

How Bangladesh fought twin perils

PM's article in The Guardian

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, jointly with the CEO of the Global Center on Adaptation Patrick Verkooijen, has written a piece for The Guardian where she said Bangladesh can offer lessons for others facing dangers like super-cyclone Amphan and Covid-19.

"Bangladesh has battled the twin perils of a super cyclone and Covid-19. We can offer lessons for others facing similar dangers," she said in the article published on Wednesday.

The article titled "Fighting cyclones and coronavirus: How we evacuated millions during a pandemic" mentioned how Bangladesh successfully tackled super-cyclone Amphan amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hasina is also the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum.

The article states there was no time to lose when Cyclone Amphan began forming over the Indian Ocean last month.

But shelters are not built with social distancing in mind in Bangladesh and the country faced a challenge: how to move 2.4 million people from the destructive path of the storm without delivering them into an even greater danger – Covid-19, it said.

"Mass evacuations are challenging at the best of times. People are reluctant to leave their homes unguarded. This time the challenge was far more complex. People were afraid to move to shelters for fear of the virus. First responders also had to make sure the evacuation itself was not a vector for contagion," the article said.

In a matter of days, Bangladesh prepared almost 10,500 additional shelters -- on top of the 4,171 in existence -- to accommodate evacuees with a measure of social distancing. More than 70,000 'cyclone preparedness' volunteers across coastal areas were mobilised. Masks, water, soap and sanitiser were distributed. The garment industry, reeling from cancelled export orders, retooled production lines to manufacture personal protective equipment, it said.

Coming on top of the pandemic, a cyclone such as Amphan throws into sharp focus the interrelated nature of the climate and health risks facing mankind. In the US, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts this year's hurricane season will be one for the record books due to unusually warm water temperatures in the Atlantic and Caribbean -- a consequence of the climate emergency. As in Bangladesh, the task of keeping people safe across the southern US and the Caribbean will be immeasurably more complicated as a result of Covid-19.

Bangladesh's disaster preparedness, including a network of 55,000 first responders, meant Amphan killed fewer than 100 people in India and Bangladesh. While any death is regrettable, the country's early-warning systems and well-rehearsed evacuation



drills have saved hundreds of thousands of lives over the years, according to the article.

Rebuilding infrastructure and livelihoods, however, is another matter. Bangladesh has rebuilt in the wake of cyclones many times before.

As one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to tropical storms -- two-thirds of its land lies less than 5m above sea level -- rebuilding is a Sisyphean task. The climate crisis makes it even harder. Cyclones are becoming fiercer and more frequent. Rising ocean levels are poisoning wells and farmland. The pandemic and resulting deep economic crisis mean that the government must now deal with overlapping health, climate and economic emergencies all at once, it said.

Cyclone Amphan was the costliest on record in the north Indian Ocean, leaving destruction estimated at \$13bn. In Bangladesh, it washed out 415km of roads, 200 bridges, tens of thousands of homes and vast tracts of farmland and fisheries. More than 150km of embankments meant to contain storm surges were damaged.

This has been catastrophic, but planning makes countries better prepared when calamity strikes. It is not enough to deal with the immediate effects of a natural disaster; communities need to be better prepared for the next storm.

The need to rebuild better led Bangladesh to enact a Climate Fiscal Framework in 2014, becoming the first country in the world to develop a multi-year, multi-sectoral approach to funding climate resilience. The framework includes estimates for the long-term costs of combating the effects and tracks climate-related expenditures across 20 government ministries, including agriculture, housing and energy, with multi-year budgets to match.

This was followed in 2018 by an eight-decade climate adaptation plan for the delta region, home to 30 million people. The first decade of Delta Plan 2100 focuses on strengthening infrastructure, such as building higher embankments to resist storm surges. After Amphan, schools, hospitals and houses will need to be built back stronger, with increased resilience, so they can resist cyclones, and storm surges in coastal areas, doubling up as shelters when the next disaster hits, the article added.

Across the world, Covid-19 is adding a huge strain to government finances, but we believe long-term fiscal frameworks and climate adaptation plans give nations better tools to respond. Health, economic and climate resilience are interrelated. That is why the Delta Plan also includes land and water management projects, and measures to make communities healthier and more resilient: for example, solar home kits that can be used to filter contaminated water to stop disease following every destructive storm.

PM calls for rapid invention

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Citing the United Nations, Hasina said one new infectious disease emerges in humans every four months and the Global Virome Project estimated that there are about 700,000 which are capable of causing pandemics.

"Many of them may pose existential threat to the whole human race. So, the current and newer vaccines will be needed for the survival of the humans."

For prevention, vaccination has proved to be one of the most important means to combat infectious diseases, she added.

In this connection, the PM sought assistance from the GAVI Alliance, formerly known as Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation.

The UK is hosting the Global Vaccine Summit, bringing together leaders from governments, foundations, the private sector and civil society and it marks 20 years since the GAVI was founded.

Hasina said since its inception in 2000, GAVI has helped immunise over 760 million people against deadly diseases, saving more than 13 million lives worldwide.

"Our simple wish can ensure that GAVI is fully funded to strengthen immunisation infrastructure; help immunise 300 million additional children and save up to 8 million lives in GAVI-supported countries.

"So, it is not only I, but the whole world is waiting to hear from you in support of GAVI," she said.

The premier said there could not have been a better time than today to meet to support the causes of vaccination when the world is frantically searching for an effective vaccine to fight Covid-19.

"I'm delighted to be with you today to be a partner of the initiative which has saved lives of millions of children and pregnant mothers."

The PM said in this journey, GAVI has been a "time-tested partner" for Bangladesh towards achieving universal health coverage and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

"Bangladesh reached the target of MDG number 4 -- reducing under-five mortality by two-thirds in 2010 due to important assistance rendered by GAVI," she said.

Hasina said since her first tenure as the PM (1996-2000), her governments have relentlessly worked to bring the fruit of development to the last person

in the line.

"In our efforts, GAVI has provided continuous support to expand immunization coverage up to 98 percent. Our Universal Health Coverage programme could not have been successful without the alliance's active participation and contribution of \$700 million."

She said with GAVI's partnerships for innovation in immunisation, Bangladesh has become the pioneer in the region for digitising and strengthening data systems as one of the most advanced users of the Digital Health Information System-2.

The PM said the government was studying establishment of a unique digital identity for health services in partnership with ID2020, GAVI and the a2i programme.

About hosting 1.1 million Rohingyas, Hasina said Bangladesh said the country was sheltering the "forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals" at a great financial, social and environmental cost.

"Our health officials and workers from international organizations are working to limit the number of Covid-19 cases in the Rohingya camps," she said.

US President Donald Trump, Burkina Faso President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and leaders and representatives of different countries and international organisations also spoke at the event.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and the co-chair of Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Bill Gates, delivered the keynote speeches, while Chair of GAVI Board Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala gave the closing address.

The summit aims to raise at least \$7.4 billion for the GAVI for 2021-2025 to protect a further 300 million children against infectious diseases like measles, typhoid and polio.

In a statement, the GAVI said if the summit succeeds, the alliance will be able to maintain immunisation in developing countries, mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

"We will be able to sustain health system so that the countries are ready to rapidly introduce Covid-19 vaccines and by 2025, we will have immunised more than 1.1 billion children and saving 22 million lives," it said.



Jamuna river dangerously close to makeshift shops in Arichaghat area of Manikganj district. In the past few weeks, the river devoured many establishments in the area. The photo was taken on Wednesday.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

'Development' feasts on forest

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different government and non-government organisations are demanding from the forest department at the moment," the acting CCF said.

"What I can say is the new forest policy the government drafted last year states no forestland should be used for non-forest purposes."

FORESTLAND ALLOCATION

The Daily Star obtained forest department records showing the department had to give away more than 1.60 lakh acres of forestland to various government and non-government agencies for setting up offices and other establishments.

Around 43,095 acres of natural forests were handed over to the Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation (BFIDC), which planted rubber trees there, destroying natural forests.

Several law-enforcement agencies and security forces have been allocated the lion's share of forestland -- around 93,924 acres, according to the documents.

Other land recipients include Bangladesh Railway, Bangladeshi Betar, Bangladesh Scouts, Bangladesh Girls Guides Association, Roads and Highways Department, Talimabad satellite earth station, Bangladesh Medicinal Plant Research Centre, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council, Central Jail, Gazipur municipality, Moulvibazar municipality, Bangladesh Water Development Board, Bangladesh National Herbarium, Bangladesh National Zoo, Rashidpur gas field, Sylhet gas field, Power Development Board, Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited, Bangladesh Forest Research Institute, Department of Fisheries, Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute, Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority, Mongla Port Authority, Buddhist Cultural Academy, Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation, and Petrobangla.

Of non-government recipients, two private primary schools in Bandarban and several landless farmers were given land in Cox's Bazar.

In Gazipur, the forestland recipients

include a garments manufacturing company, which was given 1.96 acres.

As per these forest department records, these lands were given to the government and non-government organisations as of June 12, 2019.

Even after this date, 160-acre land was given to Bangladesh Railway to construct rail lines in Cox's Bazar.

GRABBING

According to the forest department website, the country has a total of 45.36 lakh acres of forestland in 35 districts.

Of this total forestland, 2.87 lakh acres were grabbed by various influential locals, organisations, and politically vested quarters.

"Most of this grabbed forest lands have become human settlements and industries. The forest department is battling cases in court about some of these lands," said an official, who wished to be anonymous.

Though the forest department is officially in possession of 42.86 lakh acres of land as per the Cadastral Survey (CS), which ended in 1940, a good portion of this land has been recorded as "khas land" in the Bangladesh Survey (BS) record.

Interestingly, the forest department is yet to know the exact quantity of land recorded as "khas land" during the Bangladesh Survey.

This has proved problematic as district administrations have often leased out forest lands, showing these as "khas land". In this way, around 50,000 acres of land have been leased out to various persons and organisations over the years by DC offices.

A land ministry official explained that the forest department was given all the land declared forest lands in the CS record. But during the Revisional Survey (RS) and Bangladesh Survey, many plots were recorded as "khas land".

As per existing land law, all "khas land" belongs to the land ministry. But the local deputy commissioner is the custodian of the land as tax collector and is able to lease out this "khas land".

Though any forestland is not eligible for leasing, DCs and land ministry officials often show it as "khas land"

Food budget to be 16pc bigger

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"We are increasing the allocation to protect the poor from food insecurity and tackle any situation like the Covid-19 crisis," said Mosammat Nazmanara Khanum, secretary at the food ministry.

Already, a large number of people have fallen into poverty and are facing food insecurity due to losses of income opportunities after the government enforced countrywide shutdown to curb the spread of Covid-19.

The 65-day lockdown ended on May 30 but its effect on life, livelihood and the economy remains.

To support the poor, the government increased distribution of food items for free, and at nominal prices. Yet, many poor and low-income people complained that they have been deprived of such support.

The government provided 24.50 lakh tonnes of rice and wheat under various schemes such as Gratuitous Relief (GR), special OMS and Food For Work (FFW) between July 1 and May 21, up 12 percent from that in the same period the previous year, according to food ministry data.

Md Shah Kamal, senior secretary at the disaster management and relief ministry, said there would be a rise in the number of poor people because of coronavirus-induced economic shocks around the world.

"Bangladesh is also likely to see a higher number of poor people. We will continue to distribute food to support them," he said.

In the next fiscal year, the government plans to expand food distribution through Food for Work programme. But it plans to cut allocation for GR and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF).

Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, questioned the planned cut.

"It is strange that allocation for the Vulnerable Group Feeding and GR programme is projected to decrease by 17 percent and 61 percent. As far as I know, these are some of the better targeted food-based assistance programs."

He also questioned the sharp rise in operating expense for food procurement and distribution in the next fiscal year.

The expense is projected to increase by 30.9 percent whereas food subsidy is projected to rise by 15 percent, he said.

"Consequently, operating expense as a proportion of the total subsidy is projected to increase from 23 percent in fiscal 2020 to 26 percent in fiscal 2021. For every 100 taka spent on subsidy, it will cost 26 taka to deliver it!"

The government plans to allocate Tk 6,044 crore as subsidy in the next

as a factor in his death.

The three police officers -- Tou Thao, 34, J. Alexander Kueng, 26, and Thomas Lane, 37, -- were charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder, and taken into custody.

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, a black former US congressman, has requested bail of \$1 million for each of the four defendants, reports Reuters.

Floyd's family, in a statement thanking protesters, called the arrests and new charges a "bittersweet moment" -- and a "significant step forward on the road to justice."

They urged Americans to continue to "raise their voices for change in peaceful ways."

Kidnapped HSC examinee found dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Police recovered the body of an abducted HSC candidate in Abhaynagar upazila of Jashore early yesterday.

A group of criminals abducted the victim -- Nuruzzaman Babu, 18, son of Imran Gazi of the upazila's Purakhali village -- on Monday and demanded Tk 50 lakh ransom from his father, said police.

The victim's father filed a complaint with Abhaynagar Police Station the next day. On information, police detained two suspects -- Rifat Ahmed Aush, 20, of Jashore, and Abdur Razzak, 22, of Jhenaidah -- who later confessed to have abducted Babu, they added.

Tajul Islam, officer-in-charge of Abhaynagar Police station, said they recovered the body following the information the two detainees provided them with during quizzing.

Babu's body was sent to Jashore General Hospital morgue for autopsy, he added.

Silver lining

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Contacted via email, Prof Corinne Le Quéré of the University of East Anglia, the lead author of the paper, also suggested ways for Bangladesh to reduce its emissions.

"Mainly, a reduction in the production of electricity and a reduction in road transport," she said.

"For Bangladesh the biggest potential is to move from gas to renewable energy such as solar and wind power. Elsewhere in the world, the largest drops in emissions were from road transport. There, they are encouraging walking and cycling as well as moving towards electric transport as quickly as possible is the biggest potential.

"Still, that drop only brings emissions in line with where they were in 2006, which highlights how much emissions have spiked in the last 14 years."

The estimated total change in emissions from the pandemic amounts to 1,048 million tonnes of carbon dioxide until the end of April.

The changes are largest in China where the shutdowns started, with daily decrease of 242 tonnes of CO2, followed by 207 tonnes in the US, and 98 tonnes in India.

The report said reduction in annual emissions is projected to be around four to seven percent compared to 2019, depending on the duration of the lockdown and the extent of the recovery.

"If some restrictions remain worldwide until the end of the year, it would be around seven percent," the report said.

This estimate also echoed the view of the Global Energy Review that mentioned in its latest report published last month that decline in carbon emissions will be almost eight percent across the world this year.

Bangladesh had aimed to reduce CO2 emissions from transport, power, and industrial sectors down by five percent under normal circumstances.

And it also plans to cut it down by 15 percent by 2030, if support from other countries are available, said Mirza Shawkat Ali, director (Climate Change) of the Department of Environment.

A project has been initiated for updating the NDC (nationally determined contributions), he added.

"We have prepared an action plan to reduce carbon emission in three sectors -- industry, transport and energy. Respective ministries are working to reduce carbon emission," he said.

Undetected

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Dhaka city, the rate increases. When the people tested are mostly from outside, it falls. The difference is not much," Prof Nazrul Islam said.

Areas that are hotspots have more people testing positive, he explained.

Prof Nazrul who is also a member of the National Technical Advisory Committee of Covid-19 said, "We would say the transmission is not decreasing."

Both the experts said the number of daily tests was inadequate in terms of the size of population.

As of yesterday, there were around 20 tests per 10,000 people in the country.

To contain the outbreak, experts said there is no alternative to rigorous testing.

"Unless we go for vastly more tests, isolation and treatment, it would be tough to control the epidemic," Prof Ridwanur said.

During yesterday's briefing, Prof Nasima Sultana of the DGHS said the death rate in terms of total detected cases was 1.36 percent as of yesterday.

Meanwhile, a total of 571 Covid-19 patients recovered, taking the total number of recoveries to 12,161.

With this, the recovery rate now stands at 21.13 percent, according to the DGHS.

She added that 386 people were put in isolation.

Among yesterday's victims, 29 were male and six female, she said adding that 21 were from Dhaka, nine from Chattogram, two from Sylhet, one each was from Rajshahi, Barishal and Khulna divisions.

Of them, three were aged between 21 and 30, one was between 31 and 40, three between 41 and 50, 14 between 51 and 60, 11 between 61 and 70, two between 71 and 80, and another was between 81 and 90.