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Immediate help for the cyclone affected near embankments

An urgent need to address starvation and waterborne diseases

CYCLONE Amphan has devastated the country's coastal areas, with around 70 villages going under water in Koyra upazila in Khulna when the embankment was breached. This has resulted in thousands of people living in utter despair. According to a report in this daily, at least two lakh people have been badly affected by the cyclone. Among them, those who once lived near the embankment are living in dire conditions with no food and not enough drinking water, and suffering from various waterborne diseases.

While the government has done a commendable job in evacuating a huge number of people during the cyclone ensuring minimal casualties, the challenge now is to make sure that those affected are given immediate food assistance and that they can start rebuilding their lives. The local administration has so far distributed 50 tonnes of rice, 500 packets of dry food and Tk 75 lakh among the cyclone victims in the upazila. But as the report has pointed out, there are families in remote areas who have not yet received any food aid, leaving them without any food for at least two days. The immediate priority is therefore to provide food and drinking water to these people.

The second most urgent task for the government is to repair the Harinkhola embankment which was badly damaged, allowing saline water to come in. The civil surgeon of Khulna has warned that such huge quantities of saline water entering the areas are causing waterborne diseases, with a crisis in drinking water inevitable. Unless the embankment is repaired on an urgent basis, it will become uninhabitable. Where will all these people go?

We hope that the administration is accelerating its efforts in these areas as these people need to physically survive, rebuild their homes, get back their cattle (shifted to another upazila during the cyclone) and basically start their lives from scratch. Prompt interventions are crucial.

Safeguarding last rites during the pandemic

A noble example set by Al-Rashid Foundation

WE are humbled by the noble example set by the Al-Rashid Foundation during this pandemic, which has already taken too many precious lives. Faced with the grim reality of burying those who have succumbed to the virus, this organisation has been providing crucial help at a time when people have been asked to stay away due to the health risks posed by funeral gatherings, especially in a household where the virus may have spread. Family members and relatives are finding it difficult to bury the deceased in this situation. With approval and training from the Ministry of Health, a team of 30 committed individuals are working with unabated determination to carry out the burial rituals as soon as they get a call from the family of the deceased, hospital authorities or the Ministry of Health—transporting bodies to the respective graveyard, crematorium or church in different districts.

Even during the Eid holidays, the members of the organisation carried out this difficult task as they laid to rest three more victims of the pandemic. While precautions must be taken when dealing with such a highly infectious disease, it is indeed shocking that some patients have been abandoned in their final moments, and left without anyone to arrange for the funeral. There have also been reports of residents who were resisting the burial of Covid-19 patients in their neighbourhoods, putting intense pressure on the families to abandon the body. It is during such dire times that Al-Rashid Foundation and other similar volunteer organisations have stepped in to serve bereaved families from various religious communities, maintaining their specific rituals.

We commend the humble initiatives by such establishments to come forward and demonstrate inclusiveness through their diligent support, and call upon others to do the same as well. Such crucial moments of crisis puts our humanity to test. We must take heed from this example and try our best to do whatever we can, collectively or individually, to contribute in this ongoing battle against Covid-19, if we are to survive all odds. Al-Rashid Foundation further plans to set up clinics to provide medical services for the poor across the country as well as free ambulance services to transport dead bodies in the near future. Organisations like these should be supported by both state and the private sector.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Treatment for Covid-19 patients

There have been plenty of reports on patients being denied treatment for multiple diseases in various hospitals across the country, especially if they displayed any of the symptoms of coronavirus. Due to this, many critical patients have passed away while their families desperately tried to get them admitted. I have also read about incidents where after the demise of these patients, it was proven through medical reports that they were actually Covid-19 negative! I was relieved to learn recently that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has directed all public and private hospitals with 50 beds and more to ensure healthcare service for Covid and non-Covid patients in separate arrangements. Such a directive was needed urgently as more citizens are falling victim to this deadly virus. I would like to thank the authorities for this. Hopefully now the citizens of our country can avail treatment with ease.

Zeenat Siddiqi, Dhaka

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

"THE virus is slowing us down to the speed of poetry." – Billy Collins

Whenever there has been an outbreak of pandemics, artists and authors have responded, with a sense of responsibility, to the miserable human condition. If hundreds of thousands of people die of a fatal disease—sometimes the figure reaching to 50 or 60 percent of the population of a city or a country—silence reigns supreme, and in this state, poets and writers attempt to break the silence, recording the intensity of misery and reality in poetry and fiction. As the history of pandemics suggests, a great number of poets and writers have composed groundbreaking works reacting to human suffering. Some notable examples are Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (1827), London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), Maugham's *The Painted Veil* (1925), Camus's *The Plague* (1947), Koontz's *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981), Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), Saramago's *Blindness* (1995), and Brooks's *Year of Wonders* (2001), which are all considered enduring masterpieces. People are currently perusing *The Plague* as if "the novel were a vaccine," as if it were "something that can help heal us." It is assumed that gloom descended upon some of Shakespeare's plays because of the troubling plague in England in 1592, which lasted until 1594. In an article titled "From Sa'di to Boccaccio: The literary legacy of pandemics," Hamid Dabashi, Professor of Comparative Literature, Columbia University, refers to Saadi's poems in which there's an account of human suffering caused by famine in 13th century Persia. Saadi's most powerful lines, as Dabashi quotes, read, "A famine of such devastation one year happened in Damascus/ That lovers forget all about love..."

Poetry plays an important part in bringing joy to the agonised and solace to the affected. As Simon Armitage, poet laureate of the UK, lays out in his arguments, "Poetry is by definition consoling; it often asks us just to focus and think and be contemplative. It asks us to be considerate of each other and the world." Armitage has written a great poem entitled "Lockdown" on the Coronavirus effect that *The Guardian* has recently featured. In his introduction to the poem, the poet claims that poetry as an essential art form helps us alleviate our agony during the critical times of pandemics. Armitage is optimistic that we may see a different planet, where everything will be new.

The present poet laureate of the USA, Joy Harjo, has also stressed on the positive role of poetry that, she believes, may help people overcome depression, and on the continuation of creativity in the face of epidemics. She states, "We always turn to the arts, to poetry at times like these when we are thrust into the unknowing, into

places of terror or awe. People are calling on artists to help inspire and make sense during these times." It is really important and compelling for artists, for poets to "make sense" of things happening around them, of the events that are creating pressure on people's minds and making them sink into anxiety. Sometimes, the precipitousness or precariousness of tragic incidents transform the situation so drastically that people either become completely silent or begin to create anarchy. In these days of coronavirus, people are baffled, because the enemy shifts its colour now and then, kills people brutally, making corteges of dead bodies on streets and in fields, and seizes the surviving populace in panic—as was the picture in times of other pandemics,

quarantine, and other lived experiences springing out of coronavirus. An international literary journal *Reckoning*, which is devoted to environmental justice, has made a call for creative work, including poetry, for its special series called "Creativity and Coronavirus". In this way many publications, including renowned international literary journals and magazines, are trying to create a "lived record" of the coronavirus pandemic.

Bangladeshi poets are doing no less. A remarkable poem by a not-so-well-known but strong voice of poetry named Minar Basunia, "God Belongs to All Creatures", has become popular on social media, receiving attention from a wide readership and a slew of comments and words of praise. Basunia writes (in my translation):

be considerate of each other as well as of nature. In response to coronavirus, I've also attempted to write a few poems, from which I feel tempted to share a few lines:

Silence has gripped the whole wide world

No one weeps anywhere on earth anymore

It seems everyone is waiting for the last call

The world is blanketed in despair and silence.

Finally, I'd like to quote American poet Billy Collins, who with his keen observations seeks the progress of the world through poetry. Although the "virus is slowing us down," Collins confirms, the world will certainly retrieve a green light at "the speed of poetry." In conjunction



Decameron, John William Waterhouse, 1916.

including plagues, flu, and the Black Death in Europe. It is the artists and poets who try to enliven and inspire the worried and the panicked during these times, making sense of and giving meaning to life.

Poets from various corners of the world are responding to these trying times, reflecting on the severity of events, the uncertainty of the future, and their personal experiences and feelings. Carol Ann Duffy, poet laureate of the UK from 2009-2019, has launched a project entitled "Write Where We Are Now" which is taking contributions from a constellation of poets from around the world. Under the project, a number of prominent poets from the UK and other countries are sharing their poems on the lockdown, isolation, social distancing,

God does not belong to only humans. He has probably accepted the appeal of dolphins—

He has probably responded to the prayers of the sea—

He has perhaps deeply listened to the pleas of the woods—

He has perhaps considered the demands of the hills reasonable.

Here the poet refers to the injustice human beings have been perpetrating against the environment for hundreds of years; other creatures in nature had probably been making an appeal to God, who belongs to everyone and everything, for a long time for their safe existence on earth, and God has listened to them now. Both eco-critically and philosophically powerful, this poem tenders an important message to human beings to

with medical science, art in general and poetry in particular is inevitable for the world—more so in the toughest times of pandemics—because a world without poetry poses a threat to the mental health and sane survival of humanity. During these days of devastation, poetry may help us keep mentally strong, save us from falling prey to despair, and deliver us from the prospect of etioloating the self. Poetry inculcates common decency, heals wounds, assuages anxiety and dissipates despair, leading us toward a world that may emerge newer and wiser.

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The double piston of love and fear



HIS visiting card had two office addresses: one in Scotland and the other in Estonia. There was nothing wrong with it, but the architect who just shared his card explained the oddity. He told us about his dual citizenship. Worried that his business in the UK in a post-Brexit scenario could take a tailspin, he had opted for an e-citizenship of e-Estonia. Yes, you read it right. The Estonian Government has created a cloud based public-private consortium to make most of its services, including citizenship, available online. Our Scottish friend maintained that under this new arrangement, he could still avail all the benefits of the European Union (EU) despite his mother country being politically severed from it.

And why would Estonia allow e-citizens? Because it is crowdsourcing funds through e-investments and e-citizenships: a win-win proposition. What prompted Estonia to adopt such extreme measures is even more interesting. "In case of any foreign intrusion, which is not unlikely given this Baltic country's former conglomeration, the country will simply disappear in the cloud securing all the resources of its citizens," the card owner explained. Imagine a strategic online retreat in place of a military defence, how ingenious! Well, not so unique if you are a *Star Trek* fan who is used to the concept of being beamed up.

I remembered this chit-chat on the issue of hiding in the cloud out of fear of something ominous while passing through the clouds on a special flight to Bangkok. Fear necessitates innovations. The emergency health protocols in every

household, every office have come out of fear. Sanitisation, distancing and protective gear are the new normal paraphernalia risen out of fear. And of course, except for some essential work, we too have moved online, albeit by default.

My daughter and I took a special flight to Bangkok. When my wife, who works in the Bangladesh Embassy in Bangkok, told us that we could avail the plane meant for shipping back 160 Thai nationals, we were not very sure. My daughter in particular was afraid of airport safety. Then my wife hurled the unassailable diatribe: what motive could I have in staying in Dhaka while our activities were being done online? I guess fear is one factor that made me seek station leave and come to Bangkok.

On May 23, we went to board a flight organised by the Royal Thai Embassy in Dhaka. The airport had a deserted look as ours was the only flight. The officials of the Embassy made sure that we had the medical clearance and government papers to fly—their diligence was exemplary. They guided us every step of the way, quite a contrast to our immigration, where it took three individuals in two counters to clear one passport. The supervisor was dictating what commands to press on the keyboard, what to type to merge my new passport with the old one. And they were not even apprentices. In their casual remarks it was revealed that the officer had been doing this for four years. Quite a long way before we e-transit, I sighed.

The Thai embassy officials gave every passenger a goody bag that included some snacks, a face mask and a pair of surgical gloves, hand sanitiser and wipes, and a cash refund of 314.20 Thai baht that they got through negotiated discounts from the airlines. Every passenger got their share of discounts from the already purchased e-tickets! Imagine such honesty in our culture even at the time of Ramadan. I don't think the fear of

after-life grilling would have brought out such righteousness in many of us. A small gesture goes a long way in giving the impression of a country.

On the plane, each alternate seat was kept empty. There were three male stewards, all wearing PPE. We felt like human subjects abducted by aliens. Thailand has suspended all its flights until June 30, and the major airports have been shut down. Our plane was taken to Don Mueang domestic airport which had been re-designed to facilitate the repatriation of stranded Thai nationals from different parts of the world. The entire place was barricaded by human shields of staff wearing PPE. We were seamlessly processed through six different tables. It took us less than five minutes to have our temperature checked, papers verified, on-arrival visa endorsed. Our bags were not given on the belts. They were isolated and bleached and brought to the bus bay. A special bus carried us through the runway all the way to the parking lot to reduce any chance of contamination. The Thai nationals, however, had to wait to be processed for the quarantine centre where they would have to stay for two weeks. Some of these men were wearing Italian-Thai Development jackets, which made me guess they were engaged in the Dhaka Metro Rail projects. I offered them my gratitude in silence.

The Bangladesh Embassy had to vouch for our home quarantine. The Thai government has identified 14,000 Thai nationals who needed repatriation during the pandemic. They are bringing them in batches to ensure proper accommodation at the quarantine centre—so the flights are coordinated with the availability of space there. It is not only fear but also care that necessitates innovations.

Thailand is beginning to relax its lockdown, and it has shown amazing professionalism in handling the crisis. Like everywhere else, there was pressure

on the government to lift the lockdown. In response, this is what PM Prayut had to say: "We have received calls to ease certain restrictions, but we have to think about being prudent. We have to listen to information from medical experts. I do not want to make decisions under duress. They should be based on facts."

Thailand was the second country to be affected by the disease when Patient Zero came from Wuhan. A taxi driver who carried this Chinese tourist was later tested positive in January. The situation aggravated when the disease spread during a Thai boxing event. Thanks to strict curfew measures, contact tracing and testing, the country has managed to recover from initial setbacks and reduce the number of affected patients to 3,045, with 57 succumbing to Covid-19. The three new cases today are all from inbound passengers who have been brought back to the country. There is comfort in the way things are planned and executed.

Right now, Bangkok is slowly transitioning to a new normal mode. Social distancing is going to stay. Working online is going to stay. The future has suddenly been pushed back to be present at the present time.

Our journey to Bangkok seemed like a scene from a dystopian world. We were happy to give up our rights to free mobility not only because we were afraid but also because we felt that we were being cared for. There was comfort in our discomfort. We overcame the fear of flying at a horrid time, out of love. I think a lot can be done if you are pulled by the double-piston of love and fear. Wasn't it Oprah Winfrey, who once said, "every single event in life happens in an opportunity to choose love over fear"?

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