The Daily Star

Why don't the beneficiaries' NID numbers match with those on EC database?

No time for confusion when people are starving

WHILE the government's cash assistance programme for 50 lakh poor families is supposed to start from today, it is unfortunate to learn that many enlisted national identification (NID) numbers did not match the ones on the Election Commission's database. The problem was exposed when the government ran a mock test before beginning the fund transfer. Also, as the lists of people eligible for the financial assistance came from the district commissioners' office in Bangla, matching those names and their NID numbers with the national database, which is in English, has become very difficult, according to a senior finance ministry official. Moreover, it may take a lot of time to transfer the cash to the beneficiaries as most of the enlisted people do not have any MFS (mobile financial services) accounts and the providers are having to open the accounts after matching their NIDs with the EC database.

Amid such a situation, we are not sure how the government would distribute the funds to the poor families within the stipulated time before Eid. What we do not understand is why the mock test was conducted at the very last moment when all the preparations to disburse the money should have already been completed. Had this been done a few weeks earlier, there would have been more time to solve the problem. Now, how the authorities would solve the anomalies in the NIDs remains a question. We also have doubts whether all these poor people actually have NIDs. Also, there could be many who have not even been registered for getting the fund and are left out of the government's scheme.

While the government has taken a commendable decision to engage MFS operators to send the funds directly to the families' mobile banking accounts—because it will significantly reduce corruption in the disbursement process—it should also have given focus on removing the pre-existing anomalies in the NIDs. The NID mishap at this point in time is very unfortunate. The government should solve the problem as soon as possible and disburse the cash among the enlisted families. There is no time to waste because people are facing hunger on a daily basis.

Protect migrant workers from food shortages

International community must uphold the rights of migrant workers

A report in this daily on May 13 painted a grim picture of the fate of Bangladeshi migrant workers with most host countries doing very little to support them. While we have already heard of the mistreatment of migrant workers during the pandemic—for example, they are being crammed into work camps, losing their jobs and facing high rates of infection—this report confirmed that at least one lakh of the over five million Bangladeshi migrants working in the Middle East are suffering from hunger.

Bangladesh embassy officials in Saudi Arabia have handed out food parcels to around 8,000 workers, and have warned that thousands more will require food aid. In Bahrain, where one-fourth of nearly two lakh Bangladeshis are in financial crisis, the embassy has received appeals for food from at least 4,200 migrants. The situation is dire not just in the Middle East—embassy officials in Malaysia, Greece and Italy have also confirmed the need for food aid and cash support for thousands of migrants.

This is only the plight of the documented workers. Reports have confirmed that many of the two to three lakh Bangladeshis who work in Saudi Arabia illegally are afraid of even leaving their living quarters due to the fear of a crackdown. This has already begun in Malaysia, where the detention of undocumented migrant workers has been widely criticised by rights groups—as has been their decision to make employers pay for mandatory coronavirus tests of foreign workers, the costs of which are expected to eventually be shouldered by the workers themselves.

The expatriates' welfare ministry's announcement of a Tk 4.5 crore fund for migrant workers, and a separate announcement of another Tk 3 crore for immediate food support, are positive steps forward. However, this is nowhere near enough to protect the millions of Bangladeshi workers abroad. Equally importantly, the question that needs to be asked is: aren't the host countries also responsible for the migrants working on their land? While the Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other rights groups have asked these countries to protect the migrant workers, the host countries seem little concerned.

We urge the government to speak up for the rights of our migrant workers and engage at all diplomatic levels, especially with OIC countries, to protect them. It is unjust and morally reprehensible that the workers who have given their labour for these countries are now being unable to fulfil a need as basic as the right to food. The UN and the international community must hold these countries to account and uphold the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers during these difficult times.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Disposal of waste crucial

Many of us have been taking various measures to protect ourselves from the coronavirus, including using gloves and masks and hand sanitisers. But how are we disposing of those materials once used? Are we considering the health/environmental risks? Most of these materials produce plastic waste which is difficult to recycle. Unfortunately, the waste is not being disposed of in a safe and organised manner. This risks the spread of infections even further. Gloves and masks are commonly used in the medical field, but now that a large number of our population are using them, the threats of spreading infections are much higher. The authorities should do something about it urgently.

M A Hafez, *Dhaka*

Time to push online learning in higher education

MOHAMMED SHAHIDULLAH and MUSHTAQUE CHOWDHURY

WE have come a long way in teaching and learning using technology. Whatever we call it—online learning, virtual learning, or e-learning—it has made education independent of time and place. Users have access to course materials 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Learning management systems (LMS) make it possible to upload course materials, assignments, and exams as well as to create discussion boards and other communication tools. Online learning has made distance learning an accessible and effective alternative that is traffic-jam free and unaffected by unexpected campus closing because of hartals, strikes, and man-made or natural calamities like the coronavirus pandemic. Online learning makes it possible to not lose a semester or spend extra money for overstays in hostels. As a result, it solves the problem of campus housing, which is always a major problem for university students. This also provides opportunities for stay-at-home mothers and persons who have jobs but would like to advance their degrees.

Online learning has many benefits. These include, among others, flexible schedule and environment; independence of place and time; saving on on-campus housing; independence of transportation hassles and expenses; student-centred learning according to the learner's convenience and learning time; equal opportunities for all students, introverts and extroverts alike; improving technical skills through the use of LMS; freedom from campus buildings or fixed learning resources; access to many free courses like Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and modules from anywhere in the world; access to lectures from world-famous experts in respective disciplines; supplementing in-class learning; finishing a semester strong and on time; and independent learning and time management.

There are a few myths on online learning, including the notions that online learning is less rigorous and promotes "cheating", that it is isolating and lonely, and that the instructors are inferior. These are all unfounded. Because of these myths, unfortunately, there was a strong resistance to implementing online learning in higher education. No new technology or change is readily accepted or welcomed because of its "disruptive" nature. In traditional classroom teaching, students are tested on what they read. In online learning, the emphasis is on authentic learning—learning by doing. Students engage in various ways, such as through experimentation, real-world problem solving, problem-based activities, case studies, and participation in discussion boards and virtual communication. Exams and quizzes are proctored like in the TOEFL and GRE to avoid cheating. Online learning provides a strong networking community for group study, discussion, and sharing ideas and interests, reducing feelings of isolation or loneliness. In universities in the global north, most on-campus instructors also facilitate online courses, and all online instructors are required to go through training on online teaching-learning. Communication with instructors usually takes place through telephone, email, discussion boards, virtual live meetings, and chatrooms.

Online learning requires specific software, hardware, technological know-how, and, of course, high-speed broadband Internet. An LMS

Online learning offers an important way forward to truly implement Digital Bangladesh.

is required for uploading courses and related resources on the website. Blackboard, D2L/Brightspace, Canvas, and Moodle are some of the popular LMS platforms. Moodle is a free open-source LMS. Desktops, laptops, tablets, or smartphones are needed to access an LMS. A webcam or built-in HD camera and a high-quality headset help in video conferencing and live classroom sessions using Zoom, Skype for Business, Blackboard Ultra, and WebEx. Virtual live meetings can be treated as traditional classroom sessions from one's residence, and all activities can be recorded for later review or for students who missed a class.

These classes provide the students with the opportunity to ask questions and participate in discussion.

Many of the private universities in Bangladesh proactively adopt new technologies to provide contemporary education to their students. These students are able to complete their education on time and will have an added advantage in the job market. Most private-sector employers will prefer candidates who are trained in online learning because most jobs will require such expertise. Unfortunately, most public universities in the country are lagging behind in offering their students an opportunity to complete their education on time by introducing online learning, even in the current lockdown situation. It is slated that the universities will probably remain closed for many months, causing a wastage of precious time for students.

Some of the private universities in Bangladesh have been delivering their courses online since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. For example, BRAC University's James P. Grant School of Public Health offers a one-year full-time Masters in Public Health (MPH) programme, with half of its student body coming from abroad. As the lockdown started, BRAC University went online, and most of the courses were offered remotely. In the MPH programme, students have already completed the modular course on epidemiology, which was done with interactive teaching followed by Q&A. Using Google Forms, the School has also successfully conducted exams. According to the course coordinators and School administration, there were some initial hiccups as the students returned home following the lockdown, but since then, it has been running without any significant challenges. The students' attendance in "classes" has also been one hundred percent. Online teaching was tried for biostatistics in Spring 2006 when the first author was a Fulbright visiting faculty at the School. Moodle was the learning management system used, and the course went successfully.

There is more than one way to train faculty members to teach online within a short period of time. Resources are available to offer free training. Technology companies can help with hardware and software. Policymakers and regulators, such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh, can play a significant role in developing guidelines and making available the needed resources to incorporate online learning as an integral part of learning in higher education. The public universities must not shy away from this transformation. We believe that this is an important way forward to truly implement Digital Bangladesh.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Kerala Model

SHASHI THAROOR

AS India's 1.3 billion people struggle to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the country's 28 states stands head and shoulders above the rest. Kerala, in southwestern India, has been so successful in "flattening the curve" that many now speak admiringly of a "Kerala Model" for handling public-health emergencies.

Kerala was the first Indian state to report a case of Covid-19—a medical student who had arrived from Wuhan, China, at the end of January. When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide lockdown on March 24, Kerala had the most cases of any state. Yet today, it ranks low on the list of confirmed cases, and high on the list of Covid-19 recoveries. Moreover, the state's fatality rate (0.53 percent) is the lowest in India, and it has managed to limit the spread of the virus without inflicting any of the human suffering seen in other parts of the country.

Kerala's formula for success has been straightforward. Public-health authorities have prioritised early detection through extensive testing, widespread contact tracing, and 28-day quarantines for all those infected (the rest of India, following the World Health Organization's guidance, has required only 14 days).

Since issuing its initial Covid-19 alert on January 18, the state has screened all arrivals at its four international airports, and immediately hospitalised or quarantined suspected cases. On February 4, Kerala declared Covid-19 a state-level disaster, and shut schools, restricted public gatherings, and instituted lockdowns in early March. By the time the central government had followed suit weeks later, Kerala had already deployed more than 30,000 health workers and placed tens of thousands of people in quarantine.

Kerala's Covid-19 response emerged

Staff members of a government-run medical college collect swabs from people to test for the coronavirus at a Walk-In Sample Kiosk in Ernakulam in Kerala, India, on April 6, 2020.

Kerala's Covid-19 response emerged from a template that long preceded the current crisis. Among Indian states, it is unique for having allocated significant resources to public-health infrastructure, devolved power and funding to village-level bodies, etc.

from a template that long preceded the current crisis. Among Indian states, it is unique for having allocated significant resources to public-health infrastructure, devolved power and funding to village-level bodies, and established a social system that promotes community participation and public cooperation.

In addition to having the highest literacy rate in India (94 percent), Kerala also boasts a declining birth rate, higher life expectancy, more empowered women, and stronger welfare support for the indigent and the marginalised. People do not beg or starve in Kerala. The state offers universal access to health care and medical information, and respects all residents as rights-bearing citizens. No one is treated as a mere subject, as is common in many other Indian states. Throughout the current crisis, Kerala's educated populace has behaved responsibly, limiting community transmission, cooperating with authorities, and seeking prompt treatment as needed.

This institutional and political culture is not the result of some one-off policy. Kerala has spent generations creating the infrastructure to support social development, placing it far ahead of the rest of India on many key indicators. In addition to its rights-based welfare system, it has a vibrant civil society, free and independent media, and a competitive political system. Its robust form of social democracy reflects the contributions of alternating coalitions of Communist and Congress-led governments over time. As foreign observers have noted, the state's social compact reflects extremely high levels of trust in institutions and elected representatives.

As a result, Kerala was able to impose restrictive measures far more humanely than other states have. When Keralans under home quarantine reported that they had no one to bring them essential supplies, the police promptly delivered what they needed. When schools were closed, poor parents who rely on school lunches to provide their children with proper nourishment received the meals at home. Before the central government had even declared a lockdown, Kerala had announced a comprehensive economic relief package for citizens in need.

Meanwhile, Kudumbashree, a Keralan grassroots network of local organisations and women's self-help groups, has helped the state's containment strategy by producing two million masks and 5,000 litres of hand sanitiser in the first month of the national lockdown. Some 1,200 community kitchens were established to feed the indigent and unemployed, and Kudumbashree has already served 300,000 meals a day.

Kerala has maintained regular communication with the public about health risks, broadcasting precautionary messages through official channels to dispel fake news. Unlike other states, Kerala's response has centred on people's participation, not law enforcement. When migrant labourers became restive, they were given free accommodation and food, and urged to wait in place. These instructions were delivered in migrants' own languages, and duly followed. In other states, migrants have been kicked to the curb by the millions.

Kerala is among India's most densely populated states, which makes its success in combating the pandemic all the more remarkable. Moreover, an estimated 17 percent of its population works or lives elsewhere (their remittances account for 35 percent of the state's annual income), more than one million tourists visit each year, and hundreds of Keralan students study abroad, including in China. All of this mobility makes the state more vulnerable to contagious outbreaks, and yet it is weathering the crisis with flying colours.

In achieving such impressive results, Kerala has built on its tradition of decentralised governance, transparency, egalitarianism, civil rights, public trust, and governmental accountability. It offers clear lessons for the rest of India, both in responding to the current crisis and in preparing for the next one. Sadly, the central government's words and actions suggest that no one in New Delhi is paying attention to the success story right under their noses.

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