

Massive work needs to be done in Amphan-affected areas

Immediately repair the coastal embankment where needed

THE whole nation heaved a sigh of relief as cyclone Amphan did not hit the country as badly as we feared it would. Had Amphan—the first “super cyclone” created over the Bay of Bengal in this century—made its landfall in Bangladesh, it would have completely ravaged our coastal regions. The places of West Bengal where it had hit Wednesday afternoon are in a bad shape now, despite the fact that the cyclone had weakened and turned into an “extremely severe cyclonic storm” when it landed there. While we have been spared the worst, the devastation done by Amphan in our coastal regions is still enormous, and massive work needs to be done to bring life back to normal in the affected areas.

As of yesterday, at least 10 people were reported to have been killed by the cyclone. Hundreds of villages, particularly in Satkhira, Jessore, Khulna, Patuakhali and Borguna, were submerged by the high tidal surge. While parts of the coastal embankment were washed away in some places, cracks or breaches developed in many other points through which sea water is still entering inside the embankment, inundating dwellings of hundreds of people. Drinking water crisis would be a major issue in these areas in the coming days. In Rajshahi, Naogaon and Pabna mango and litchi orchards were ravaged, while paddy fields in many districts went under water as the cyclone passed through the north-western region of the country Wednesday night. It will definitely need some time to assess the losses and damage done by the cyclone, but whatever news we have got from the affected areas is enough to make us concerned.

We are fortunate enough to have Sundarbans stretching along our coastal districts. The 6,017 sq km mangrove forest has always been our greatest saviour in times of natural disasters like cyclones. Had the forest not absorbed the fury of Amphan, its impacts on our coastal areas would have been more severe. Since the Sundarbans has been acting like a shock absorber, economic and commercial interventions that threaten the forest's ecological balance should be stopped immediately to save this unique forest.

Now, the biggest challenge for the government would be to minimise the sufferings of the cyclone-affected people. It should immediately start rehabilitation and relief operations in the affected areas, for which inter-ministerial coordination is needed. Safe drinking water should be made available for people. In addition, the coastal embankment should be repaired, where needed, on an urgent basis to stop sea water from entering inside. The government also needs to make a better plan to maintain the embankment throughout the year, as breaches in the embankment often cause sufferings to those living in the coastal areas.

Last but not the least, as the government did a commendable job of evacuating people to the cyclone shelters at the right time, we hope that it will also take the necessary precautions for containing the Covid-19 spread in the affected areas, as lakhs of people are now leaving the shelters for their homes.

Returning migrant workers will need huge assistance

Govt should start planning for their recovery and reintegration

THE outbreak of the coronavirus has put thousands of Bangladeshi migrant workers at risk of losing their jobs as the global economy struggles and is likely to enter into a recession. At the same time, declining oil prices could also spell doom for many migrant workers, as Middle Eastern countries account for 70 percent of the remittance that comes into Bangladesh, and Middle Eastern economies that are highly dependent on oil prices may suffer even more.

Many migrants who have already lost their jobs now find themselves stranded in foreign countries in extremely tough conditions. Once countries relax restrictions and air travel resumes, it is expected that a few hundred thousand migrant workers will return to Bangladesh. The UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has issued a statement warning that the most vulnerable of the returning Bangladeshi migrants will require immediate support to meet their basic needs.

According to the IOM, this support will have to come in three stages. The first stage is to provide humanitarian and medical assistance before they return to Bangladesh. The second stage is to provide immediate assistance upon their arrival, as many of them may not even have the money to return home. And the final stage will include social reintegration and social recovery assistance.

As our economy will also suffer because of the outbreak, it will be a difficult challenge for the government to create enough employment to make up for the jobs that are lost abroad. Therefore, the government needs to start formulating plans to achieve just that from now on. Besides creating new jobs for returning migrants, the government could consider granting them loans to set up their own businesses, as well as provide skills training programmes to help them regain employment quicker. All of this will require a lot of funds and we hope the IOM and other international agencies will provide their full support to the Bangladesh government during these difficult times.

MUSHTAQ CHOWDHURY and ROBERT YATES

THE coronavirus rage is showing early signs of slowdown in most parts of Europe and South East Asia. Strict regimes of social distancing are being eased with reopening of schools and selected businesses, not without controversy though. But it is still advancing in the rest of the world and until an effective vaccine is universally available, it remains a threat to us all.

In Bangladesh, the number of identified cases continues to rise every day. The government is taking steps to push social distancing as a new norm but, for understandable reasons, finding it difficult to fully enforce it. The effect of these measures on vulnerable people is devastating and potentially has a greater impact on their lives and wellbeing than the virus itself.

As in many other countries, Covid-19 has revealed the weaknesses in Bangladesh's health systems. These include: inadequate surveillance systems and capacity to track the spread of the virus, shortages of health human resources of all categories, lack of essential facilities and equipment (e.g. functioning primary care centres, hospitals and ICUs), insufficient specialised equipment (ventilators, testing kits and PPEs), and lack of necessary drugs. Bangladesh has successfully faced many natural disasters in the past but in this particular case, we, like others, were overwhelmed. The head of the government firmly took over the helm but others seemed ill-prepared, leading to poor or little coordination among the different arms of the state. Efforts to get citizens on board were tragically missing. It also showed how poverty and vulnerability deterred enforcement of tough actions in protecting citizens' health. Added to this is the inherent crisis of valid, relevant and timely data.

Despite Bangladesh's acclaimed progress towards the MDGs, in terms of improved socio-economic status for its people, the Covid-19 shock will definitely threaten its performance in the SDGs. It is clear that the principle of “leave no one behind” will have to be enormously reinforced if Bangladesh has to move into a “developed country” status in 2041.

The Covid-19 crisis has set the ground for a “new” health system. Bangladesh has about 30-40 million people who are poor by any standard. With rising poverty and unemployment due to the crisis, this number is likely to rise to

about 50 million in the next two to three years. They, in addition to the remaining population, will need publicly-financed healthcare. With such a deadly disease ever-present and able to flare up quickly, it is in all our interests that there is truly universal access to a full range of health services needed to tackle the disease and other conditions. Covid-19 is, therefore, perhaps the ultimate example of why we need universal health coverage (UHC)—if anyone is left out, it threatens the health security of everyone.

The government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has committed itself to achieving UHC for Bangladesh in several

Organization, Bangladesh spends only 0.4 percent of its GDP through public health spending, the lowest in the world. Our South Asian neighbour Sri Lanka, for example, spends four times as us; 74 percent of our nation's health expenditures are by people from their own pocket, leading 3-4 million people sliding into poverty every year. This will inevitably increase as a result of the Covid-19 fallout. The generous allocation of new resources to meet the pandemic-related challenges gives the conviction that the government, if committed, can make more money available for health. A phased increase of public health spending

level have made tremendous progress towards UHC including Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Vietnam and Morocco. Thailand achieved UHC in 2002 when its GDP per capita was almost exactly the same as Bangladesh's today. UHC is, therefore, perfectly affordable in Bangladesh if there is the political will to implement it.

Because UHC reforms always require significant increases in public financing, they tend to be led by heads of state who have the power to reallocate public budgets. Progressive leaders often take this initiative because UHC reforms are extremely popular. Across the world, politicians that have delivered UHC to their people have become national heroes. This was the case in Germany, UK, France, Australia, Japan, Canada, Korea, Thailand, Brazil, Mexico, and Indonesia. It is also interesting to note how many of these great UHC reforms emerged out of national crises—including the UK, France and Japan after WWII, Thailand in 2001 after the Asian financial crisis, and Rwanda after the genocide in 1994. And yet again, in 2020, we are seeing early signs of some leaders recognising the opportunity that the Covid-19 crisis might give them to launch popular UHC reforms—notably in Ireland and South Africa. Might this crisis even precipitate a change of government in the United States where it is highly likely that the Democrats are going to campaign on a pro-UHC platform?

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has the political capital to go for a big push on UHC. Given global trends, it is inevitable that Bangladesh will make the transition to publicly financed UHC at some point in the next 20 years. As there are sufficient resources in the country to achieve this now, there is no reason why the prime minister shouldn't become Bangladesh's national UHC hero and write her name into the history books in the next five years. What a wonderful gift this would be during the Mujib Borsho and on the golden jubilee year of Bangladesh's independence! This new transformative initiative in healthcare could proudly be called “Bangabandhu-Sheba” or “Suborna-Sheba”. It will be an essential step in living with the ongoing threat of Covid-19 and achieving the long-term sustainable development goal target of universal health coverage.

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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international forums, including signing a United Nations General Assembly resolution on UHC in December 2012 and a political resolution on UHC at the High Level Meeting for UHC in New York last September. Unfortunately, this is one of the few commitments made by the highest office which has, until now, remained unimplemented. But perhaps Covid-19 and its aftermath might give the government the impetus it needs to change this and bring universal healthcare to everyone in Bangladesh. In particular, the government can use the opportunity of this major health disaster to garner support for more investment in the health sector.

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If history is any indication, humans can defeat Covid-19 too

ATIQUR RAHMAN

A virus in distant Wuhan, China did not cause much of a stir initially; but five months on, with five million people infected and more than 3 lakhs dead globally, the coronavirus is a major concern for humanity all over the world. Caught in a stranglehold of death and distress, humans are feeling acutely nervous.

If alive today, Thomas R. Malthus, the proponent of Malthusian Theory in 1798, would have said: I told you. If you overburden Mother Earth with demands beyond its carrying capacity, you will be sized down. With the world's population nearing eight billion, are we too many for Mother Earth? Is Covid-19 sizing down humans as predicted by the doomsday prophet Malthus?

Covid-19 is not an extraordinary blip in man's long history. Something sinister was destined to happen sooner or later. Bill Gates predicted the inevitability of such an outcome while addressing the TED conference in 2015. He said that the world needs to be ready for the next health crisis... while Ebola seems to have been brought under control, next time “we may not be so lucky”. Stephen Hawking said in 2006, “Life on Earth is at the ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster, such as sudden global warming, nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus or other dangers.” Hawking was not only looking at supernatural events but also man-induced disasters. He advised humans to look for an alternative celestial body to live on.

What is happening around us now have put humans on their back foot. Covered and cornered, humans are seeking refuge in their houses with protective masks, disinfectants, and hand wash. Where possible, they are retreating from the congested cities like Dhaka, Delhi, and Bombay to the relative safety and uncongested shelters of rural areas.

But why should humans be so covered? True, the virus is highly contagious, but so had been many other viruses that had visited mankind in the past. And it is not that they have not seen such pandemics before. In the last 2,500 years, the total human lives lost due to major pandemics are estimated to be about 400 million—the major ones like the Black Death in the mid-14th century killed as many as 200 million; the plague of Justinian around the time Islam was emerging as a major religion killed some 40 million people; the great plagues of 17th and 18th centuries killed nearly 36

million; and about a 100 years ago, some 50 million people died from the Spanish flu. These are significant numbers, and some of the pandemics killed more than half of the global population during those periods. More recently, the HIV-AIDS killed some 30 million people. Beyond the pandemics, famines and diseases killed another 200 million. In their ferocity and killing power, most of those pandemics dwarfed Covid-19. How could man, the most “civilised” creature in the world, proud conqueror of the earth and the seas, and explorer of the deep space, be covered by this rather “minor” threat posed by Covid-19?

Since prehistoric days, humans have survived many pandemics, and have learnt their lessons on how to conquer them. With a little bit of patience and self-isolation only, Covid-19 could have been controlled by reaching “herd immunity”. But modesty, focus and action are not

past pandemics. Humans did survive many cataclysmic natural events like floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Such incidents over the past centuries killed (in addition to pandemic deaths) more than 204 million people. But humans seemed to have conquered these incidents also. Cut down and fallen, they renewed their journey again, and forged ahead. Their courage and strength have been demonstrated again and again.

With this long experience of survival, man today should not be afraid of Covid-19. After all, has not man made great advances in science and technology? Are they not digging deep down the earth, exploring the deep seas and going under the polar caps to explore resources, and blasting off to the outer space searching for habitable places for colonisation? With the vast knowledge they possess, can't they blast their way to victory against this minute, invisible virus?! What a pity!



PHOTO: REUTERS

always the qualities that our leaders demonstrate. Otherwise, how could they engage in meaningless blame game or cut the funding of one of the prestigious agencies whose action is valuable now in leading man's victory over Covid-19?

Humans were not covered by past pandemics, nor had they stopped doing whatever they were doing. They even continued to fight wars, lobbying the dead bodies of soldiers succumbing to Black Death “as cannon balls” over castle walls to make the enemy run away from the awful stench of decaying bodies (*The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, by Peter Frankopan).

The heroics of humans have not just been their ability to survive the

These conquests of humans underline their self-confidence, their relentless pursuit to complement their progress with more achievements. Covid-19 could hardly be a match for them, only if they could reach herd immunity. It hasn't been achieved yet but it seems not too far away from their reach either. Some frontrunners like Remdesivir, Hydroxychloroquine, and Avigan are having some teething problems; no less than 30 other drugs are under the watch list of the European Medicines Agency, and some may go for clinical tests soon. These show good promise for sound public healthcare needed for reaching herd immunity.

But we should not forget something:

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the real fight is not man versus nature, or man versus virus. It is man against man. The history of man's fight against themselves is full of dreaded stories. The death and destruction caused by man's greed and anger against one another, manifested in the form of colonisation, invasion, and wars of epic proportions, is a testament to man's cruelty, unsurpassed by nothing else.

A sense of invincibility has given man the arrogance to believe in themselves too much. Malthus believed that too, as he said: “The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of population. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves.”

In the last few centuries, more than 655 million humans perished through wars, ethnic cleansing, political purges, political unrest, abuse of labour, slave trade, and forced labour. The count of death includes only the major wars and crimes; many more have died in conditions created by such hostilities. These figures represented much larger percentages of the global population in those days than the current Covid-19 figures do, which as of now stands only at about 0.4 percent of global population.

Man need not be afraid of Covid-19. They need to get their act together, not by spending trillions on killing machines, but by taking care of nature and the children of Mother Nature.

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