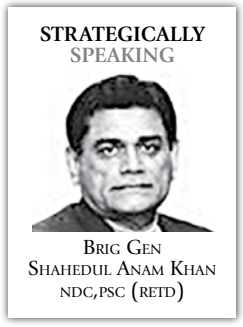


The Upside of a Crisis



“WHEN written in Chinese, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters: one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity.” I had no doubt that the Chinese were people with an abundance of wisdom stemming from, and culled out of, the tradition of more than 5,000 years of civilised existence, but it is only a wise leader who can internalise such profound thoughts, as did John F Kennedy whose exact words I have quoted above. He also added, “In a crisis, be aware of the danger—but recognise the opportunity.” Should all leaders worth the name not do so as well? It would be well to remember that a crisis reveals the true character and quality of a country’s leaders, the business community and the affluent section of society.

Apart from the death and destruction, a crisis leaves many lessons in its wake. The good points must be built upon further, without indulging in celebratory beating of one’s chest or coming out with outlandish and puerile statements—such as that the number of deaths would have been triple were it not for the actions taken, or that we have combatted the Covid-19 pandemic more efficiently than many other countries in the world, etc. What is important, alongside strengthening the positives, is to address the weaknesses revealed without wasting time on discovering exculpatory circumstances. And that is possible only by looking dispassionately and objectively at what went wrong and why. Rectification is possible if the administration is quick to take action to plug the holes in terms of the infrastructure, policies, and the process of taking decisions or formulating policies. The idea is to be prepared for an eventuality. Although there would be many unpredictable contingencies, a good plan must foresee as many as those and formulate as many alternatives as possible, so as not to be caught off guard. The effort should not be merely to manage things but to do the right things, and do so on time.

A case in point is the way we have, over the

last two decades, developed our capability to tackle natural disasters like cyclone and flood, which are rather more predictable. But as far as this pandemic is concerned, we were caught completely off guard. And although the mission to combat Covid-19 remains unfinished, it is time for a mid-course assessment, or a post-mortem on our actions taken so far. Here is my tuppenny worth of suggestions.

The first is to take a hard look at our health sector. What Covid-19 has done is to expose, very blatantly, our frail and poor healthcare system. It is in a shambles. The 2.3 percent of GDP expenditure on health is inadequate if the state really wants to provide even basic healthcare support to the vast majority of the 17 crore people who fall in the category of indigents. True, the government has invested considerably in providing the basic facilities by establishing an extensive network of health services. The number of public hospitals has gone up considerably, but are they fully staffed and equipped? What good is a hospital if the ICU does not have a centralised oxygen supply system? Except for Dhaka, very few divisional headquarters—not to speak of district headquarters—have specialised services and few of those hospitals have ICU facilities, if at all, not to speak of the upazilas. More than 50 percent of ICU beds are in the capital. This is another example of everything becoming Dhaka-centric. And only when the health ministry scampers to induct thousands of nurses and junior doctors after we were hit with the full blast of the pandemic, did we come to know about the state of manpower in our private hospitals.

Private hospitals have mushroomed in Bangladesh but they are highly commercial. Healthcare service, for them, is an appendix; churning out money is the prime motive. In any case, most of those in the high-end category of hospitals cost much more than some hospitals abroad, and the quality of their service does not quite measure up to the standard of service of hospitals in the neighbouring countries. In any case, a majority of the private hospitals in Bangladesh are beyond the reach of those in the middle rung of the economic ladder. Moreover, the pandemic has helped many of those producing or dealing in medicines and equipment like oxygen cylinders to reap whirlwind profit, which is quite unfortunate.

The second issue is the way we have attempted to tackle the pandemic from the very seminal stages of its onslaught. It could be said that the appraisal of the likely impact of the pandemic, particularly on public health, was faulty as much as our confidence in developing herd immunity—and belief in Nature taking care of it—was in abundance. The euphoria was stoked all the more by a few “experts” who cited the example of SARS. And as the situation developed, it appeared that the administration

In the midst of the pandemic, general treatment in the hospitals seems to have stopped. More than a hundred people have reportedly died due to hospitals turning away general patients, including pregnant women. Many hospitals did not, and still do not, have any facility for Covid-19 treatment. It is an emergency without the government declaring so. Under this circumstance, the government can press in any facility to address the emergency. Couldn’t a certain percentage

military utilised the funds diligently, honestly and wisely, and in a planned manner. The military health service is led by a band of highly efficient and dedicated officers and staff who are, as it is, under tremendous strain even in normal times.

In view of the prevailing state of the health sector, it deserves much more than what it has got in the past. We understand that there will be an increase of 7.25 percent in the health budget for next year. Given that our per capita expenditure on health is the lowest in South Asia, the proposed increase is not enough. If the annual outlay on development in the health sector has not been fully utilised, it is the system that must be corrected, and removing systemic flaws should start with discarding the ones in the leadership of the sector. Right to health is implicit in a citizen’s right to life.

One wonders whether anyone is watching the graphs. If so, how is it that the so-called lockdown—if it was a lockdown at all—was lifted at a time when both the numbers of identified cases and deaths spiked exponentially? And now, we have selective lockdown. Couldn’t the reverse—selective reopening—be done? Merely declaring a “general holiday”, as the administration had done, leaves too much to people’s discretion, and given our economic condition, with the informal economy being hit the hardest, the poorest section of society had no other alternative but to scrounge around for a living.

The long and short of it is that the health sector should receive much more than what it has been receiving in the past, and it should be led by dynamic people. A permanent national taskforce or committee on epidemics, as we have for natural disasters, should be set up. The shortcomings in all public hospitals should be eliminated in light of the Covid-19 experience and their facilities should be brought up to par. Blatant commercialisation of the private health service should be stopped. A strict mechanism to enforce orders and instructions should be put in place before issuing directives. For a country like ours, this is a tall order, but that has to be done, gradually of course, if we want to be better prepared to face such an eventuality in the future.

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We have selective lockdown now. Couldn’t the reverse—selective reopening—be done?

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

was playing it by ear. Some of its decisions seemed to be off-the-cuff reactions, and many of them were not even implemented fully. Even “the best laid schemes of mice and men” may go haywire, and so did ours in the very first weeks of the pandemic stamping its footprint in the country.

The government hospitals designated to treat Covid-19 patients were not adequately set up, despite the PM’s directives. The number of testing booths remains pathetically inadequate. And that justifies the demand for making quick testing kits available on a large scale. It is hard to reason the delay in passing verdict on the fast testing kit one way or the other. It has been more than a month since the ones produced by Gonoshasthaya Kendra were handed over to BSMMU.

of hospital beds in all the private hospitals be requisitioned for Covid-19 patients? Government instructions to private hospitals were left at the discretion of their authorities: a few complied, but most did not do so fully.

It seems that only one hospital in the country, CMH Dhaka, is equipped adequately to treat Covid-19 patients. For all VIP patients, the road leads to CMH only. The demand for its services is noticeable. While it makes me proud that this one treatment facility of ours has garnered confidence in the people, I wonder why such confidence has not been created by other hospitals. When senior government functionaries reportedly choose CMH over other government hospitals for Covid-19 treatment, what confidence will others have in them? Why is that so? The answer is bitter: the

Work from home: More cons than pros



TASMAH T RAHMAN

WHILE personally I found more positives than negatives in working from home, I realise that the sudden shift to full-time online work may have affected others differently. As I was curious to know what others felt, the only way to do so was to

ask my fellow development practitioners in Desperately Seeking Development Experts (DSDE), a Facebook group that was created to bring development practitioners together. It gives them a platform where they can reach out and receive any support they need related to the development sector. So, when I asked the group members—“What are your thoughts about working from home?”—there were, interestingly, more cons than pros. I received more than 30 responses in one night, and a majority of them were negative. Let me first highlight the negatives.

CONS:

Work-life balance disrupted

Most respondents complained about having no work-life balance. Having to multitask at home, the burden was double and even triple for working mothers. With the children and the elderly homebound 24/7, they had to take care of them along with daily household chores. As most homes are not equipped with sufficient domestic appliances, people found it hard to juggle between cooking, cleaning, washing and then working longer hours. Women in general had issues with the constant attention demanded by toddlers at home, while parents of school-going children tried balancing to help out with online classes and homework. It was even harder for single mothers, as they had to take care of not only home management but also home schooling and work deadlines.

While this scenario is slowly changing as many men have opted to “help out” and

diligently shared the household work, a lot remains to be done to change the mind-set that household work is not women’s responsibility alone—it is everyone’s! Hopefully, the new normal caused by Covid-19 has created greater awareness of the amount of work to be done on a given day at home, which can’t be sidelined as inferior in any way.

Etiquette 101

The Covid-19 crisis has caught many of us off guard. Not being used to full-time online



work and associated norms, many people accidentally turn on the camera with their “sando genji” (sleeveless shirt) on, not knowing that others in an online meeting can see them! Or, someone just starts talking without “unmuting” their microphone. While most do not dress up and show their faces, less efforts are required for “looking presentable” in these meetings. One respondent was happy to be able to attend meetings in his PJs and someone joked about accidentally standing up in a meeting wearing a decent shirt and a tie—with shorts! Rules of social etiquette in online meetings would have to be learnt by all as we

go forward.

Too much screen time

It is true that due to the crisis, many offices were working round the clock during the emergency period. Especially in the development sector, where NGOs and civil society organisations were working on the ground, they had no timetable at all. Other organisations also had to go through restructuring, re-planning and re-budgeting exercises. No one saw this coming, so everything was a mess initially. As

were more productive and time was better utilised, others thought online meetings were less productive. Some said work-from-home was great for team spirit but most didn’t agree. Some said online meetings are not a solution for face-to-face interactions.

Stress and sleepless nights

Needless to say, the lockdown and the resulting new normal have brought in uncertainties that none of us were ready to cope with. Hence, all the stressful days and sleepless nights. Another reason for stress is too much family time; we are not used to spending so much time with our spouses, parents and children. Add this to the pressure of full-time cooking, cleaning and no access to outside food. Dhaka’s urban dwellers, living in apartments, did feel trapped and bored and frustrated with no solution in sight. Many are emotionally distressed with reports of death coming from all directions and thus in dire need of psychological therapy.

PROS:

Flexible working hours

While most respondents complained about the situations mentioned above, almost all agreed that the flexible working hours have given them immense freedom. Employees would have to continue to work from home for several months, keeping social distancing intact, while some would have no option but to start the field work (as the disadvantaged and vulnerable communities continue to suffer with no employment and no income). However, the idea of conventional workplace may have changed forever, as employers may now opt for smaller office spaces, with less rent and utility bills. However, it is important for employers to give their employees a “choice” for working from home and introduce effective digital tools to get result-based outcome from employees and not base their performance on time spent in office hours.

Big save on commuting

Hours spent in unproductive traffic are gone. This not only saves valuable time, but also thousands of taka saved in fuel. It remains a

fascinating topic of study to understand the reduction on carbon footprint ever since the crisis began. A smarter way forward could be to start a zoning system for office-goers in the post-Covid-19 scenario, meaning that Dhanmondi residents, for example, would work from home for two days a week, reducing the traffic load on streets. Perhaps these are the days that children can go to school, balancing the traffic on the road. Parents then will not have to juggle between going to work and picking children up; they could just go and pick them up during a lunch break while working from home.

Kids saw their parents more than ever before

All parents have agreed that their children have never spent this much time with them. These times, if spent well, may turn out to be valuable for the children’s lives. Going forward, there need to be ways to spend more quality time with children.

To conclude, the Covid-19 crisis, if nothing else, has probably taught us to be humble. Working from home is a privilege that most citizens cannot afford. Those of us who can have materialistic “wants” created to constantly keep our minds occupied, to be part of a race and to feel relevant. However, when our loved ones are falling ill or dying, no amount of money can help. The pandemic, if nothing else, has helped us to open the doors of self-reflection. While we adjust to this new life, we should look within and reflect on our life, our actions and their consequences. But for now, a few materialistic investments may make life easier. Investing in household appliances (like a washing machine), a decent workstation (equipped with a chair with proper lower back support, sufficient lighting and fast wi-fi connection) and, last but not the least, investing in mental health may be helpful. If all fails, we need to remember to breathe!

Tasmiah T Rahman is the Head of Strategy and Business Development, Skills Development Programme, BRAC. Views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect that of her organisation.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



ELECTION OF BORIS YELTSIN

June 12, 1991

On this day in 1991, Boris Yeltsin was easily elected president of Russia (then part of the Soviet Union) in the republic’s first direct, popular elections, and he was president of independent Russia until the eve of 2000.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Circus worker
- 6 Forum figure
- 11 Muscular dog
- 12 Stand
- 13 Mideast region
- 14 “Divine Comedy” author
- 15 Blasting stuff
- 16 Stiffly phrased
- 18 Series-ending abbr.
- 19 Historic age
- 20 Bellow
- 21 London area
- 23 Pop star John
- 25 Sphere
- 27 Heir, often
- 28 Landslide detritus

DOWN

- 1 Samples
- 2 Like
- 3 Candy flavor
- 4 Seventh Greek letter
- 5 Worker’s reward
- 6 Some tires
- 7 Test type
- 8 Perfect shape
- 9 Toward the rear
- 10 Poor
- 11 Uno plus due
- 12 Bruins legend
- 24 Sock part
- 26 Not to mention
- 28 Field game
- 29 Go astray
- 31 Skilled in
- 32 Comes in
- 33 Physicist Nikola
- 35 Stern with a bow
- 38 – Mater
- 42 Lingerie buy



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

H	A	M	S		S	E	P	A	L
E	P	I	C		T	O	D	A	T
L	E	N	A		U	N	I	T	E
D	R	I	L	L	B	I	T		
F	A	C	E	T	S		P	I	T
I	D	O	L	S		L	I	M	I
T	A	R		S	O	N	A	T	A
S	M	A	S	H	I	T			
C	A	V	O	R	T		R	O	V
A	C	O	R	N	S		I	R	A
N	E	W	T	S		M	E	N	D

BETLE BAILEY



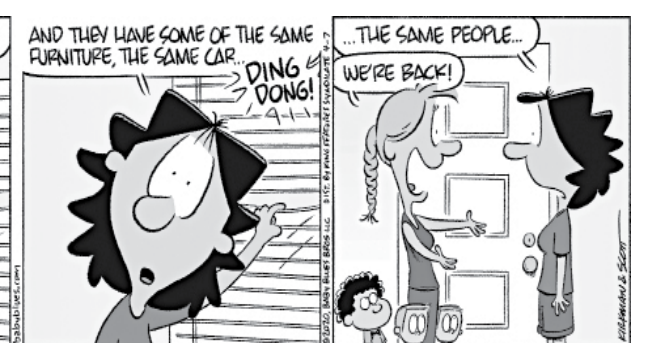
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BABY BLUES



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