

The world at risk of mega-famines

Bangladesh cannot afford to be complacent

THE United Nations' World Food Programme (WFP) has warned that the world is at risk of "mega-famines" as COVID-19 cases are expected to peak in the world's most fragile countries in the next three to six months. Even before COVID-19, there was already 135 million acutely hungry people in the world, in addition to the 821 million people who were chronically hungry, highlighted the UN organisation. The pandemic will likely double the number of acutely hungry people.

The UN's warning should be taken seriously by policymakers, particularly in countries like ours. While we are fortunate to have adequate food stocks in case of an immediate crisis, the current and imminent implications of COVID-19 on the food supply chain cannot be ignored, particularly as we are a part of the global economy. The government has taken some timely steps, such as mobilising workers from parts of the country and sending them to the haor areas, which were facing acute labour shortages, to harvest the paddy, and taking measures to save crops before impending flashfloods and cyclones in the north-eastern and southern regions, respectively. However, concerns remain whether farmers will be able to sell their crops at a fair price. Already smallholders and women farmers are having to sell their produce at one-fourth or one-fifth the usual price—how will they make up for this loss to their livelihoods and what disastrous impact will it have on the next production cycle?

The government cannot afford to be complacent at this critical stage of intervention as it strategises how to ease the lockdown and distribute and redistribute food products, without jeopardising the safety of communities. Additionally, with millions of people in extreme poverty and temporary unemployment due to the ongoing crisis, the government needs to expand its social safety net programmes to ensure access to food for all. Having adequate food supplies in stocks will mean nothing if it is not properly and fairly distributed.

Celebrating Mother's Day

Let's ensure our mothers get their rightful place in family and society

AS we celebrate International Mother's Day today, remaining confined to our homes, we, in fact, get a better chance to see the hard work our mothers have to do every single day only to make our lives comfortable. During this lockdown, it's our mothers who are sacrificing the most just to ensure that we can go about our regular life without facing much hassle. This is what mothers do in any given situation—they make sure that their children are fed, clothed and educated with whatever resources they have. They keep the family together and allow other members to work and pursue their dreams. But do we even find the time to pause for a minute and think about what they get in return for their endless love and care for their children and family? How many amongst us recognise their role in the family and society? How many amongst us make sure that our mothers are in good health, both mental and physical?

We are saddened to learn from reports that during the ongoing lockdown violence against women has increased around the world. Manusher Jonno Foundation has recently conducted a telesurvey which found that 4,249 women out of 17,203 they have interviewed faced different forms of domestic violence in April this year during the shutdown. We often come across reports in the media about how elderly parents are mistreated and abandoned by their children. Women's unpaid household and care work have not yet been formally recognised by our state. And as we all praise the role of our mothers today, an overwhelming number of expectant mothers are dying in the remote corners of the country every day due to their lack of access to proper healthcare services.

On this Mother's Day, let us take a vow to end the violence and discrimination our mothers as well as women in general face at home and ensure that their hard work is recognised in the family and society.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Turkey's response to AFP report

I am writing to you regarding the AFP news piece titled "Armenia decries crimes against 'civilisation' on genocide anniversary" published on April 25, 2020 edition of *The Daily Star*. As this news reflect a subjective narrative based on the unfounded claims by the Armenian side, I would like to bring to your attention the following so that you can inform your readers with the counter arguments:

Turkey, having solidarity among its citizens regardless of their backgrounds of faith or identity, commemorates with respect Muslim, Christian and Jewish civilians of Ottoman communities who lost their lives during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

More than 500 thousand Muslims have been massacred by Armenian rebels in the same period. We would like to remind that Turkey's proposal to establish a Joint Historical Commission on the event of 1915 is still on the table. We believe the truth will be unveiled if this Commission is established. Those who try to take this proposal off the agenda are radical Armenians who want to make their responsibilities during the events of 1915 forgotten.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's message to Armenian Patriarch of Tukey, Reverend Sahak Masalyan on April 24, 2020 clearly demonstrates Turkey's approach on this matter.

Mustafa Osman Turan, Turkish Ambassador to Bangladesh

COVID-19 and the assault on fundamental rights

Involuntary disappearance, re-appearance and detention



C R ABRAR

A spectre is haunting the conscientious citizens of Bangladesh—the spectre of the Digital Security Act, 2018 (DSA). By now the law has become synonymous with

curtailment of freedom of expression and repression. The recent developments of involuntary disappearance, re-appearance and subsequent detention of several commentators and social activists have raised the alarm if indeed we as a nation are shying away from upholding one of the cardinal principles of the *Muktijuddher Chetona* (the spirit of the Liberation War) to freely express our views.

A few recent cases will corroborate the above statement. On May 6, businessman Mushtaq Ahmed and cartoonist Ahammed Kabir Kishore were sent to jail and Dhaka Stock Exchange director Minhaz Mannan Emon and Rastra Chinta organiser Didarul Islam Bhuiyan were shown arrested a day after they had reportedly been picked up in a case filed under the DSA allegedly for spreading "rumours". Five persons based in Sweden and Germany and six more unnamed persons have been named for "tarnishing" the image of the father

of the nation, "hurting" the spirit of the Liberation War, and "spreading rumours" about COVID-19, army and other security forces among others, on social media.

Cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore, began profiling "life in the time of corona" while Mushtaq started spreading anti-state propaganda, the complaint noted. It was further claimed that authorities had detected "anti-state chatting" in the WhatsApp and Messenger exchanges of Mushtaq, Minhaz and Didarul. The

to the fact that Kajol has been deprived of due process of law and may perhaps be a victim for freely expressing his views on matters of public interest.

Detaining individuals on charges of "spreading rumours", "tarnishing image" and "hurting spirit of Liberation War" for an unstipulated period in a situation when they cannot seek protection of higher judiciary amounts to arbitrary action. It may be recalled that initially Kajol had been detained under Section 54, violating

have noted that following the outbreak of COVID-19, there has been an increase in instances of involuntary disappearance, extra-judicial killing and human rights violations. In most cases the actions were justified on ground of tackling rumours. The feeling is pervasive among rights activists that COVID-19 may have come as a boon to that section in the administration that is disposed to remain unaccountable and non-transparent, and thus quash dissent and public scrutiny.

The country is going through a testing time. It is the need of the hour to face the COVID-19 challenge in unison. The gradual rise in the infection curve with no sign of receding and the worsening conditions of the masses reinforce the fear that we are yet to chart out appropriate course of action. Framing a suitable response necessitates discussion and debate among all stakeholders and that entails tolerance of diverse views and free flow of information. The watchdog role of civil society only ensures transparency and accountability of the public functionaries and also of non-government initiatives engaged in humanitarian assistance. Those in the administration should not only welcome citizens' engagement but create enabling conditions to facilitate the process. At the very least, it entails state's unfettered pledge to uphold the fundamental rights of the citizens guaranteed by the constitution. All responses to COVID-19 must therefore be "evidence-based, legal, necessary to protect public health, non-discriminatory, time-bound and proportionate".

In order to do away with the prevailing dreary and fatalist frame of mind of the people it is incumbent on the authorities to immediately release those detained under the DSA, make every effort to recover those who became victims of involuntary disappearance, and not proceed any further with the frivolous cases of defamation. Scrapping the DSA and instituting a credible commission of enquiry with adequate authority to look into the cases of involuntary disappearance and extra-judicial killings will go a long way to re-establishing citizens' trust in the state.

As the custodian of the constitution, the Supreme Court may consider taking immediate measures to ensure people can seek its protection without any hindrance and (in the interim, until such a system is put in place) advise the executive branch to strictly uphold fundamental rights of the people guaranteed by the constitution and act in accordance with the law, and only in accordance with the law.

CR Abrar is an academic.



original complaint was annexed with 60 pages of screenshots and a compact disc as evidence, and a 2-page list of articles seized and details of their Facebook profiles, including the URLs.

The government move came at a time when citizens were reeling from the bizarre developments centring the involuntary disappearance of journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol (March 10), his re-appearance in the border town of Benapole (after 53 days) and subsequent placement in detention.

The authorities' attempt to present Kajol as an absconder from justice failed to gain traction. The CCTV footage of some people surrounding his motorbike just prior to his disappearance, the initial refusal of two police stations to register the family's attempt to file a case, the lack of progress in investigation, improperly detaining him under Section 54 of Criminal Procedure Code to secure time to frame other, publicly humiliating him by handcuffing his hands behind his back (a practice reserved for those accused of violent crimes such as rape, murder, terrorism and the like) and "law enforcement agencies' overdrive to keep him in prison" at a time when courts are dysfunctional, all point

the guidelines framed by the High Court and upheld by the Appellate Division. As the hearing of the government's review petition is still pending those guidelines continue to remain in force. Therefore continued detention of Kajol under Section 54 appears to be in breach of the law.

It is a matter of the courts to decide whether charges brought against the above accused for "spreading rumour", "tarnishing image" and "hurting" a sentiment are tenable or not. In most instances of involuntary disappearances, including the ones above, does not the denial of law enforcement agencies of any knowledge of whereabouts of victims amount to making a false statement? Evidence is replete that in a number of cases victims are shown as under arrest if and when they are produced before the court, some weeks and even months after they were reportedly disappeared. Should not the errant members of law enforcement agencies be held accountable for such gross misconduct?

These recent actions of law enforcement agencies have triggered widespread protests. Rights groups documenting the excesses committed by state agencies

The heroicness of children

HUMAIRA SULTANA

THINK of a child in lockdown! I can only imagine a caged bird, trying so hard to be freed. I can imagine, I can see, because I have three of them!

A child is always like a little scientist, always exploring, trying new experiments and new things, making new friends, finding new places, flying like birds in an open meadow, following the butterfly or simply roaming around the community from dawn till dusk! And now, their childhood is being lost because of a thousand instructions and set of rules of social distancing due to the pandemic.

COVID-19 holiday (lockdown) was fun for the first few days for the children. No school, relaxed study hours, comfortable sleeping times, waking up and going to bed late, movie time (for the privileged ones), or longer playtime. Some even travelled with their parents during the first few days of the government declared holiday. Children of working parents were extremely happy as they got to enjoy the company of both their parents, perhaps for

the very first time of their lives, or at least after a very long time!

But as the duration of the lockdown and the number of people infected increases, so does the burden on children. They are locked up within the confines of the four walls. Online classes, continuous dos and don'ts and no friends. These are seriously impacting their mental state.

Think of the children who are not privileged, living in urban slums or under the open sky. Most of the parents of these slum children are now jobless due to social distancing and lockdown. For these working families mostly comprising of domestic helpers, day labourers and garments workers, the miseries cannot be solved just with immediate relief. They have no work, no income, and very depressingly, no savings! These families are already starving, including the children. To them roaming around is no longer fun. And to those sleeping on the roadside, starving may be a bigger threat than the virus!

A couple of days ago, I was reading an article which said that children with disabilities are having a tough time and

becoming increasingly restless during this lockdown. On top of that, the medical facilities available to them are very limited.

Violence against children is on the rise, whereas the scope to report them has declined. Apart from this, children are also exposed to increased family violence, mostly violence against women. In both cases, children are directly and indirectly affected.

In rural areas, where agriculture is the main source of income and nutrition of the family, children are also being severely affected. Farmers are not getting the appropriate price for their crops or other products. People are predicting that there could be a severe food crisis in the upcoming days, which these families are already struggling with—as on the hand they are not receiving fair payment for their produce, while on the other, crops are getting wasted due to their inability to deliver them to the appropriate market. Families are selling off their cattle for cheap to support their basic needs, leaving them even more vulnerable. Children's food and nutrition and other basic rights

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Children at an orphanage at the capital's Azimpur watch TV.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

are being hampered. In early April, a destitute mother threw five children into the river Ganges in Uttar Pradesh as there was no food due to the lockdown! I couldn't even read the news; I didn't even dare to.

Whenever I see Facebook statuses of how bored people are getting due to the lockdown, or of mouth-watering food they are making and enjoying (I am not against people posting food photos), I think about the children who are starving and going to bed hungry or the mother who threw her children into the river. Whenever I see posts mentioning how tough life has become—to manage work and household with kids as the kids are restless—I think about the children who are running pillar to post with their parents to get some relief!

Children are wonders! If they are happily causing mischief at home, be happy for that, be happy that they are healthy, that they are having a meal, that they are at home, complying with tons of different instructions.

All the children out there or at home, they are the real heroes and fighters of COVID-19. Because they are compromising their childhood and the memories they get to make because of this pandemic.

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