they may

consider reintroducing physical distancing measures in a way that minimises negative impacts.

To strengthen health services, all countries must first protect health workers. WHO continues to work with governments, industry and the Pandemic Supply Chain Network to overcome global shortages of personal protective equipment. It is imperative that health workers have the gowns, gloves, medical masks and eye protection required to save lives and avoid infection.

Countries must continue to expand isolation and ICU capacity, while also rationalising it. By networking Covid-19 treatment facilities, health leaders and administrators can better share the burden among facilities. By implementing clear triage protocols, they will ensure all patients with severe manifestations are provided safe, rapid admission to intensive care units. Rigorous infection prevention and control is needed to prevent health facilities from facilitating transmission.

Ensuring essential health services are maintained is vital. We must not only reduce mortality from Covid-19 itself, but also from vaccine-preventable diseases and other treatable conditions that can increase when health systems are overwhelmed. WHO will continue to support countries in the Region to implement key WHO guidelines on maintaining essential health services as they directly respond to Covid-19.

To achieve these outcomes, member states must mobilise a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach

that highlights each person's role in supporting one another to stay safe, healthy and well. Regular hand-washing, coughing or sneezing into one's elbow, and avoiding contact with people with flu-like symptoms are crucial to staying healthy. So too is following local and national guidance on physical distancing. Avoid using tobacco, alcohol and other substances that impair the immune system and damage health. Support health workers and say no to stigma.

We must also stay well. Look after your mental health and be supportive of others. It is natural to feel sad, stressed, confused, scared or angry during a crisis. Helpful coping strategies include getting sufficient rest, exercise, eating well, avoiding harmful substances and staying in close contact with family and friends. WHO will continue to provide accessible and actionable information on coping with Covid-19-related stress and anxiety, and will support all member states to strengthen mental health services as part of the Covid-19 response.

We must continue to stand together to tackle what is the greatest public health challenge of a generation. The Region's strategy to control and suppress spread, strengthen and maintain health services, and support each other to stay safe, healthy and well, will help all countries to save lives and minimise impact. Our mission is clear. Our challenge is great. Together, forward in the fight against Covid-19.

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