

## Clinics and diagnostic centres without valid licenses?

*The DGHS and health ministry cannot absolve themselves of responsibility*

WE are appalled to know that two-thirds of the country's private clinics and diagnostic centres have been operating without valid licences since 2018. There are more than 15,000 of such clinics and diagnostic centres responsible for various surgeries, medical treatment and pathological tests. In the context of the ongoing pandemic, the implications of such anomalies in legal compliances are quite frightening.

This inexplicable gap in accountability cannot be explained away by saying that the renewal of licenses has been slow because of DGHS's switching to digitisation—as has been claimed by an official of that body. Nor is it acceptable that all the DGHS can do is serve notices and declare clinics and diagnostic centres illegal if they violate the Medical Practice and Private Clinics and Laboratories (Regulation) Ordinance, 1982 under which these facilities are governed. These are not acceptable excuses for allowing such crucial establishments, which deal with people's medical treatment, to operate illegally for any period of time. We have seen what can happen through the case of the recent Regent Hospital scandal, in which thousands of patients were swindled by the hospital by issuing fake Covid-19 reports, endangering their very lives.

We know that there are many such clinics and diagnostic centres where both testing and treatments are questionable. And if tests are not reliable, the diagnosis will be wrong and so will the treatment.

A major revision of the process of making these medical facilities compliant with the law is urgently needed. The first step would be to carry out a proper probe into why these facilities were allowed to run without valid licences in the first place. According to DGHS, there are only three officials to look after the licences of around 5,000 clinics and diagnostic centres. The health ministry must immediately increase the DGHS's manpower and give it the authority to close down clinics and diagnostic centres that have not renewed their licences, instead of merely sending notices and publishing announcements in the newspapers.

There also has to be close monitoring of these establishments so that they maintain the basic standards of diagnostic testing, cleanliness and medical treatment including surgeries and procedures. For this, the DGHS itself must be transparent and purged of all corrupt elements that might have helped these dubious establishments to continue operations. A former director of DGHS has suggested that the licensing process be decentralised with upazilas, civil surgeons, health and family planning officers issuing and renewing licenses—of course, after thorough scrutiny of the facilities. Such suggestions should be taken heed of. The DGHS and health ministry must make clinics and diagnostic centres compliant with the law and accountable when they violate it. Lives depend on such basic oversight by these authorities.

## Malaysia leading the way

*Migrant workers deserve fair legal protection*

MALAYSIA is planning to introduce an e-wages system which will alert the government in case foreign workers working on Malaysian territory do not get paid. It is a fantastic idea. And we couldn't agree more with the Malaysian government that such a system is necessary to ensure that foreign workers are not taken advantage of and that they regularly receive the economic compensation they have worked for.

The Malaysian government is also planning to enforce Section 446 of the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act from September 1 to ensure that all employers provide housing and accommodation and that their workers' welfare is taken care of. Moreover, according to Malaysia's human resources minister, his ministry will also propose that every foreign worker be given protection under the Social Security Organisation in order to meet the international standard of treating all workers, foreign or domestic, equally.

The ongoing pandemic has wreaked havoc for many a migrant worker, especially those from Bangladesh. It has also exposed the vulnerable conditions they are forced to live and work in, with employers and host countries abandoning thousands of them at the first sight of hardship. Thousands of our workers have lost their jobs, and many have been deported and even denied their wages despite having worked for them. And all of this has been possible due to there being a lack of mechanism through which migrant workers could ensure that they are not treated this unfairly.

The Malaysian government could change all this for the majority of migrant workers around the world with the steps it is mulling over. Should Malaysia implement them, a debate over protecting migrant workers could start, and other countries around the world could be convinced to follow suit. Thus, we are fully on board with these steps and would like to call upon other countries to consider taking similar measures to protect migrant workers.

# A Tale of Misplaced Priorities

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

IT'S mind-boggling to think of a situation where there is an urgency, poor people are in dire need, and money is in the hands of the government allocated to help those in need, but the money is not being distributed properly. This is what is happening with the Bangladesh government's cash transfer programme for the poor people in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak. It is both baffling and symptomatic of the government's mismanagement in addressing the catastrophe of an unprecedented magnitude. It is also a tale of misplaced priorities.

Since Bangladesh was hit by the pandemic in March, with its first case of infection identified on March 8 and the first fatality on March 18, concerns grew about the impact of the looming crisis on public health and the economy. By the time its first case was recorded, more than two months had already passed of the global pandemic with the global death toll surpassing 7,800 and the number of infected 191,000—but the government was in denial. Ministers and ruling party leaders claimed that "we are ready". But a pandemic, like a tsunami, does not wait for someone's acknowledgement. It just ravages as it wishes. Consequently, Covid-19 continued to spread in Bangladesh while testing was done at the lowest rate in the world, even though complacency was palpable among the ruling party leaders and government officials. The focus of the entire state machinery, since the beginning of the year, was somewhere else.

The economic impact of the pandemic rapidly became obvious by late March. As businesses were being shut down, albeit partially, and economic downturn began, anyone could see that the misery would spare no one, but it would hit some more than others. There were repeated calls from the economists and concerned citizens that the poorest sections of the society need help from the government. The stimulus packages, which were declared in two phases in March and April, left the most vulnerable behind. The misplaced priorities and ambiguous modalities of these stimulus packages were evident. While cash transfer was a key component of the stimulus packages of governments all around the world, Bangladeshi stimulus packages completely ignored the option.

The government's decision to extend its social safety network, provide food relief and enhance its Open Market Sales (OMS) programme were badly needed steps taken in late March and early April. But largescale corruption, theft and pilferage defeated their purpose. Throughout April, media reports showed how local Awami League leaders, elected representatives of local councils, parliament members and local government officials were collectively part of a scheme to deprive the poor and needy. The official reaction of the ruling party was that it is "embarrassed", while

its activists filed cases against anyone who dared to speak on social media. Journalists faced the wrath and the Digital Security Act (DSA) once again became the weapon of choice. As for those who perpetrated the crime, few were reprimanded, and far fewer brought to justice.

These were happening when at least 16.4 million new people were pushed below the poverty line, according to Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). Bangladesh's overall poverty level was projected to increase by 25.13 percent, where rural poverty would be 24.23 percent and urban poverty would be 27.52 percent. According to the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), the rate of poverty in Bangladesh may have doubled to 40.9 percent since the beginning of the pandemic.

By mid-May, there were some realisations that those who are in the informal sector and relying on daily

allocated to cover the cost of distribution. As the lists were being prepared, copious press reports revealed how it became a repeat of the relief distribution scam, with the ruling party activists, their families, local officials, and local representatives being listed to receive the money. Dozens of cases were reported in which a single phone number, of an influential local AL leader, was used to list dozens, in some cases hundreds, of names.

Almost two months have passed since the announcement was made—"help is on the way". But as of July 7, only 1.6 million have received the money. Some 3.4 million are yet to get any support. Why the delay? Because the lists prepared by the local administrations are full of flaws. Those who should not be eligible were listed; for example, 3,000 government employees and 7,000 pensioners were listed. These lists included people who are receiving support from other social safety programmes. Some are listed with

in the wake of Covid-19 all around the world were meant to help individuals address the immediate crisis. They have been implemented accordingly. In many instances, there have been more than one round of cash transfers. Bangladeshi poor are waiting.

The failure to administer the cash transfer programme quickly and efficiently is symptomatic of the mismanagement of the government. Lack of coordination, from testing to economic stimulus packages, is easily discernible. Instead of trying to address the rampant corruption and reign in the party activists and loyalists within the administration, the government's actions have slowed down the programme itself. Most importantly, it has revealed the priorities of the government—poorer segments are the least of its concerns. The public health system has already failed to serve the citizens, particularly the less fortunate, while the elite and so-called VIPs are



The poor in Bangladesh are still waiting for cash assistance.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

income, the poorest of the poor, are in a desperate situation. Despite the claims of the previous years that economic growth has addressed poverty, within weeks of the pandemic the huge disparity that these strategies have engendered was laid bare. The extent of vulnerabilities of the poor and the lower middle class became difficult to hide behind the rhetoric of success.

It is against this background that the government declared a plan to provide a one-time assistance of Tk 2,500 each to five million families among the most vulnerable sections of society. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the initiative on May 14, and it was promised that the fund would reach everyone before Eid-ul-Fitr, May 20. The listed families were supposed to receive the money through mobile financial services. The government allocated a total of Tk 1,250 crore for this initiative; Tk 8 crore was

inaccurate information. Interestingly, according to a press report, some government officials have reportedly worked out an arrangement with their fellow officials—"I list your people, you list mine." But so far, nobody has been held responsible for these corrupt practices. There is no way one can justify these as "mistakes". Not holding anyone responsible is nothing short of condoning the crimes committed. The culture of impunity of the past years has contributed to these practices as those who did all these are well aware that nothing will happen to them.

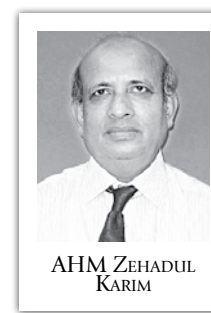
The Covid-19 situation is rapidly deteriorating in Bangladesh, and the economic fallout is being borne by those who are at the bottom of the ladder. But they are the ones who are being ignored by the government, except for lip service. The cash transfer programmes adopted

being treated differently. The decision to impose fees for coronavirus tests at the government sites demonstrates the same mind-set. The number of tests has declined since the fee has been imposed, and it is the poor people who are now avoiding the test because they can hardly afford to spend the money at this time of economic hardship.

The economic crisis caused by the pandemic is not going to go away soon. The global recession is already upon us. Bangladesh's economy is bound to face more difficult days ahead. But it should not be the poor and middle class who disproportionately bear the burden, while the members of the privileged class and political elite enjoy preferential treatment.

Ali Riaz is a Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Illinois State University, and Nonresident Senior Fellow of Atlantic Council, USA.

## Is population growth risking our food security?



AHM ZEHAJUL KARIM

IN 1830, the world population was only 1 billion. It took 100 years for this number to double. But within a span of only 30 years, in 1960, global population reached 3 billion. Since then, the world population estimate started to spike exponentially, and it took hardly 15 years to reach the 4 billion mark, by 1975. The global population reached 6.8 billion in 2009, and it is estimated to reach 9.1 billion in 2050—with an increase of 47 percent over this period—showing an average addition of approximately 82 million people every year since 1930. This pace of increase is naturally disconcerting for social scientists and demographers globally.

We also have statistical evidence showing that 80 percent of the total population of the planet comes from lower-income countries in Asia and Africa, and the growth rate of these countries is also comparatively higher than that of the developed nations. Demographic pressure and poverty go hand in hand. The question is, why is the population of the underdeveloped nations increasing so rapidly compared to the developed nations? We also have to keep in mind that the worldwide growth rate of population at 1.8 percent does not apply to people living in rural areas and those living in urban slums and low-cost areas in the Third World countries. Although the overall population growth throughout the world as well as in a few developing countries decreased considerably in the recent past, this trend of slower growth has not been seen in many poor and underdeveloped countries.

In fact, most of these countries have already been overburdened with excessive

population pressure and its concurrent economic pressure. For example, Bangladesh has a total population of 165 million living in an area of 147,570 sq. km. As such, it remains the most densely populated country in the world, facing tremendous pressure on agricultural land and settlement. Although the economy recorded a sizable growth due to government initiatives in the last few years, there are reasons to fear that the country will not be able to attain

*There are reasons to fear that the country will not be able to attain its wider development goal unless its demographic pressure is not overcome through appropriate social and human development.*

its wider development goal unless its demographic pressure is not overcome through appropriate social and human development. It may not be able to show real progress unless it attends to other indicators of development, such as environmental protection, healthcare facilities, decreasing pollution, minimising the income gap, etc. Economist Amartya Sen argues that development entails a set of linked freedoms relating to social and human progress and rights which are essential elements of real development.

That makes it imperative for all countries of the world, including the Third World nations of Asia and Africa, to pay equal attention to the social crisis besides the economic one.

In the coming days, food crisis and economic hardship for these countries may reach a critical point. In a recent report, it has been mentioned that due to desertification, cropland loss, water scarcity, and resource depletion, food production throughout the world could be as much as 25 percent less than the projected demand for it by the year 2050. Another report estimates that the demand for food is expected to increase by 60 percent by 2050. The reason for this is undeniably the population growth. There are multifarious effects of a fast population growth and the most noticeable victim of it is the agricultural sector. Since land is the principal source of food production, it is directly affected by population pressure, which is also true for a country like Bangladesh.

The richest countries of Europe, the United States and Canada have a growth rate of less than 1 percent while the growth rate in the African countries still continues at 2.4 percent. We know that world population is increasing at the rate of 1.2 percent, yet the doubling time for population growth in many underdeveloped nations is estimated to be 25-37 years. In 1930, Bangladesh had a population of 35.5 million. It reached 153.5 million in 2008, despite the fact that the country has succeeded enormously in reducing its birth rate. The Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was reportedly terrified at the prospect of a huge demographic pressure on his country. In a speech in 1972, he expressed his concern over this matter and warned by saying that "if we are not careful, our population might reach 150 million in future, creating enormous problems in terms of our food and nutrition." Now, we

have already crossed that mark, creating an unsustainable environment for us all. This also goes for many other Third World countries. It is believed that many of these countries will face immense problems in terms of managing their food and nutrition intake, if the population increase is not halted immediately.

When the global population continues to increase at an abnormally high rate, it is obvious that there would be demand for more food for the survival of people. To feed such a large population, we would be left with only two alternatives: i) to bring more and more uncultivable land, forest and hills under cultivation which would further reduce our unused land resources; or ii) to increase our food productivity by cultivating the same plot of land repeatedly through a massive use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides and underground water by employing deep-tube wells and shallow tube wells, which would put a tremendous strain on the ground water table.

It so happens that people sometimes get unrealistically inspired by the cornucopian viewpoints about agricultural growth being supported by high technology which, they believe, can be effective in reducing hunger and malnutrition. Despite the increase of food production through technification of agriculture, we must think about the catastrophic destruction of our valuable land. Today, we hardly think about the destruction of land fertility and damage to soil which occurs due to overuse of chemical fertilisers and modern forms of extensive irrigation. The bottom-line is, if we want a better life free from diseases and with proper access to food and nutrition, we have to keep our population size at an optimum level. This has to be the priority going forward.

Prof Dr AHM Zehadul Karim teaches at the Department of Anthropology, Jagannath University, Dhaka.