

Ensure digital devices for all

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Prof Kamal Ahamed, president of Bangladesh Bishwabidyalay Parishad, a platform of vice-chancellors of public universities, said all universities should have assessments on the economic and the mental conditions of students.

He proposed all universities look into various problems of students and teachers like whether they need laptops or smartphones and internet access.

"All public universities are getting ready for online education, they are trying to overcome their lacking... budgetary allocation is immediately needed to address these matters", said Kamal, VC of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University.

North South University VC Prof Atiqul Islam said private universities should not pressurise students over tuition fees and enrolment in new semesters. Rather, they should assist them as much as they can.

"We can help students have access to smartphones and internet," he said.

He also pointed out that without student enrolment, only 10 out of 105 private universities would be able to survive the pandemic. He proposed merging of universities to tackle the situation.

Brac University Distinguished Professor M Kaykobad said all universities should ensure online classes. "We have seen that whenever we begin using any technology, some sort of discrimination appears. But the gap narrows with time," he said.

He also said, "If students stay at home and have nothing to do,

they will face more problems. Such students must be given all the assistance they need."

UGC Professor Dr Fakrul Alam proposed taking up a holistic plan before introducing online classes. "If we hurriedly start the online education, it will increase the digital divide," he said.

For the sake of smooth education in future, he also proposed "blending" online education with in-person classes after the country would get back on track from the pandemic.

University Teachers' Network organiser and Dhaka University's Associate Professor Samina Luthfa said all students' access to online education must be ensured. "Otherwise, there will be discrimination and students will be deprived of their rights to education."

She also said online classes should first be introduced for postgraduate students and then for the undergraduate students.

Jahangirnagar University student Aaica Zulfiqar proposed formation of a platform for counselling students on mental health as they have been living indoors for months amid the pandemic.

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology student Tanvir Akanda said research-based planning was needed before introducing online education to all students. "The authorities should talk to students about their needs for the planning."

Shuprova Tasneem and Mohiuddin Alamgir from The Daily Star moderated the webinar.



Passersby on Zia Sarani in the capital's Shanir Akhra help a rickshaw-puller retrieve his vehicle after it fell into Kutubkhali canal. A portion of the culvert over the canal collapsed about eight months ago, narrowing it to such an extent that two vehicles can hardly pass at a time. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

The caravan of broken dreams

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Economists said the rapid emergence of the new-poor due to job loss and salary cuts will further deepen the crisis unless the social safety net programmes are taken to support them.

Another survey on 5,471 people found that 77 percent of the formerly non-poor group had slid below the poverty line.

This study was conducted by the Power and Participation Research Centre and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development in April.

MANY STORIES OF PAIN
Abdur Rahman used to run a small factory, making hats at a tin-roof building in Uttara Sector-9. He used to pay Tk 25,000 as rent for the space.

He lived with his wife and two daughters at a Tk-15,000-a-month flat.

He had 75 workers in his factory. After the government enforced the shutdown in late March, the orders were cancelled and he had to let go of all his employees.

"The machines alone cost about Tk 20 lakh. The workers are waiting for their arrears while the landowner is asking for rent," said a hapless

Rahman.

He recently sent his wife and two daughters to his village home in Barishal's Bakerganj. He now lives in a small room in Turag area, paying Tk 4,200 a month.

"I too will leave Dhaka next month," Rahman said.

The economic hurdle also pushed many university students to leave their accommodations in the city due to the sharp fall of demand for private tutors.

EXPAND SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Social safety net programmes in Bangladesh are mainly focused on the rural poor, said Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC).

"The number of poor people in the urban areas has increased due to the pandemic. Programmes should have been launched earlier keeping in mind the urban people who slipped into poverty during the shutdown," he said.

Noted economist Prof Anu Muhammad of Jahangirnagar University said the government should have introduced food and cash

assistance in March. Many countries took such initiatives.

"But our government has failed to do that... The number of poor people has doubled now. The government should start food and cash assistance to the new poor immediately," he said.

PROPERTY OWNERS ALSO COUNT LOSS

Afzal Hossain and his family own a business of renting homes in Tejgaon Industrial Area. They have 200 residential units, of which 25 have been vacant since April.

"We reduced the room rent from Tk 7,000 to Tk 5,000 and flat rent from Tk 25,000 to Tk 20,000. We still can't find any tenants," said Afzal.

He added that his family constructed the buildings taking loans and now the lenders are asking for payment of instalments.

"Besides, some tenants have not been able to pay the rent for three months while others went to their village, leaving their belongings and did not return," he said.

The picture is similar in Savar, Gazipur and Narayanganj which are hubs for low-wage working people.

Hounded by threats, trolls

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This raises the question: Who does this Digital Security Act protect if not the ordinary citizens?

On the other hand, the 14-year-old son of a farmer has been arrested for criticising the government move to increase tax on mobile call rates, two university teachers are still languishing in jail for criticising a former health minister, and at least 37 journalists have been arrested since the beginning of the pandemic mostly for reporting on the lockdown.

The deputy commissioner of the Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police told several media outlets that they are scanning the hate content and trying to identify those behind it.

It must be noted, however, that the actors are hardly difficult to identify -- many of these actors have full social media presences complete with details about who they are, where they live and who their friends are. Some are popular YouTube vloggers with thousands of subscribers.

Their social media reach goes far beyond that of the arrested ninth-grade student from some village in Horibarani union of Mymensingh's Bhaluka upazila, whose name most people don't even know. He was arrested the same day a case was filed.

As the Sampadak Parishad noted in a statement last week, "Statistics show that more journalists, teachers, and intellectuals have been arrested under the DSA than cyber criminals, especially in the last six months."

This tide of hate speech spewed around a couple of issues. There was an innocuous comment made by one of the educators appreciating a post on LGBTQ rights at the University of

Oxford. There was a video where an educator taught about the importance of consent in romantic exchanges, and there was another on menstruation. In addition, there was a video where educators encouraged parents to allow their children to interact with people from the opposite gender, and a video asking youngsters to celebrate love on Valentine's Day.

These videos had been on the internet for a while, and nobody seemed to have noticed them all this time -- it was only last week that all hell broke loose in what can objectively be called a concerted witch-hunt.

It is telling that while YouTube is filled to the brim with "religious tutorials" by "religious scholars" on how men may objectify women for their pleasure, a video teaching mutual respect and consent drew flak from this digital community.

In the absence of physical protection, the educational platform took down the videos on menstruation and consent, social media users pointed out. At least one of the educators apologised for his "hurting religious sentiments", confessed to causing that offence, and stated that he is ashamed.

A considerable fan base was left disappointed, because when push came to shove, this youth organisation caved. After all, believing in the rights of women and vulnerable communities, is nothing to be "ashamed" of, or apologise for; freedom of belief and expression is a constitutional right guaranteed by the state.

But then again, it is also the state's responsibility to ensure, through the rule of law, that citizens can exercise those constitutional rights. Is that being done, is the question.

1,000 listed as human traffickers

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"We are now updating the list after checking it with police records. We also have come to know about more traffickers from local police stations and the relatives of those killed in Libya," he said.

Regarding the number of traffickers, DIG Mainul said, "We are still working on it. The combined list so far has names of over 1,000 people as human traffickers."

He, however, said the number may increase as local police stations at different districts and detective branches also have information on human traffickers.

Sources said the previous police list had 1,042 names.

TRAFFICKING ZONES

Analysing complaints on trafficking and intelligence reports, law enforcers have marked 24 districts as "human trafficking zones", said a top police official.

The districts are Cox's Bazar, Sunamganj, Habiganj, Kishoreganj, Pabna, Sirajganj, Narsingdi, Narayanganj, Gopalganj, Faridpur, Bandarban, Brahmanbaria, Shariatpur, Jashore, Satkhira, Chuadanga, Meherpur, Bagerhat, Jhenidah, Chandpur, Chattogram, Cumilla, Pirojpur and Bhola, said the official, requested anonymity.

The official further said Cox's Bazar is a "major trafficking zone" and 66 of the listed traffickers are based in the district alone.

MANY UNDER WATCH

According to PHQ database, at least 6,106 people were arrested between 2013 and 2018 across the country for their alleged involvement in human trafficking.

"We have already started our work to keep an eye on their current status. Many of them have come out of jail... The move is aimed at stopping them committing the crime again," DIG Shaikh Nazmul Alam of the CID told The Daily Star.

Sources also said many of those arrestees walked out of jail on bail and

are now working as brokers of different transnational human trafficking gangs.

Another top police official said registrations of around 100 recruiting agencies, which send people abroad, were cancelled for their alleged links with trafficking. "We are working to confirm their involvement," the official said.

MASTERMIND UNDER SCANNER

So far, 26 cases have been filed against 300 people with different police stations following the killing of the 26 Bangladeshis in Libya.

Sixty-seven people have so far been arrested, and of them, 36, including an employee of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, were arrested by the CID.

Of the arrestees, 20 have already given confessional statements in court, said sources.

Imtiaz Ahmed, DIG (organised crime) of the CID, told this newspaper that they were doing their best to arrest the masterminds, but many of the suspects were out of the country.

"Most of the traffickers went into hiding and are on alert after we launched a drive against traffickers. But we have already started updating their list and drives are underway to arrest them," he said, adding that they were trying to seek Interpol's support in this regard.

"The good news is recently we have been able to track down the location of a top mastermind of the trafficking syndicates. The mastermind is already under watch," he said.

CID officials also said the godfather of the syndicate has been trafficking young girls to different dance bars and hotels in Dubai since 2018. He owns some five hotels in Dubai.

The officials declined to share further information on the mastermind for the sake of investigation.

Besides, the CID has taken steps to seize properties of the criminals who are on the run.

"We have already completed an investigation against three traffickers. We will file cases against them soon," added DIG Imtiaz.

Returnees can overwhelm

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use is going up day by day, reducing the demand for farm workers.

Prof Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said the rural economy would obviously be under pressure. "This pressure will continue as long as the health risk, caused by the pandemic, is there. This is going to be a huge burden on the already slowed down rural economy."

He pointed out that the large number of manpower who used to go abroad every month for jobs are now stuck in rural areas due to the current situation. "More than six lakh people used to go abroad from Bangladesh every year. They are now there in rural areas. Given the current situation, it can be said the economy is under huge pressure."

Talking about the support to the rural economy to cope with the

pressure, Mirza Aziz, also a visiting professor at Brac University, said the government should help this section of people through its relief distribution measures.

He said the novel coronavirus would hopefully disappear or its intensity would reduce in the coming months. "And at that time, we will have to put in our all-out efforts to restore the production and supply chain."

Mirza Aziz put emphasis on guiding the SME sector by the government after the Covid-19 and quick restoration of production in big industries in full swing.

Mustafizur said the government should expand its social safety net programmes to include those going back to their villages. "The cash transfer scheme can be expanded from the existing Tk 50 lakh."

He stressed the importance of

spending money on renovation of rural roads and investing money in public works to engage a good number of returnees in those programmes.

"The stimulus package of Tk 5,000 crore which was allocated for agricultural loans should be implemented quickly so that people living in rural areas could start their economic activities which will be helpful to engage more people," he said.

Mustafiz said there would be a qualitative change in the economy, which would absorb some pressure, if the government could carry out these initiatives properly.

He, however, stressed the need for addressing the health issues at the moment. "And after that, the government should pay its attention to revamping the economy. Currently, nothing is going on for these two sectors. There is a question about the policy matters as well."

Adopt aggressive virus measures

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reported almost 64,000 new cases Friday and the death toll now stands at just under 134,000, according to Johns Hopkins University.

California, one of the hardest hit by the pandemic, will release up to 8,000 more prisoners to reduce the spread of the virus in its crowded jails, officials said.

Brazil, the second-hardest hit, surpassed 70,000 deaths and reported 45,000 new infections, the health ministry said.

In Uzbekistan, citizens were facing lockdown restrictions again from Friday that were originally imposed in March but lifted gradually over the past two months.

The Central Asian country's return to confinement followed a decision by Australia to lock down its second-biggest city Melbourne from Thursday.

A police officer manning a checkpoint on the outskirts of the former Soviet republic's capital said only drivers with "a good reason" to enter Tashkent -- such as delivering food or other vital supplies -- could pass.

Restaurants, gyms, swimming pools and non-food markets have all shut their doors until at least August 1.

Private transport within cities will be limited to morning and early evening journeys and essential purposes such as travelling to work and purchasing food or medicine.

Victoria, Australia's second most-populous state, reported one of its highest daily increases in infections yesterday and warned the numbers would get worse before they got better as its capital city began its first weekend of a six-week lockdown.

In Hong Kong, the spike marks a setback for the city after daily life

had largely returned to normal with restaurants and bars resuming regular business and cultural attractions reopening.

Despite being right next to mainland China where the virus first emerged, the city had managed to quash local transmission in recent months.

But new clusters have started to emerge since Tuesday, including at an elderly care home that reported at least 32 cases and a housing estate with 11, reports AFP.

India's health ministry yesterday reported another 519 deaths from the virus infection, taking the country's death toll 22,123.

'TURN THIS PANDEMIC AROUND'
"Across all walks of life, we are all being tested to the limit," the WHO's Tedros told a virtual news conference in Geneva.

"From countries where there is exponential growth, to places that are loosening restrictions and now starting to see cases rise.

"Only aggressive action combined with national unity and global solidarity can turn this pandemic around," he said.

Earlier Friday, an epidemiologist and an animal health specialist from the WHO left for China to try and identify the animal source of the new coronavirus pandemic.

The US welcomes the WHO's probe into the origins of coronavirus in China, its ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva said Friday.

Elsewhere, French officials warned of rising cases in metropolitan France as the death toll topped 30,000.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted a decision to allow businesses, including bars and event spaces, to reopen may have been

Russia, China veto Syria aid via Turkey for second time

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council failed to find a consensus on prolonging cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria on Friday after Russia and China vetoed an extension and members rejected a counter proposal by Moscow.

Without an agreement, authorization for the transport of aid to war-torn Syria, which has existed since 2014, expired Friday night.

Germany and Belgium were working on a final initiative to save the effort, with hopes of bringing it to a vote this weekend.

"We are ready to work round the clock, and call on others to think of the millions of people in Syria waiting for the Security Council to decide their fate," said German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen, who holds the rotating presidency of the Security Council this month.

After Moscow and Beijing wielded vetoes for a second time this week, only three countries joined Russia in backing its proposal to cut the number of aid transit points from two to one.

China supported Russia, but seven countries including the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Belgium voted against, with four abstentions.

An attempt by Russia to pass a similar resolution also failed earlier this week.

The NGO Oxfam had warned that stopping cross-border aid would be "a devastating blow to the millions of Syrian families who rely on this aid for clean water, food, health care and shelter."

Thirteen countries voted in favor of an earlier German-Belgian draft, but Moscow and Beijing opposed the extension because they favor a more limited proposal.

European countries and the US want to maintain two crossing points on the Turkish border -- at Bab al-Salam, which leads to the Aleppo region, and Bab al-Hawa, which serves the Idlib region.

The UN authorization allows the body to distribute aid to displaced Syrians without needing permission from Damascus.

Russia and China argue that the UN authorization violates Syria's sovereignty, and that aid can increasingly be channeled through Syrian authorities.

The latest proposal by Russia, which claims to want continued aid for the insurgent Idlib region, would have kept only the Bab al-Hawa access point open, and for one year.

Moscow claims that more than 85 percent of current aid goes through Bab al-Hawa and that the Bab al-Salam entry point can therefore be closed.

Western countries oppose it, with the US having described two entry points as "a red line."

In January, Moscow, Syria's closest ally, succeeded in having the crossing points reduced from four to two and in limiting the authorization to six months instead of a year.

According to Washington's ambassador to the UN, Kelly Craft, keeping only one border crossing open would cut off 1.3 million people living north of Aleppo from humanitarian aid.

Another diplomat noted that "if the authorization is renewed a few days late, it is not the absolute end of the world. It suspends the convoys for a few days, it does not put them in danger."

For the UN, keeping as many entry points open as possible is crucial, particularly given the risk of the coronavirus pandemic, which is spreading in the region.

Testing

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The officials who have been working hard to control Covid-19 outbreak will be disheartened due to the wrong deeds of the top health officials, he said.

In the last 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday, a total of 11,193 samples were tested in 77 rt-PCR labs across the country.

Of them, 24 percent -- 2,686 people -- tested positive for the virus, according to DGHS.

Meanwhile, 30 people died of Covid-19 yesterday.

With the fatalities and new cases, the death toll now reached at 2,305 -- 1.27 percent of all confirmed cases, and the total number of confirmed cases rose to 929,465 -- 19.49 percent of all people tested.

Including yesterday's 1,628 patients, the total number of recovered patients rose to 88,034 -- 48.60 percent of all confirmed cases.

Among the yesterday's deceased, 25 were male and five were female. Of them, 13 were from Dhaka, 10 from Chattogram, three from Rajshahi, three from Khulna and one from Barishal divisions.

Three were aged between 31 and 40, three between 41 and 50, eight between 51 and 60, 12 between 61 and 70, three between 71 and 80 and one was between 81 and 90 years.

A total of 853 people were put under isolation in the last 24 hours.

AFP, Rome

500 migrants reach Italy's Lampedusa in two days: IOM

AFP, Rome

More than 500 migrants have arrived on Lampedusa over the past two days, the UN's migration agency said Friday, as people take advantage of calm seas to attempt the perilous Mediterranean crossing to Europe.

Since the start of summer, the island has seen a sharp increase in the number of migrants landing there directly, even as others picked up from the Mediterranean by charity rescue boats have been brought in recent days in Sicily to the north.

Nine boats arrived Thursday from Tunisia, carrying a total of 116 people. A further 434 people arrived Friday, on seven boats from Tunisia and two larger vessels from Libya, according to the International Organization for Migration.