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FOUNDER EDITOR
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A horrific fire at Corona unit

The hospital authorities must provide credible answers

THE death of five patients in a fire that broke out at the Corona Isolation Unit of the city's United Hospital Wednesday night is an appalling tragedy. According to the hospital authorities, the fire might have originated from an electric short circuit at the unit which was built temporarily outside the main hospital building, and spread immediately as it was windy outside due to inclement weather. Although the fire was doused within 40 minutes, according to fire service officials, unfortunately the lives of the five patients getting treatment there could not be saved.

Now, the questions that naturally arise are: were the fire and the subsequent deaths of the patients a result of negligence? Did the hospital authorities take proper safety measures when giving electric connection to the Corona ward which is a makeshift structure? Why were the partitions and ceiling of the unit built with "inflammable materials", ignoring the risk of catching a fire? Also, since the hospital has its own fire extinguishing system (according to their statement), why couldn't they take any action to douse the fire before the fire service team arrived? Did the authorities try to rescue the patients with Covid-19 symptoms from the isolation unit when they noticed the fire in the first place? Moreover, why did they keep date-expired fire extinguishers at the hospital, as revealed by the Dhaka North City Corporation mayor yesterday? The hospital authorities must be made to answer these questions.

Since a probe committee has been formed by the Fire Service and Civil Defence authority to investigate the incident, we hope the actual reasons for the fire will be revealed soon. We also hope that it will be a fair investigation without any obstruction from any quarter and that the hospital authorities will not hide any information regarding the fire. And if found guilty of negligence, action should be taken against the hospital authorities according to our law. We express our sincere condolences to the families of the deceased.

Greater caution needed after easing of lockdown

Crucial to maintain social distancing rules and health guidelines

THE government has decided not to extend the ongoing shutdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic beyond May 30 based on economic considerations. The economic fallout has been undoubtedly devastating with huge job losses and closing of businesses. However, the move comes at a time when the number of deaths due to the virus is on the rise, as is the number of cases being reported. Hospitals are getting overwhelmed by the sheer number of patients; so it is now more essential than ever not to give into any form of laxity. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has already directed all government and non-government hospitals to treat Covid-19 patients separately. It is difficult to see how hospital capacities can be increased any further without making some kind of special arrangements.

Once the shutdown ends, public transport is also set to resume on a limited scale—on a trial basis until June 15—as well as airline services. And government and private offices will return to business as usual. However, the government has issued health guidelines for all of the above and more, which must be strictly followed in order to contain a potential explosion of new cases and number of deaths as a result of the virus once the lockdown ends.

Any breach of social distancing rules and health guidelines due to the partial easing of the lockdown may cause the outbreak to rapidly get out of control. And so, people in general as well as law enforcers must remain on the highest level of alert. No business should be allowed to operate without strictly adhering to the government's guidelines. And transport services must be extra cautious as we do have a history of seeing our public transports being regularly overcrowded. Moreover, it is crucial for people to stay home and not gather in public places, except for in cases of emergencies.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Sundarbans, our friend in need

At a time when the nation is grappling with the multifarious effects of the coronavirus pandemic, bracing for the recent "super cyclone" Amphan—with wind speeds of up to 180 km per hour—was nothing short of appalling. However, by the grace of the Almighty, Amphan didn't wreak as much havoc as feared, thanks to the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest.

Coming to our rescue as it did many times in the past, it stood strongly, acting as a shield of defence for us yet again. Thus, it must be taken into serious consideration that we should protect this gift of nature for our own sake, by any means necessary. As it is, the biodiversity of the mangrove forest is already at risk, and the controversial coal-based Rampal power plant will further endanger it. Therefore, I urge the government to preserve the world heritage site by removing the coal-fired plant and other industrial units surrounding it, which will cause irreparable damage to the forest both in the long and short terms. I trust that the government will act prudently and save the country from harm's way.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

Education crisis will be more severe after reopening of schools

Rasheda K Choudhury, *Executive Director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) and former adviser to a caretaker government, talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about the impacts of prolonged school closure and what needs to be done to better manage the present situation.*

The government has decided to keep all educational institutions closed until June 15. Earlier, the PM said that schools might remain closed till September, if the situation did not improve. If schools remain closed for a long period, how will it impact our primary education sector?

The closure of educational institutions has been necessary to contain the spread of Covid-19 but it has also been very challenging for the entire education sector, from pre-primary to higher education. As in many parts of the world, some of the major negative impacts of a prolonged school closure for us would be learning loss, increased dropout rate, child labour, early marriage, early pregnancy, violence against children, and malnutrition, among other things. We know for a fact that some of these are already happening, but the effects will be more visible after the reopening of schools.

If the shutdown continues for a long period, the competencies we expect from children upon completion of their education cycle will be negatively affected. However, I think the most significant impact will be the increased inequality in learning as many hard-to-reach groups are now missing out on different government and other ongoing educational initiatives through state-run TV and online courses.

The government has been trying to make up for this loss primarily through four platforms—TV channels, mobile networks, online and radio. We have observed that despite some limitations, secondary-level lessons are being delivered in a better way through television, but lessons for the primary students are not being delivered in a child-friendly manner. Moreover, with only 56 percent of the population having access to television, the majority of children from poor households in remote, inaccessible areas and those belonging to the ethnic minorities and disabled groups are currently missing out on education.

But like I said, the challenges will be more visible after the reopening of schools. Over the years, Bangladesh has achieved enviable success in reducing dropout rate, particularly at the primary level—from 40 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2018. After Covid-19, the dropout rate will surely increase as those who are currently missing out on learning will be reluctant to go to school anymore. The livelihood challenge for families facing acute shortages of food and other necessities will be a major factor contributing to the increased dropout rate and child labour. Moreover, when the parents will have to make a choice between sending a boy and a girl to school, they may choose the son to attend the school

and try to marry off their daughter. Thus, early marriage may become more prevalent resulting in an increase in early pregnancy.

There are reports coming in through the media that because of livelihood challenges, hunger and many other emerging psycho-social factors that parents themselves have been experiencing, incidences of violence against children inside households are also on the rise. People and their government in every country recognise the multi-dimensional negative effects of prolonged school closure. How to effectively deal with these challenges is a million-dollar question now.

What measures should be taken to ensure that students do not drop out of schools because of the shutdown? Do you think continuing with the school feeding programmes and timely distribution of stipend will be enough to keep children in school?

Both the school feeding and stipend programmes have been playing a significant role in ensuring higher attendance at schools and reducing dropouts. The government should continue with these programmes at all costs. However, over the last 16 years, the stipend amount has been increased only nominally; it should be increased further. The stipend programmes should also have universal coverage to include learners in non-formal education (NFE), who primarily belong to the disadvantaged groups. Moreover, in order to reduce school dropouts after reopening, the vulnerable families should be provided with financial support.

What's your take on the reopening of schools?

Frankly, the current Covid-19 situation in the country is not favourable to reopening schools. We are in the third month of the outbreak. Globally, countries have faced the most severe impacts of the outbreak—both in terms of deaths and infections—in the third month. We can't put our children at risk by reopening schools when the infection curve is going up. We should wait until the situation is somewhat contained and all preparations are in place. UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and the World Bank jointly formulated a set of guidelines in late April 2020 about reopening of educational institutions during and after the pandemic. Our decision makers and other authorities concerned should be making adequate preparations following those guidelines before deciding to reopen. For example, we need to produce millions of cotton-made, environment-friendly face masks, particularly for our students and teachers,



Rasheda K Choudhury

before they go back to classes, and make sure that each and every school has proper WASH facilities.

What are some of the areas on which the government needs to focus more to better manage the current situation?

We understand that for now the government's top priority is to address hunger and poverty resulting from the global pandemic and the unprecedented shutdown. However, it is good to see that the government has already taken some initiatives to make up for the learning loss, and has been trying to address the challenges at different levels of education.

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is already developing a very impressive three-phase response plan—short term (six months), medium term (12 months) and long term (24 months)—which is in its final stage. The plan includes students' improvement tracking, regular assessment, teachers' skills development, health-hygiene, protection of learners, among many other things. We hope the plan will be finalised and approved by the decision makers as soon as possible. Once it is approved, the government will need to focus on proper implementation and monitoring of the plan in cooperation with the school authorities, local communities, NGOs and other stakeholders. The plan should consider revisiting the syllabus and discontinuing unproductive national exams like the Primary Education Completion Exam (PECE).

The lessons currently being aired on TV for primary students have to be more attractive with provisions for learning through games, cartoons, etc. As nearly 30 percent of our primary students are first-generation learners, their parents are unable to help them with their education at homes. We can't expect, for example, a rickshaw puller to help his kids learn from the TV programmes, particularly when the

lessons are difficult to comprehend.

My suggestion to the policy makers would be to reach out to those learners through mobile phones who can't be reached through TV or other online platforms. Since 96 percent of our population has access to mobile phones—not smart phones but feature phones (which can download FM radios)—their networks could be used for providing lessons (that are already being given through TV or other platforms) to primary children for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening.

The mobile phone service providers should contribute here through providing free service to the unreachable children as part of their corporate social responsibility. BTRC can make such a suggestion to the mobile phone companies with specific guidelines for doing it. It would make a huge difference in primary education during the shutdown period if carried out with appropriate strategies and proper monitoring.

Where do you see our primary education sector once the pandemic is over or somewhat contained?

In terms of GDP, our investment in education is the lowest in South Asia. More allocations are needed in this sector—not only for stipend programmes, school meals, WASH facilities and health and hygiene, but also for increasing the quality of education, teachers' capacity building and improving the teaching-learning process. During the ongoing lockdown, primary teachers should be given orientation and training on online teaching. Since they are not much familiar with or prepared for providing lessons electronically, it has already become a big challenge. Teaching through TV or online with a focus on equity and quality could open a window of opportunity for Bangladesh after reopening. More investment will also be needed in research, assessments, data generation, analysis and monitoring. I sincerely hope that the upcoming budget will dedicate at least 15 percent of the total allocation for education, as per our national commitment to achieve the targets of SDG-4.

Considering the current and post-pandemic situation, the government should prioritise education along with other important areas like food safety and livelihood, employment generation and economic development. We may hopefully manage the adverse impacts of economic slowdown caused by the pandemic, but if we lose a generation of learners in education, it will be difficult to overcome the loss in years.

Safe motherhood in the time of Covid-19

JOBY GEORGE

COMPLICATIONS of pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of women's death in the developing world. The 2020 Safe Motherhood Day, observed on May 28, comes in the backdrop of the added risks to mothers across the world, as the strained health systems struggle to provide essential and life-saving services to women and children. The situation in Bangladesh is no different. The shifting attention of the health systems to respond to the pandemic, restrictions in travel, economic hardships, and the fear of contracting the infection from health care facilities are preventing many mothers from seeking the much-needed care during pregnancy, childbirth and postnatal periods. The declining trends in the utilisation of maternal health care services since the start of the epidemic are concerning.

While the outlook of the pandemic may be grim, there is still a lot to cheer about. One of them is the valiance and determination of the hundreds of health care providers, who continue to provide life-saving services to women and children. On the occasion of this Safe Motherhood Day, I would like to pay tributes to some of the champion health workers, who are standing strong with the Bangladeshi mothers in the fight against Covid-19. They represent the spirit and resolve of the thousands of doctors, nurses, midwives, paramedics and other health workers who are saving lives every day.

Beauty Akhter, an infinitely courageous midwife, works at the Jonaki Gucha village of Nilkomol Union in Haimchar upazila, Chandpur. Jonaki village is a remote riverine island, with no electricity, water supply or any such civic amenities. To reach the village, one has to travel across the Meghna river and then about two and a half hours on foot. During the rainy season, communication is worse and travel is risky due to the high tides. When not travelling to 25 settlements to visit her patients, Beauty provides essential services for mothers and children from a makeshift building with two rooms and a tin roof, set up by the Union Parishad. One of the



Midwives continue to provide essential healthcare services in rural Bangladesh amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

rooms is used as her residence so that she can serve round-the-clock. The villagers here have heard very little of the Covid-19 pandemic, mostly from word of mouth and the few solar-powered televisions that are present. They do not understand social distancing as they continue to go about with their lives to make ends meet. In the midst of all this, Beauty is trying to provide healthcare services to women to the best of her abilities. More than the fear of Covid-19, she fears the lack of awareness and the social and economic adversities that women face on their journey to motherhood.

Another midwife working at the Shahebrampur Union Health and Family

Welfare Centre of Madaripur district is Hosneara Akter. Her round-the-clock availability and devotion attracted most women to visit the centre until the first Covid-19 patient was identified in Madaripur in mid-March. Like everywhere else, families were frightened to go out of home for medical assistance. Given the number of mothers due to deliver soon, Hosneara felt the need to continue maternal care services though it posed a risk to her own life. She engaged local elected members to reassure the mothers that the centre is open for services and is safe. Hosneara kept calling mothers on their mobile phones reminding them of their check-up and delivery dates as well

as how they should maintain health safety instructions during Covid-19. She set up a handwashing corner outside her healthcare centre to maintain hand hygiene, arranged protective gear for herself, and followed the guidance received from her supervisors.

Nurun Nahar Begum works as a paramedic at the Union Health and Family Welfare Centre set up by the Union Parishad in the remote island of Nijum Dip in Hatiya, Noakhali. She has been serving here for the last three years and, before the pandemic struck, would provide services to an average of 150-200 mothers, including about 20 deliveries, every month. But since March, as fear of Covid-19 grew and movement became restricted, the numbers have gone down by about half. These are not the only challenges she is facing. Nurun Nahar is unable to maintain social distancing protocols among clients during satellite clinic visits. Living far away from her family, she is bravely unbending when it comes to providing healthcare services to the community.

Every day, our health workers are trying their best to save lives in these difficult times. Beauty, Hosneara, Nurun Nahar—these are just names for many of us. To their dear ones, they are more than that. Despite their families' concerns, frontline health workers like them are continuing their services during this pandemic in the numerous public healthcare centres all over the country, starting from community to district level. Worries surrounding Covid-19 sink their hearts too, yet they would not pause for a while as, according to them, they chose this profession and there is no room for compromises. To reach the remotely located population, there are over 4,400 union-level healthcare centres providing essential healthcare services in Bangladesh. Women mostly depend on these centres for maternal and newborn care services and safe normal deliveries as these centres offer round-the-clock services. On behalf of all mothers, let us be appreciative of these heroes for making motherhood safe in the time of Covid-19.

Joby George is the Chief of Party of USAID's MaMoni Maternal and Newborn Care Strengthening Project.