

Flattening the curve

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example. People need to wear a two or three-layer cloth mask, that they will wash after every use.

"Physical distancing is being stressed upon. The law enforcers will try to maintain physical distancing, but soon the crowds will get out of control. We have seen this before Eid -- the law enforcers tried to disperse crowds, but failed to do so because they cannot jump on civilians with riot gear."

Talking to The Daily Star, he also said, "We do not have enough hospital beds, enough ventilators to deal with the crisis."

He talked about an impending transport crisis among office goers, since there has always been a shortage of transport, compared to the need.

"Even if buses have been instructed to operate at half their passenger capacity, what will happen when office goers will crowd into the buses?"

In addition, the government had formed an eight-member expert committee to supervise, monitor and support the coronavirus response, at the end of March. Its members have also advised the government on how to ease the lockdown -- but the government's current step sharply contrasts with that.

"We had asked the government to lift the lockdown phase-by-phase," said Prof Shah Monir Hossain, a member of the expert committee.

"We recommended that they identify the cluster areas and put those on complete lockdown, while easing certain other areas that are not seeing as many cases. We had asked the government not to allow reopening of markets before Eid, but they also had to think of the businesses."

"We had hoped to flatten the curve by the end of June, but that is probably not going to happen anymore because the number of coronavirus patients will increase."

While compliance is the key to controlling the transmission, it is a gargantuan task in the context of Bangladesh to enforce the rules of social distancing and other steps, said Prof Monir, also a former DG of DGHS.

Criticising the government and the committees for failing to plan a safe return to normal life, Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director of disease control at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, said, "Lockdown is supposed to be lifted at some point but they need to devise a good mechanism. But we are not seeing it."

"For instance, an infected assistant to a bus driver will act as a super spreader of Covid-19 as he usually lifts and collects passengers. So, special measures are needed to be taken for both bus drivers and helpers, but we've not yet heard of anything like that."

Prof Be-Nazir too suggested that the government should have lifted the shutdown in phases from areas that are less affected.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) of the World Health Organization (WHO) and president of Public Health Foundation of Bangladesh, explained further what "phase-

wise" lifting of a lockdown could look like.

"Districts can be divided according to their number of cases. In those with under a hundred cases, the lockdown can be lifted, but that has to go hand-in-hand with strict quarantining of the cases and contact tracing."

"Districts containing between 100-300 cases can zoom into upazilas with clusters and maintain the lockdown there, while easing restrictions in other upazilas. Districts with over 300 cases have to be under complete lockdown."

The WHO has outlined six stages a country needs to reach before lifting the lockdown. These stages are: Disease transmission is under control; Health systems are able to "detect, test, isolate and treat every case and trace every contact"; Clusters are minimised in vulnerable places, such as nursing homes, schools and workplaces; and a second wave can be managed and communities are fully educated, engaged and empowered to live under a "new normal".

"We have not achieved these stages yet," said Dr Huq.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Health Watch yesterday sent a press statement, signed by its head Dr Mushtaq Chowdhury, to the media along the same vein as WHO.

"The Watch believes that the social and scientific aspects of the planned 'reopening' on May 31, 2020 and its likely consequences have not been duly considered," the statement said. It also said the government should take four steps to ease the lockdown.

"Monitor scientifically the effects of the reopening on disease incidences so that any negative outcome can easily and immediately be tracked and attended to for making strategic changes. The country has a number of important institutions which deal with data," it said.

"Strictly adhere, religiously implement and scale up the 3Ts [Test, Trace and Treat]."

"Strengthen and empower the primary health care centres at community clinics, union centres and upazila health complexes. These should be the place of first call and should be equipped with the requisite facilities, including testing [at upazila level], contact tracing, isolation facilities and initial treatments."

HEALTH SAFETY DIRECTIVES
In a circular, the Health Service Division of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has directed all public and private offices to follow 12 health directives from now on.

Signed by Deputy Secretary Khandokar Zakir Hossain, the circular directed on disinfecting offices, their premises, streets and official transport and setting up thermal scanners or keeping thermometers to check body temperature.

It also suggested using each piece of surgical mask only once, reusing fabric masks after washing them properly, cleaning hands frequently, maintaining a distance of three feet from each other while eating food, and disinfecting toilet every time it is used.

It also directed the authorities to monitor whether people are following the health rules and to isolate any infected persons immediately.

Trump cutting US ties

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Jinping to give \$2 billion to the WHO over the next two years to help combat the coronavirus. The amount almost matches the WHO's entire annual program budget for last year.

Trump last month halted funding for the 194-member organization, then in a May 18 letter gave the WHO 30 days to commit to reforms.

"Because they have failed to make the requested and greatly needed reforms, we will be today terminating our relationship with the World Health Organization and redirecting those funds to other worldwide and deserving urgent global public health needs," Trump said on Friday.

It was not immediately clear when his decision would come into effect. A 1948 joint resolution of Congress on US membership of the WHO said the country "reserves its right to withdraw from the organization on a one-year notice."

The World Health Organization did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Trump's announcement. It has previously denied Trump's assertions that it promoted Chinese "disinformation" about the virus.

The European Union yesterday called on the US to "reconsider" the decision to sever ties with the WHO over its handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

TRUMP STRIPS HK PRIVILEGES
Trump used some of his toughest rhetoric yet against China, saying Beijing had broken its word over Hong Kong's autonomy by moving to impose new national security legislation and the territory no longer warranted US economic privileges.

At the White House news conference, Trump called this a tragedy for the people of Hong Kong, China and the world, having already attacked Beijing over the coronavirus pandemic, which began in China. Trump said China's "malfeasance" was responsible for massive suffering and economic damage worldwide.

"We will take action to revoke Hong Kong's preferential treatment as a separate customs and travel territory from the rest of China," Trump said, adding that Washington would also impose sanctions on individuals seen as responsible for "smothering - absolutely smothering - Hong Kong's freedom."

He did not name any of the potential sanctions targets. Trump said his announcement would "affect the full range of agreements we have with Hong Kong," from the US extradition treaty to export controls on dual-use technologies and more "with few exceptions."

"Our actions will be strong, our actions will be meaningful," Trump added. China's state-run Global Times newspaper called Trump's announcement "recklessly arbitrary."

Trump gave no time frame for the moves, suggesting he may be trying to buy time before deciding whether to implement the most drastic measures, which have drawn strong resistance from US companies operating in Hong Kong. He also said he was issuing a proclamation to better safeguard vital university research by suspending entry of foreign nationals from China identified as potential security risks.

Sources, including a current US official, told Reuters on Thursday that the latter move could affect 3,000 to 5,000 Chinese graduate students. Financial markets saw Trump's announcement as more bark than bite and US stocks finished mostly higher as it was seen as less threatening to the US economy than investors had feared.

"I don't think a lot has changed," said Craig Allen, president of the US-China Business Council. "We haven't taken steps that really ratchet up the tension even more."

He said he interpreted the actions rescinding Hong Kong's special status as being first subject to review by various agencies and not happening immediately.



With no buses plying between Dhaka and Mawa, Munshiganj, some motorcyclists are carrying multiple pillion riders with sizable backpacks and no helmets on the highway for hefty sums. Inset, the utter disregard for safety is also seen on Dhaka-Aricha highway near Jahangirnagar University. The photos were taken yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN/PALASH KHAN

IMF to lend \$732m for urgent needs

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prompted the country to seek the IMF's help in the first place.

And the third is to ensure that the IMF can get repaid. Since it does not take any physical collateral from countries to whom it is lending, the belt-tightening helps to act as a kind of collateral.

So the fact that the latest funding from the Washington-based multilateral lender comes without strings, as the official statement says, seems a rather uncharacteristic move.

But if one reads in between the lines, the assistance is not all it is cracked up to be.

The crisis lender says it will closely monitor how the country fares in promoting strong and inclusive growth while preserving macroeconomic stability once the public health crisis abates.

Key policy challenges for the country include tax revenue mobilisation, addressing the mounting default loans in the banking sector, and improving infrastructure and governance to enhance the business environment and attract foreign direct investment, the IMF said.

In other words, the lender is letting the country be off-leash -- for now.

But once normal order returns in the world, the country would be put back on the leash for the Tk 6,222 crore that is coming with next to no interest rates.

Bangladesh would get about \$244 million under the Rapid Credit Facility, meaning there would be zero interest rate, and another \$488 million under

the Rapid Financing Instrument that has less than 1 per cent interest.

The repayment period would be 15 years with a grace period of five years, said a finance ministry official.

Normally, IMF financing is added to the country's foreign currency reserves managed by the Bangladesh Bank as it comes through in phases.

This time, the amount would arrive in one go within a few days, and the government would issue a special bond to borrow the funds from the central bank to use the money, the finance ministry official said.

The finance ministry would now sign a letter of intent with the BB to this effect. Of the sum, Tk 3,000 crore would be used as interest rate subsidy on the loans going to the pandemic-hit micro, small, medium and large entrepreneurs, farmers and exporters.

Another Tk 2,000 crore would go to banks to cushion them from the losses from the deferred interest payment on loans for May and June.

About Tk 16,000 crore in interest was to be paid in the two months; and the borrowers would be repaying the Tk 14,000 crore over 12 months in instalments, the finance ministry official said.

The global last-resort lender will not stop here; it would make available another \$700 million for the country if it needs.

"The IMF continues to monitor Bangladesh's situation closely and stands ready to provide further advice

and support, if needed," it said in the press release.

Bangladesh has responded quickly to the coronavirus outbreak with a comprehensive set of measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus, providing immediate relief to the most vulnerable households and affected businesses, and preserving the country's macroeconomic prospects, said Antoinette Sayeh, deputy managing director and acting chair of the IMF.

The government has unveiled various stimulus packages amounting to \$101,117 crore, which is 3.6 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, to help people, businesses, entrepreneurs, farmers, industrialists and exporters counter the impact of the pandemic.

A temporary increase in the fiscal deficit is necessary, and it will be important to ensure transparency and accountability in the use of all emergency spending, Sayeh said.

The Bangladesh Bank took appropriate steps to ease liquidity conditions and allow the financial sector to support the economy. Further easing could be considered if the economic situation deteriorates and inflation remains moderate, she said.

"A gradual increase in exchange rate flexibility should be allowed to adjust to the external shock while preserving foreign reserves."

To secure the funds from the IMF, the government would now speed up its ongoing reforms at the National Board of Revenue and in the banking sector.

Public plight set to worsen

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"Although we will have 50 percent passengers, the operational costs will remain unchanged. Besides, we will have to spend an additional about Tk 1,000 on health safety and disinfecting procedures after every trip," said Abul Kalam, vice-president of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, after the meeting.

The government last fixed inter-district bus fares in May 2016 at the rate of Tk 0.42 for each kilometre. With the new hike, the cost of travelling from the capital's Galtali to Barishal through Faridpur would be Tk 789, excluding tolls. Before the shutdown, it cost only Tk 438, excluding tolls.

Within Dhaka city, bus fare was last fixed in September 2015 at the rate of Tk 1.70 per km. If the new rate comes into effect, the fare from Mirpur Zoo to Notre Dame College would be Tk 60 which was Tk 33 as per existing rate.

BURDEN ON PEOPLE
Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at Centre for Policy Dialogue, said, "There is a shortage of public transport. The decision to keep 50 percent of the seats vacant...would be very difficult to enforce."

He added that the 80 percent hike would be a major burden for common people.

At least two of the stimulus packages announced by the government were related to the transport sector. The companies can take advantage of those packages, he said.

Bus companies should try to keep the operational costs at a low level and make very little profit during the crisis, he said, adding that if necessary, they can ask for more stimulus packages.

"Common people should not be made the victim to provide benefits to the bus operators," he told The Daily Star.

AIR PASSENGERS TO PAY MORE
The time has come to say goodbye to budget air travel as airlines will have to keep almost half the seats empty, said officials at different airlines and the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

According to CAAB guideline, the airlines must keep at least 30 percent of the seats empty on every flight to ensure social distancing. There will be an empty seat between every two passengers unless they are from the same family.

But officials at different airlines said they will have to keep at least 50 percent of the seats vacant to follow the guidelines.

where his son requested him to pay them Tk 10 lakh otherwise they would kill him. He also said the trafficker did not give them any food for two days and tortured them with electric shocks.

"I gave Tk 10 lakh to Julhas on May 24," said Rajjak, adding that on Friday he came to know his son was killed. Khandakar Sowkat Jahan, officer in-charge of Rajoi Police Station, said, "After hearing the news of the 26 Bangladeshis killing in Libya, locals attacked the house of Julhas on Friday. On information, we rushed to the spot and Julhas told us that he was infected with coronavirus. He gave his sample to get tested on May 26."

"We kept Julhas at Madaripur General Hospital's isolation unit under police supervision. After his coronavirus results comes, we will take the next course of action."

Sohel, brother of dead migrant worker Rakibul from Jashore, said, his brother went to Benghazi in Libya a few months ago and was working there with a low wage. There, Rakibul met a Bangladeshi called Abdullah, who promised Rakibul that he will be taken to Tripoli and demanded Tk 75,000 for it, Sohul said.

On May 15, Rakibul and around 40 other Bangladeshis set out for Tripoli from Benghazi and were abducted on

Racism cannot be 'normal' in US

Says Obama of latest police killing

AFP, Washington

Former president Barack Obama said Friday he shared the "anguish" of millions of Americans over the death of a black man killed by police in Minnesota and that racism cannot be "normal" in the United States.

"This shouldn't be 'normal' in 2020 America," Obama said of the death of Minneapolis man George Floyd and several other recent racial incidents in the country.

"It can't be 'normal,' the first African-American president of the United States said in a statement. "If we want our children to grow up in a nation that lives up to its highest ideals, we can and must do better."

Floyd's death on Monday sparked three nights of rioting in Minneapolis and protests against police brutality in other US cities.

Death count

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government test the office-goers to check infection.

The antigen test is a quick method to detect fragments of proteins found on or within the virus by testing samples collected from the nasal cavity using swabs.

Through the antibody test, it is checked whether a person has developed an immune system against Covid-19. It also determines whether a person has previously or recently been exposed to the coronavirus.

"It takes only 10 minutes to conduct antigen and antibody tests. It will not take more than two days to find out the situation of coronavirus infection in a factory where about 1,000 people work," he said.

Those who would be tested positive in the antigen tests would be sent to isolation, he said, adding that by following this technique, the spread can be prevented in the coming days.

Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director of disease control at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, said the next 15 days would be crucial for Bangladesh.

The country has a good reputation for overcoming cholera and diphtheria crises. "If we can properly maintain the personal hygiene, we would be able to overcome the novel coronavirus as well," he said.

"But as a health expert, I'm not seeing any visible plan of the government to combat the deadly virus in the coming days which is frustrating."

DAILY BRIEFING
Prof Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of DGHS yesterday said a total of 9,987 samples were tested in 50 labs across the country.

"In the last 24 hours, 1,764 people tested positive for Covid-19. With them, the total number of infection has reached 44,608," she said.

Meanwhile, 360 Covid-19 patients have recovered during this period, pushing the total number of recovered patients to 9,375 and the recovery rate to 21.02 percent, the DGHS official said.

A total of 469 people were put under isolation in 24 hours, she added.

Among the 28 deceased, 25 were male, she said, adding that 18 were from Dhaka, seven from Chattogram, two from Rangpur and another was from Sylhet division.

Of them, four were between 31-40 years old, four between 41-50, nine between 51-60, six between 61-70, three between 71-80 and two between 81-90 years old, Dr Nasima also said.

SSC results

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will announce the result through videoconference in the morning and Education Minister Dipu Moni will later hold a press conference on the results through Facebook, said Mohammad Abul Khair, public relations officer of the education ministry.

This year, the SSC and equivalent exams began on February 3, with the theoretical and practical tests ending on February 27 and on March 6 respectively.

The government earlier planned to publish the results on May 7 or May 8, but could not publish it due to school closure due to Covid-19.

Some 2,047,779 students took part in the SSC and equivalent exams held at 3,512 centres. Like the previous years, results will also be available on the education board website.

Examinees can get the results from the education board website -- <http://www.educationboardresults.gov.bd/> -- and also from the websites of respective education boards.

Engage

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at the Gono Bhaban discussed different measures taken by the committee to check the spread of the deadly virus and provide healthcare services to patients.

Committee President Dr Mohammad Shahidullah, PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikus, PMO Secretary Tofazzal Hossain Miah, PM's private physician Dr ABM Abdullah, Health Services Secretary Ashadul Islam and other members of the committee were present.

The government had formed the 17-member committee on April 19 with a view to containing the spread of Covid-19 in the country.