

Cyclone Amphan during the pandemic

Extra safety measures have to be taken

THE evacuation of thousands of people in response to the warning of cyclone Amphan hitting Bangladesh's coastal districts is no doubt a huge challenge in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. It means thousands of villagers will have to go to cyclone shelters that usually become extremely crowded during such disaster management. So how will social distancing and hygiene practices crucial to stop the spread of the virus, be maintained in these shelters? This is what is worrying health and disaster management experts.

We welcome the government's endeavours to instruct local administration to increase the number of temporary shelters. Officials and volunteers are working to ensure that every school, college, and madrasa along the coast can be used as shelters during the cyclone. The government has given directives to ensure that social distancing is maintained and if anyone is sick or has a fever, they must be transported to the upazila health complex. However, in order to maintain social distancing, the government should identify and prepare all concrete structures available to use as temporary shelters.

Experts have given some important recommendations that must be heeded. The shelters must have masks, sanitisers and proper hand washing facilities with soap for everyone, and physical distancing must be maintained during evacuation and inside the shelters. The areas that will be hit by the cyclone have to be precisely identified to avoid unnecessary evacuation in areas that are not vulnerable. The risks of the spread of infections will be reduced if the people's stay at the shelters are shortened and there are fewer people there. Disaster management experts have also advised the government not to distribute food as this will lead to chaos and crowding. It is better if the people are asked to bring dry food, as they would probably have to be in the shelter for a few hours.

During last year's cyclone Bulbul, about 22 lakh people in 16 coastal districts were evacuated from their homes and taken to 5,670 permanent and temporary cyclone shelters. The challenges of preventing the virus from spreading inside shelters or during evacuation will be quite formidable.

At this time, we do not know how severe this cyclone will be. But being prepared is crucial to prevent the loss of life. Now, there is the extraordinary burden of the risk of the spread of the virus. The government must therefore act extraordinarily—making people aware of the need for hygiene practices and social distancing, and ensuring that they are adhered to every step of the way. Bangladesh has a commendable track record in disaster management. This time, we hope we can confront the double-edged sword of a cyclone and the spread of a virus with the same determination.

Thousands of Bangladeshis set to return to the country

They must be strictly institutionally quarantined

AN extremely crucial time lies ahead to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, as roughly 29,000 Bangladeshis are set to return to the country over the next couple of weeks from the Middle East. This huge influx of people could prove disastrous if the authorities fail to ensure strict institutional quarantine for the returnees, a government appointed expert committee has warned.

The number of people infected per day has been rising consistently of late. According to a report prepared by the committee, the outbreak may reach its peak in the third or last week of this month. However, if we are not careful, the sudden return of all these people from abroad could lead to a second wave of coronavirus infections.

The government must prevent such a scenario at all costs. Its decision to send people on home quarantine earlier had quite spectacularly backfired; it must avoid making the same mistake twice. Every returnee should be tested for the virus and institutionally quarantined for at least 14 days, even if they test negative, as the virus could still be in its incubation period.

But quarantining such a huge number of people will be an enormous task. Again, the government must avoid its past blunder of being ill-equipped and unprepared—to avoid a situation where returnees are forced to protest and break out of their so-called quarantine within hours, risking thousands of other lives, as has previously happened.

We call on the authorities to immediately begin all the necessary preparations to receive and strictly quarantine these people in a systematic way. How well the government reacts to this particular challenge could very well decide the future direction of this outbreak.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Address mental health

The lockdown has started to have an unfavourable impact on people's mental health, not just here but all across the globe. The long-lasting effects on our mental wellbeing are becoming a matter of grave concern with each passing day. If we want a society where everyone can play their part, then we need to make sure we support and promote opportunity for all, including those living with mental health issues. As Mental Health Awareness Week begins, we must collectively try our best to raise awareness on mental health and provide support to those who need it. Mental health and wellbeing must be at the heart of planning, architecture and design. It is clear that mental health is shaped by the environment we live in, so we should ensure that our environment protects and promotes mental health, as the anxiety and concern about coronavirus further exacerbates these problems.

Handsen Chikowore, by email

Covid-19 and the missing data conundrum

MUSHTAQ CHOWDHURY and FARZANA MISHA

THE recent outbreak of Covid-19 is unprecedented. Given the novelty and the rapidly evolving contexts, data gathered from the field is the only path to attaining the true picture of the disease's progress. Unfortunately, we do not have a handle on this yet. To design an evidence-based, feasible and effective response, the true extent of the spread and impact needs to be known, which can only be done through accumulation of accurate and up-to-date statistics. Such data is needed not only on the health sector but also on economics, businesses, education, remittance, social safety nets, etc. A constant flow of new and updated data on the response from different actors including in government, NGOs, healthcare, industry and agriculture are needed to monitor and effectively combat the disease.

Much like the lack in coordination of responses, the same holds true for data generation. Here perhaps, concerns extend well beyond coordination. It is the sheer absence of some relevant state machineries in the game. Let's take the case of two prime public sector agencies vested with the responsibility of generating data, particularly during the emergency situation in which we find ourselves—the Institute of Epidemiology and Disease Control Research (IEDCR) and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

The IEDCR was established in 1976 as the country's "disease detectives". Surveillance is an epidemiological practice through which the spread of a disease is predicted, observed and monitored to minimise harm to the populace. Over the years, it has made several important contributions. During 2007–2011, they investigated 76 disease outbreaks including the Nipah virus outbreak (although there is no recent information available on their website). In 2009, when the H1N1 threatened Bangladesh, they instituted screening of incoming passengers through 16 points including three airports, and recommended textbook containment measures such as social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands and isolating patients. An important function the IEDCR has been performing since 1978 is collecting and reporting on nationally notifiable diseases through weekly morbidity reports from upazila levels, and monthly disease profiles from medical college hospitals.

Once Covid-19 hit our shores in early March, IEDCR was designated as

the sole source of information for the disease's spread in Bangladesh. The wait for the afternoon update became almost ritualistic. The situation has come a long way since the initial days when the sole testing site for Covid-19 was the IEDCR itself. Testing capacities have been somewhat decentralised now and extended to over 30 locations in Dhaka and the main divisional cities. The fact that this is not enough—which is agreed upon by epidemiologists—is clear given that we have one of the lowest test rates in the region. Our testing rates (per million population) are almost half of those in

morbidity data? Why have they not used the medical colleges-based disease profile data to give additional estimates? If reported correctly, such data would have been more reliable than any other sources, and, in the interim, could make national preparedness more evidence based.

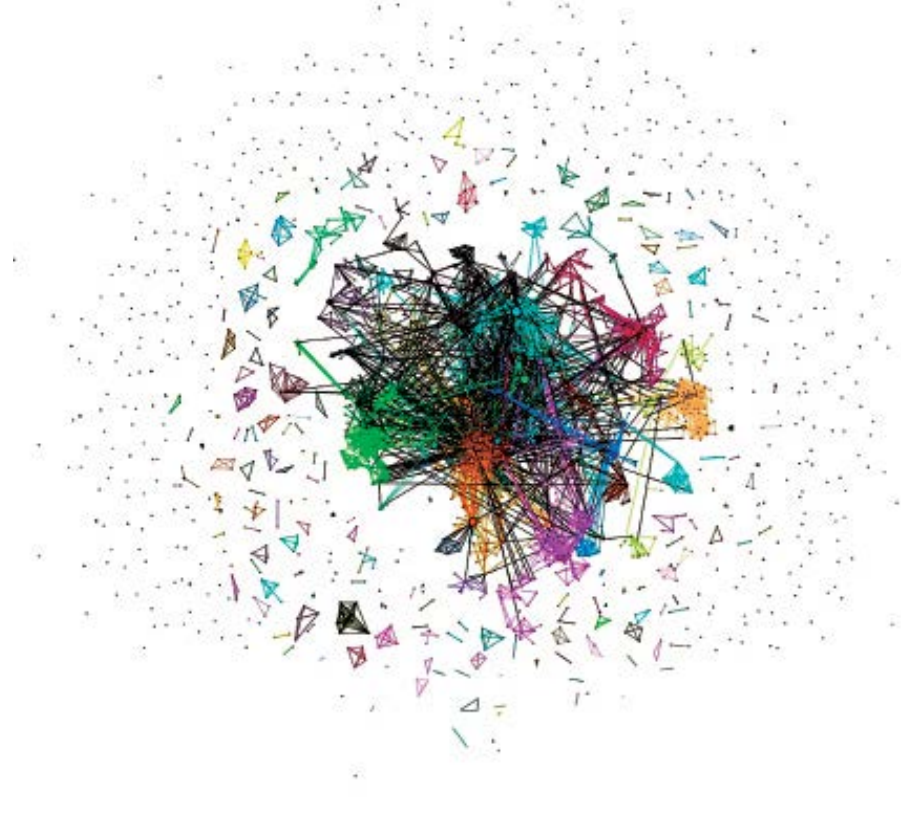
On the other side of the crisis, the premier agency for demographic and socio-economic data is the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Conspicuously, they have been eerily quiet in this current crisis. The BBS is unilaterally responsible for running projects of

registrars and staff of the upazila statistical office. Although there are genuine concerns about its quality, the SVRS has the potential to be a critical source of information in understanding the progress of Covid-19 at the community level, particularly in terms of the number of deaths. BBS could help the national response by recommending how the testing facilities correspond to the needs, not only in medical terms but also other relevant factors such as socioeconomic status of the region and capacity of local health facilities and staff, among others. Given BBS's extensive knowledge of the population and population characteristics, they are well placed to suggest where healthcare is most needed.

The silence on their part likely stems from several reasons. Hamstrung by unyielding bureaucracy, hierarchical *modus operandi*, and a strong resistance to change stifles the enthusiasm of eager staff from the get-go. Finally, activities of the BBS are typically placed in the non-essential category, to the extent that the recent government closures stopped all BBS activities, including the preparation for Census 2021. Once we put it all together, it paints a vivid picture of why we see no movement on their part.

Given our weak infrastructure, the government needs to ramp up efforts to fill the gap—while far from perfect and much left to be desired, they're beginning to get a better handle on the technical side of the issue, that is, increased testing and supplying protective gear. On the socioeconomic front, we don't know much beyond what has been reported by various universities and think tanks in the country. While there are many ambitious plans to reach aid to those who need it, we have not heard much on how the support will target and reach the intended beneficiaries. Traditional approaches and thinking will unlikely be effective here as we have seen so far. We understand BBS's trepidation and reluctance to engage. But in a world that considers data to be the new oil, we as citizens should demand more from them—especially in the face of resistance when it comes to receiving bad news. The reputation of these organisations is not up for debate in this article, but rather to encourage them to remain relevant in a fast-changing world. The post-coronavirus Bangladesh will demand their data even more.

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Data visualisation showing the global network of organisations working together on coronavirus research, created by TIM Open Access platform.

India or Pakistan. There are limitations to expanding the facilities fast if the quality is to be ensured and IEDCR is being relieved of its responsibilities of carrying out the tests. In the absence of widespread testing and reporting of related deaths, the media regularly reports on the number of deaths from "corona-like symptoms", which gives an alternative but less robust understanding of the spread of the disease. Couldn't this be done by IEDCR itself by using its upazila-based weekly

national importance such as the Census, Household Income and Expenditure Survey and the Labour Force Survey. They have also been running a Sample Vital Registration System (SVRS) through which data on vital events are collected and analysed on a periodic basis since 2011. Implemented in 1000 primary sampling units, it gives district-level estimates of births, deaths, marriages, and migration. Data is collected using a dual record system with the help of field

Will Covid-19 prevent our airlines from returning to the runways?

MAHBUB JAHAN KHAN

THE fate of the 100 year old aviation industry now seems uncertain, with a global shutdown of flights owing to the impact of Covid-19. Consequently, people directly or indirectly engaged with this industry are facing great uncertainty in terms of job security. A latest report by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) states that global aviation supports 65.5 million jobs, once its wider supply chain is considered.

The Bangladesh aviation industry has experienced remarkable growth in the last decade, and now directly employs more than 10,000 personnel. The commercial airlines in Bangladesh operate nearly 50 aircraft including freighters of different types and make. Additionally, there are also a couple of helicopter operators and flying clubs. This growing industry of Bangladesh is being overwhelmed with acute cash flow crises due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The management of different airline companies are dealing with this problem in different ways—however, everyone has a common voice with regard to getting some stimulus measures from the government and the regulatory body, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB). A point to be highlighted is that in the aviation industry because of extreme price wars, profit margins are generally so low that economic consequences of this magnitude cannot be handled by the airline companies alone.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines Limited, the national flag carrier, is perhaps the worst sufferer of the pandemic in Bangladesh, as it had to ground its entire fleet in March 2020. Within the last 20 months only, Biman had inducted six brand new Boeing 787 (Dreamliner) wide body aircraft for its long-haul flights, leased two 737-800 aircraft for medium haul operations and one Dash-8 Q400 primarily for domestic routes. Accordingly, it has nearly doubled its seat capacity to reach 4,476 seats in total. It would have received another three-brand new Dash 8 Q400s by the end of this year. Biman's own fleet is one of the youngest in the region, with only 3.5 years of average age. If we look at financials, after securing more than Tk 2000 million as profit after tax in the last fiscal year, Biman was heading for a record-breaking profit in 2019-2020. But the impact of Covid-19 has resulted in countless uncertainties in its profit-

loss calculation. Nonetheless, the Biman management has taken a number of steps, including some thrifty measures to overcome this financial and operational turmoil. It has already secured a loan worth Tk 10,000 million from the government to help offset its negative cash flow. It is also operating chartered flights to and from different destinations. By doing so, the company of 6,000 staff is getting ready, not only to re-establish its existing connectivity but also to add more destinations as the situation improves. Without the support of the government and CAAB, this target will be extremely difficult to achieve.

US Bangla, the largest private airlines in Bangladesh, started its journey in 2013 with two Dash-8 aircraft, and now

renowned private airline company, Novo Air, also started its journey in 2013 with only two 50-seater Embraer aircraft. Novo has experienced a seat capacity jump of 400 percent within only seven years of its operations by acquiring seven ATRs in phases. Importantly, it was due to induct two more aircraft of the same type in June 2020. This airline company, employing 875, is also counting the days to resume full-fledged operations with support from the government and CAAB. Regent Airway is the oldest operational private airlines and commenced its operation in 2010. This 600-strong airline has already sent nearly 100 of its employees on voluntary leave without pay and laid off another 150 personnel to endure the impact of Covid-19. It has also decided to suspend

collapse of Virgin Australia Holdings and Europe's largest regional airline Flybe sends clear signals that weak airlines (such as Afghan Airlines, which is already in trouble) have very little time to secure funds before they succumb to Covid-19.

In order for the airlines to take to the skies again, governments, regulatory authorities, lessors, financiers and other stakeholders, including individual passengers, have an important role to play. Many governments have already declared various stimulus measures, including offering easy-term loans, sovereign guarantee and other financial aid. By now, many civil aviation authorities have come forward with a bundle of supportive measures for airlines to withstand this grave crisis. For example, the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines has already decided to defer airline charges (take-off, landing, and parking fees) of local airlines. The Norwegian authority announced the cutting of aviation taxes. The Civil Aviation Administration of China has offered innovative financial incentives for airlines till June 30. Under this, for every available seat kilometre (ASK), Beijing will give USD 0.0025 for routes shared by more than one carrier and USD 0.0076 for routes operated by just one carrier. Thus, for a Dhaka-Guangzhou return flight with an aircraft of 300 seats, the Chinese government's support would be USD 10,615 per flight.

It is heartening to note that the Bangladesh government has also offered financial packages for this service sector. The most important decision of the government would perhaps be the waiving of various charges by the CAAB, which is said to be in the process of implementation. According to news media, this includes a complete waiver of aeronautical charges for domestic flights till December 2021 and 50 percent waiver of the same for international flights till December 2020. The non-aeronautical charges will also be waived for all airlines till December 2020. If such stimulus gets a final go-ahead from the government, Bangladesh airlines will certainly get some breathing space to sustain themselves during the pandemic. Without this kind of support, some airline companies may not be able to come back to the runway for their next take off.

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US Bangla was expected to receive two new ATRs by September 2020.

PHOTO: COURTESY

maintains a fleet of four Boeing 737-800s, six ATRs and three Dash-8s. Within a span of only seven years, US Bangla has secured about 800 percent growth in terms of seat capacity and has more than 1200 seats in total. Besides, it is expected to receive another two ATRs by September 2020. Due to Covid-19, US Bangla is flying only one flight per week to Guangzhou now, as well as special passenger flights and dedicated cargo flights. Nonetheless, it has also undertaken various cost-cutting measures across the organisation. This 1800-strong company is looking for necessary financial support from the government and the regulatory authority to tackle this unprecedented cash crunch. Another

its flight operations till the end of June 2020. This airline, with three Boeing 737s in its inventory, is also looking for necessary financial support to remain afloat.

In the regional and global front, different measures have been taken by different airlines for their survival. Measures include, sending of aircraft, especially the wide bodies, to stores; awarding unpaid holidays to staff including pilots; deferring deliveries of new aircraft; freezing the hiring process; introduction of reduced work times and salary cuts at all levels of the workforce. However, despite all these measures, many airlines have collapsed, and many have declared themselves bankrupt. The