

A giant who walked amongst us

Kamal Lohani has left an irreplaceable void in our moral landscape

WE are deeply saddened by the news of the passing of eminent cultural activist and journalist Kamal Lohani on Saturday. Mr Lohani was undergoing treatment at the intensive care unit of a private hospital in Dhaka. According to reports, he tested positive for coronavirus and was already suffering from several pre-existing conditions including heart disease and diabetes along with lung and kidney complications. This is, undoubtedly, a sad day for all of us at the journalist community, and the wider society in general, who benefitted from his wisdom, leadership and public service. His death, just six days short of his eighty-seventh birthday, also gives us pause to take stock of his rich legacy as a conscience-keeper of the nation since as far back as the 1950s.

Kamal Lohani played a significant role in different socio-political and democratic movements of our history, including the 1952 Language Movement and the Liberation War. He was jailed and tortured several times for his political activism in the lead-up to the war. In 1971, he worked at the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra as its news editor. In an interview with *The Daily Star* in 2015, he explained how his role as a *shobdo shoinik*—collecting and broadcasting news—was, for him, an instrument to be used in the service of the nation. “I am fortunate that I was entitled with the responsibility of writing and reading the news bulletin on our victory,” he said. In the post-war period, he served in important posts of many unions for journalists and relentlessly worked for establishing their rights and demands. In his long life, he also served as the director of Bangladesh Press Institute and the director general of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. Furthermore, he was a president of Bangladesh Udichi Shilpigosthi, and was also involved with Ektatorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee. In 2015, he was awarded the Ekushey Padak.

Mr Lohani was a giant who walked amongst us, and today the country is left poorer by his death—coming as it did on the heels of an already long list of prominent individuals succumbing to the coronavirus. He deserves a hero’s farewell, by the people who he served and who looked up to him for guidance but, unfortunately, that may not be possible because of social distancing restrictions imposed by Covid-19. But he will live on in the memory of the people and his legacy will continue to guide us in the future. May his soul rest in peace.

Donor countries must continue their support for Rohingyas

Bangladesh alone cannot bear the burden during this pandemic

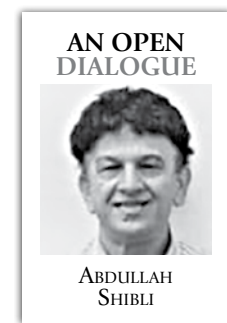
IT is concerning to learn that out of USD 308.7 million sought from the international community for the Rohingyas for 2020, only USD 87 million or 27 percent of that has been given as of May, according to the UN Refugee Agency. And as countries around the world struggle to deal with the economic fall-out of the pandemic, there might also be shortage of funding in the future. Another reason for the likely shortage of funding may be that the activities of the non-government organisations have decreased drastically amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Meanwhile, over one million Rohingya refugees are living in camps in Cox’s Bazar in cramped conditions with limited access to adequate hygiene and health facilities. Until June 18, a total of 42 Rohingyas have tested positive and three have succumbed to the disease. Only recently, at least 32 Rohingyas died on a drifting boat at sea while desperately trying to get to the Malaysian coast but could not find refuge there. Our coast guards rescued 396 of them who were at sea for nearly two months. It is likely that the situation of the Rohingyas will be more complicated in the coming days due to the pandemic-induced economic crisis. Experts also fear that the ongoing armed conflict in western Myanmar could be used by the Myanmar government as a pretext for not repatriating the Rohingyas.

While our government has included the Rohingya refugees in its national action plan to respond to Covid-19, the humanitarian agencies have also been working hard to respond to the situation. However, all the response plans may be interrupted due to the fund shortage which is likely to happen in the coming days.

While it is understandable that the donor countries would focus on rebuilding their own economy after the pandemic, it is also expected that they would continue to support the Rohingyas at a time when they need their assistance more than ever. Additionally, the international community should continue to exert pressure on the Myanmar government to start the repatriation process as soon as possible. It must intervene by deploying forces to stop the fighting and improve the conditions in Rakhine for the Rohingyas’ safe return. The Bangladesh government has been continuing to shelter the Rohingyas for many years, but with a large portion of its own population living in poverty, it cannot continue to feed over one million Rohingyas in the refugee camps and ensure their basic rights if the international community decreases their funding.

The curious disconnect between reality and the world of politics



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE national budget announced by the Bangladesh government is another example of the curious disconnect between reality and the world of politics. National leaders and NGOs have voiced their disbelief over the goals and the numbers enunciated by the finance minister (FM) a few days ago, including the GDP growth rate which is set to bounce back to the 8.2 percent target set for last year.

In sharp contrast, a World Bank forecast released on June 8 expects the world economy to experience a 5.2 percent decline in GDP in 2020. The bank’s projections, provided in its June 2020 Global Economic Prospects, warns that, if this dark scenario materialises, “That would represent the deepest recession since the Second World War, with the largest fraction of economies experiencing declines in per capita output since 1870.”

Against this backdrop, and in sharp contrast to the pessimistic global outlook, the FM’s proposed budget for the next 2020-21 fiscal year (July 2020-June 2021) targets an economic growth rate of 8.2 percent which is exactly equal to last year’s (FY20). This optimistic plan is based on the government’s faith in a quick recovery following the Covid-19 reopening which started after the Eid holidays and a hope that the economy will experience a sharp “V-shaped” rebound. While many economists, including myself have put our bets on a more gradual “U-shaped” restart of the Bangladesh economy and suggested a gradual three-phase reopening, the government is counting on alternative counsel, demonstrating its impatience with the mounting toll of Covid-19 on the health of the people and its economy.

In an op-ed in *The Daily Star* on May 26, I voiced my concern over a hasty unplanned reopening following the Eid holidays. Prior to that, on March 18, in a piece entitled “Tough Times Ahead in the Wake of Coronavirus”, we expressed the view that the indirect effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will be felt by every country since it has already slowed down global economic recovery. This group includes Bangladesh which will feel the impact of the slowdown in global trade, lack of jobs for Bangladeshis in the Middle East, and a slow recovery of

international trade. We expressed our belief that the coronavirus onslaught will weigh in on the global economy and will last even after the epidemic has been brought under control, and “it won’t end with a sudden burst of blue skies”.

It is not clear what calculations went into the government’s GDP targeting, in view of the fact that the government offices were shut down for over two months. Interministerial discussions and information exchanges between various departments have been at a standstill. According to various sources, the banking, inflation and balance of payment data have not been compiled during the shutdown period. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and the Bangladesh

party was planning to hold many rounds of rallies, national events, and publicly-financed rounds of Centennial and Bicentennial celebrations to grab international attention, and showcase our economic growth, i.e. our journey over the last decade on the “Road to Prosperity”. In this day of pain and suffering witnessed by the people during the three months of lockdown, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of the mood that prevailed as late as March 2020.

The AL election manifesto set very ambitious economic goals, including an increase in the GDP growth rate, rapid growth in per capita income, and a significant jump in the rate of investment

income of Tk 3,780 billion and a deficit of Tk 1,900 billion. However, targeting a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 8.2 percent for FY21 indicates that economic growth has been expected to pick up speed and the economy will experience a strong rebound. There is only one word to describe this whole exercise, “Unbelievable”!

One only has to contrast the FM’s overall plan with two pieces of evidence presented below to understand the scepticism voiced all around. First, let us consider the pessimistic global GDP projections from all international institutions. Ceyla Pazarbasiglu, a World Bank vice president, cautioned in an interview about the grim global picture. “This is a deeply sobering outlook, with the crisis likely to leave long-lasting scars and pose major global challenges.” The World Bank forecast of -5.2 percent is more dire than the 3.3 percent contraction that IMF predicted in April. And it warns, a protracted pandemic that leads to a breakdown in financial markets and global trade could darken the outlook.

Secondly, Oxford University has been tracking government measures in response to Covid-19 in real-time and in about 160 countries. The Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) project collects data on 17 indicators which represent the level of strictness of each policy in three categories: a) containment and closure policies; b) economic policies; and c) health system policies. The policies selected include school closures, travel bans, emergency investment in healthcare, fiscal measures, and investment in vaccines by the governments. The latest ratings published for four South Asian countries show that while Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan scored a perfect 100, Bangladesh’s Stringency Index measure is 95.24. In other words, Bangladesh has a few things to learn from our neighbours in terms of enforcement of proactive measures to limit the spread of Covid-19: strictly screen and quarantine international travellers, monitor commercial establishments to prevent virus spread, upgrade the healthcare infrastructure (the ratio of the number of hospital beds, ICU beds and ventilators to the population), and prioritise greater availability of healthcare professionals—doctors, hospital staff, paramedics and well-trained social workers.

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Bank (BB), the two major agencies tasked with aiding the government’s budgetary and contingency plans had been in operational limbo during the lockdown period.

It is understandable that the government and the ruling party are still struggling to come to terms with the damage to the economy and the year-long celebration plans upended by Covid-19. This year the PM and her allies had planned major events that would have showcased our 10 years of sustained growth and a booming economy as we entered the new decade. However, there has been an over-reliance on GDP growth and other targets dependent on GDP-growth rates.

One only has to look back only one year to jog our memory. The ruling

party was planning to hold many rounds of rallies, national events, and publicly-financed rounds of Centennial and Bicentennial celebrations to grab international attention, and showcase our economic growth, i.e. our journey over the last decade on the “Road to Prosperity”.

The Asian Development Bank’s rosy recent outlook (ADO) for the Bangladesh economy seems to have unduly influenced the government’s projection of GDP growth and minimised the importance of the economic loss, for the eight months from March to December 2020 and beyond. “A planned rise in public investment in large projects should help expansion in domestic demand,” said the ADO and added, “improvement in global growth with expected government policy support will help the industrial activities expand.” The FY21 total budget is Tk 5,680 billion with an

Bangladesh should listen to its health workers

MEENAKSHI GANGULY

NINE-months pregnant, Fatema Akhter Mukta, 30, died on June 10 after her family struggled for five days to find a hospital in Bangladesh willing to admit her when she began having trouble breathing. When, finally, a hospital admitted her and referred her to Chittagong Medical College for its intensive care facilities, it was too late. “Every hospital refused to admit her when they learned my wife was having trouble breathing, suspecting it to be Covid symptoms,” said Towhidul Arzu, Fatema’s husband. “When I begged them to help her, one doctor showed me a long waiting list of patients.”

As governments around the world struggle to contain the pandemic, Human Rights Watch has called to uphold rights including access to health and education, protection of vulnerable communities, migrant workers, religious minorities and medical personnel.

Fatema’s experience has become tragically common right now in Bangladesh, with the healthcare system overwhelmed by the pandemic. As the recorded deaths from Covid-19 passes 1,300 and with nearly 100,000 testing positive, the Bangladesh government needs to step up its efforts.

The rate of infections is likely much higher given Bangladesh’s low levels of testing—Bangladesh has tested about 554,000 people in a country of nearly 165 million, with a rate of positive tests hovering around 20 percent. The World Health Organization has suggested that until positive tests come in at about 10 percent, more testing is needed to understand the actual prevalence of Covid-19 in the population.

Some of my Bangladeshi friends worry they might have symptoms, while others are slowly recovering. Several have relatives and friends who have tested positive. Some who have lost loved ones believe prompt medical care could have saved them.

Government hospitals across the country have only 733 intensive care unit (ICU) beds and fewer than 1,800 ventilators, meaning too few of those who test positive could potentially access care facilities. Those with symptoms consistent with Covid-19 increasingly report being turned away from both public and private hospitals. There are

massive disparities in health access throughout the country. Only about 25 percent of the country’s limited number of health workers are in rural areas, where about 70 percent of the population lives. And while most of the country’s doctors, ICUs, and ventilators are in Dhaka, for the millions of people living in the city’s slums, these services remain difficult to access.

Two doctors currently serving in Covid-19-dedicated hospitals, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they were overwhelmed, and that limited

medical services and said that the authorities “will not hesitate to take action against those who fail to do so.” But doctors aren’t turning people away because they are cold-hearted or incapable. They simply don’t have the resources they need to care for patients, or even to protect themselves. Hospitals are full and even ailing doctors are reportedly being turned away.

Nor do health workers have sufficient personal protective equipment to safely provide medical care. A Bangladesh Doctors’ Foundation survey conducted

to the Bangladesh Medical Association, 31 health workers had died from the virus and over 3,164 more had been infected. The Doctors’ Association of Bangladesh has called for more tests, more facilities for Covid-19 patients, adequate personal protective equipment for all health workers, and social services for the poor.

Instead of listening to health workers and addressing their concerns, the authorities have cracked down on those who speak out, including with the draconian Digital Security Act, and issued blanket gag orders to doctors and nurses.



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PHOTO: STAR

facilities mean patients without clout are being denied treatment. “Thousands are coming to the hospital with Covid symptoms,” one of them said. “We have to accept patients if they are referred to us by higher ups and end up refusing others because there are no beds available.”

In response to reports of hospitals turning people away, Health Minister Zahid Malik warned doctors to provide

in April found over one third of 826 doctors from private hospitals did not have sufficient protection. Conditions are most likely worse in public hospitals, where more doctors have reportedly contracted the virus. According to media reports, some doctors are wearing raincoats in place of adequate personal protective equipment.

Health workers are paying painfully for this deficit. As of June 14, according

The government hates criticism. But when dealing with such a massive global crisis, it needs to at least be willing to listen to healthcare professionals, journalists, and others so that it can effectively protect public health and provide resources where they are most urgently needed.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop creating more refugees

I strongly believe that if the world unites effectively in tackling the reasons that cause people to flee their home countries, then recurring incidents of migrants dying at sea will eventually come to an end. Conflicts and persecutions force thousands of human beings to cross the Mediterranean in ramshackle vessels. Many drown.

Human rights abuses and persecution are contributing to the huge wave of refugees. Factors that trigger this continuous displacement of people from their home countries should be exposed, challenged and eradicated once and for all.

Handsen Chikowore, by email