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Rising water levels and floods causing immense distress

We should have been better prepared

IN the middle of the uncertainties caused by the unchecked spread of coronavirus in Bangladesh and the global economic downturn, the situation is being made much worse in many districts due to some 14 rivers across the country flowing above the danger levels. According to a bulletin from the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre, the water levels of the Brahmaputra, Jamuna, Padma and Meghna may rise further, exacerbating the suffering of people who have already been affected by floods that have destroyed embankments, roads and homesteads, and posing a great threat to croplands as well. So far, nearly two million people have been affected in 15 districts in the northern and northeastern parts of the country.

Bangladesh as a low-lying land is prone to flooding and rising water levels in rivers. A UN study published on March 21 said that more and severe floods are likely in Bangladesh and India due to climate change, and by 2030, floods could cost South Asia as much as USD 215 billion each year. As it stands, there is no excuse for us to be unprepared in dealing with these floods, especially since climate experts have been warning us for many years of these same risks that we are facing now. There should have been a coordinated and planned strategy to prevent these sufferings, rather than trying to ease them after they occur.

We urge the government to immediately take steps and provide aid to the people who have been affected by floods. This will involve not only handing them relief but also giving them shelter, if their homesteads have been destroyed, and protecting them from Covid-19. The triple burden of the pandemic, economic downturn and floods have made these people extremely vulnerable, and they require rapid interventions to prevent them from falling into destitution.

However, we also urge the government to ensure that this situation is not repeated and the damage is minimised in the coming years. For example, around 30 villages were freshly flooded recently after 400 metres of alternative dyke collapsed in Dharla upazila in Kurigram. While the local union chairman alleged that the collapse occurred due to the negligence of the Water Development Board (WDB), the Kurigram WDB in turn blamed the locals for cutting the dyke indiscriminately. Instead of passing the buck in this way, the government must ensure that all levels of planning and administration are involved in protecting people from floods. As this example shows, some very simple steps, if taken in a timely manner, could prevent a great deal of suffering.

Two lakh migrant workers risk deportation to a depressed economy

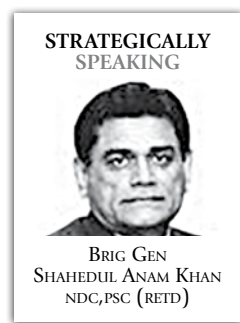
The government must protect them in Kuwait as well as in Bangladesh

AMIDST increasing uncertainty about future job prospects of Bangladeshi workers overseas, Kuwait, which currently employs around 3.5 lakh Bangladeshis, has proposed a bill that, if passed, may compel two lakh migrant workers to return home. The MPs who introduced the bill want to institute an expatriate quota system—under which Bangladeshis must not exceed three percent of Kuwait's total populace—to rectify a “great imbalance in the country's demography”. This development is certainly a cause for grave concern for Bangladeshi expats—many of whom are still in debt and risk being sent back home to a depressed economy, with little prospects—as well as for the Bangladeshi economy which earned more than USD 1.5 billion in remittance from workers employed in Kuwait.

We are deeply concerned about the anti-expatriate rhetoric that has escalated in Kuwait since the onset of the pandemic amid a slump in oil prices. Thousands of workers have already been forced to return. Most of them were held in jails and labour camps in miserable conditions and sent back empty-handed, without so much as their legal dues or personal belongings. The Bangladesh government needs to engage with Kuwait authorities urgently to ensure that our expats, who have played and continue to play an important role in Kuwait's economy, are treated with dignity and respect, and that they are not robbed of their due wages and entitlements. The Bangladesh High Commission in Kuwait needs to be particularly vigilant about violations of workers' rights and provide all kinds of humanitarian and legal assistance to those in need.

If the bill is ultimately passed, the government needs to create employment opportunities for the returnees at home, which is easier said than done, given the alarming level of unemployment in the country. We have repeatedly urged the government to increase the budget allocation for returnee migrants as well to develop a comprehensive plan for their rehabilitation. While the government has thus far claimed that “all is under control”, we remain concerned about the short, medium and long-term prospects of the returnees and urge the concerned authorities to address the issue in all urgency.

Most people like Regent's chairman are always safe



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, NDC, PSC (RETD)

“DON'T worry, I'm safe where I am now!” The scamster had thus assured his wife after multiple fraudulent acts committed by him were

exposed by the media, and he found himself a wanted man under the law—the law that he has been violating with reckless abandon as a pretender claiming an ambidextrous competence. Here is a many-faced person who employed all that a cheat has in his bag of forgeries to swindle unsuspecting people. In fact, by the latest count, there are thirty-two charges against him, including one of murder. He went by many names and many identities, sometimes as Shahed Karim, aka Shahed Hassan, sometimes as a military officer, and sometimes, perhaps most dangerously, as APS to the prime minister. He flaunted, effectively, the evidence of his links to high quarters. He chose to live in such a housing estate that many crooks had used in the past as a lair, hoping that the location would afford them safety and social credibility.

Not only was he running a hospital illegally, he was also given the permission to run Covid-19 tests. The DGHS has admitted that it was aware that Regent Hospital's license had expired, yet permission was given at the behest of the ministry. The ministry has disagreed. But both can't be telling the truth and lying at the same time. How to ascertain who is telling the truth? This was a murky decision, and surely illegal and murky decisions don't come for free.

To Shahed, I want to say that you were exposed and the law is after you only because your greed gave you away, ultimately. You charged your patients exorbitantly high for Covid-19 treatment. The health minister's comment that he was present at the agreement-signing ceremony between the DGHS and Regent Hospital “at the request” of the former sounds too innocuous to be believed.

Yes, you and your likes will be safe to run your murky trade and, when

in trouble, be kept out of public view, because that is in the interest of those that underwrite such rackets. It is not the fault of the law-enforcing agencies that it took them nearly seven days to apprehend you, because like many others of your kind, you acquire the capacity to become invisible. Like so many “wanted” criminals, you “managed” to remain invisible to the police. This is what I call “selective invisibility”, made possible with the “blessings” of the influential quarters.

you in the end.

You not only bartered the health of the nation, you also brought shame to the country by sully its image internationally. Who else but you can claim the luxury of safety after the many acts of swindling, cheating and fraud that you have long been involved in? Because, you have frothed at the mouth waxing eloquent on TV, often defending the indefensible, passing gibberish for wisdom. When it came to the party in

a president/foreign minister of India! Did you exploit your alleged political party links to gain access to them? You have claimed to be a member of AL's international affairs subcommittee. The party has denied the claim, but accepted the fact that you had been its member in the past. It is difficult to believe that you were granted an audience with a former PM and an ex-president of another country without the right words from the right quarters in Dhaka, and before a thorough verification by that country.

Shahed Hassan, or whatever your real name is, you represent the ugliest face of the society. Thank heavens that there are not many of your kind in the country. But just as a drop of acid spoils a large cauldron of milk, one like you is enough to soil the country's name. But you are in good company of the bad boys in our society. You have the Mithus and Papulis and the JKGs, the casino operators, the GK Shamims, and their godfathers who remain out of reach.

But we are better than what a few of you represent. While the Shaheds of society profit from ruining people's health and wealth, there are hundreds of others for every one of your kind, like the thousands of doctors and nurses who have risked their lives to serve the Covid-19 patients, and the dozens among them that have died because the PPEs that you provided were not of the required standard. For every one of you, there are dozens of people, of small means, who are using their service and hard-earned money to lessen the pain of the pandemic, a pain that you—and a few others like you as well as your godfathers—have colluded to exacerbate, for money.

Yes, you may not have pulled the gun on people or had a direct hand in the coronavirus deaths, but you were responsible for many of the casualties of Covid-19. Hence, you are like any other murderer, and must be treated as such. But unless those that have sponsored and backed you, who helped you to pursue your trade, are also identified and brought to justice, there will be more of the Regent Hospitals and JKGs and MP Selims and SK Shamims who will continue to “feel safe” in pursuing their trade.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd), is a former Associate Editor of *The Daily Star*.



Members of Rapid Action Battalion arrested Md Shahed (third from left) near a border area in Satkhira on July 15, 2020.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

You played with the lives of not hundreds but thousands of unsuspecting people, who sought your service to test for Covid-19. You traded their health and security for money by issuing fake certificates. God knows how many of them have infected others by now, and in turn how many they have unknowingly passed the virus onto. How does the DG Health account for the fact that he, knowing that the Regent Hospital's license had expired, allowed it to operate for the last two years? It stretches one's credulity to believe that your shady past was not known to the authorities. And that is why you have remained safe for so long to ply your business. But the law has caught up with

power, you appeared to be more Catholic than the Pope.

You sought safety by exploiting the image and the attire of the person we revere most, Bangabandhu. You managed to get access to national-level functions and appear in places where access is restricted, despite the fact that you had served a two-year prison term, and despite the fact that you were described as a man of “dangerous fraudulent nature”. That is how a home ministry letter in 2016 labelled you, a chameleon, a person with numerous identities. How come?

You have not only managed entry into high places in Bangladesh, you are even pictured with a former prime minister,

When and how can schools reopen?



MANZOOR AHMED

ON June 14, the ministry of education extended school closure, imposed on March 18 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, to August 6. Earlier, the prime minister had said the closure

may continue to September. Education authorities have to decide when and how schools can reopen safely and what the options are. A hasty move can push the situation beyond control.

A hot debate is raging in the USA this week after the authoritative Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued guidelines for safe school reopening which President Trump did not like. He considered it “too tough,” and threatened cutting federal government funds for schools that do not reopen with regular classes in the new academic year beginning in August and September in different states.

The painful dilemma faced in balancing what is to be done to protect livelihood and economy and save the lives and health of people cannot be underestimated. Political and public policy choices have to be made based on scientific evidence, health protection imperatives, and minimising damage to people's livelihood. The wellbeing of children, including resumption of learning, has to be a key concern.

UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and World Bank issued guidelines in mid-May on the safe reopening of schools amidst ongoing closures affecting nearly 1.3 billion students worldwide. The UN agencies' guidelines dealt with safe operations of schools, recouping learning loss, students' wellbeing and protection, and reaching the most marginalised. Attention is also needed to providing financial support to implement the policy, investing in recovery and resilience of the system.

The UN agencies provide useful guidelines about how schools may reopen, but a prior judgement has to be made about when it is safe to open the school. Health experts and epidemiologists across the globe, including in Bangladesh, are unanimous in supporting a cautious approach to reopening schools and most economic activities. They agree that any situation that brings people together is a risk now, even with social distancing and other precautions, and can reignite the spread.

Ashish Jha, director of Harvard Global Health Institute, says that school authorities have to seriously ask themselves if they are really ready to open and stay open. They have to ask if they are ready in respect of classroom

space, hygiene, masks, temperature check, Covid-19 testing, tracing, isolation, health referral, and counselling, not just for the students, but also for the teachers and staff.

Alison Galvani, Yale University's director of Center for Infectious Disease Modeling and Analysis, reports that their study indicates that most transmission is caused by pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic carriers, a dangerous feature of Covid-19. Schools with students and teachers coming together can endanger not only these groups but also their families and all they come in contact with outside school.

But is there a benchmark for safe gathering, as in a regular classroom? The UN guideline did not indicate a benchmark and the CDC guideline also refrained from being specific, it appears, under Trump administration bullying.

Epidemiologists admit that it depends on the socioeconomic context, but the best judgement is a sustained period of infection around one to two cases for a population of 100,000. This suggests that

should be tested using the current RT-PCR testing procedure, which can be complemented by a larger sample with rapid testing, as one designed by Gonoshasthaya Kendra.

Once an estimate of the infected population is established by upazilas, the next steps for the school reopening decision can be taken. Benchmarks for three levels of infection spread—similar to the idea of red, yellow and green zones (but not implemented)—could be used to assess the status of upazilas or even parts of upazilas, where appropriate.

No area can claim to have reached a status of complete safety until zero infection is reported for several weeks or an effective vaccine is available. Schools can open in the green and yellow areas with some variation in school operation. Schools in red zones will have to remain closed until their status changes, as determined by testing and infection rates. One size cannot fit all.

An expert team including epidemiologists should establish benchmarks of rates of infection for the

Even in a green zone, a cautious approach has to be followed because the risk of a resurgence exists. Masks, sanitisers, washing with soap and water must be available for students and teachers. Distance should be maintained in classrooms keeping a student seat vacant between two students. Classes should be held in two shifts and for shorter hours (perhaps three hours for each shift).

an ideal safe level for reopening schools in Bangladesh would be when total current infection comes down to 2,000 to 3,000. The infection rate for the last month or so has been increasing daily by more than these numbers. It appears decisions have to be taken for partial reopening with necessary safety rules before the ideal infection level is reached.

A low national average in infection rate would be the aim, but it does vary greatly for different areas. The larger Dhaka Metropolis has about one-third of total infections in the country. An upazila (there are around 500 in the country) with an average population of 350,000 would be an appropriate unit to estimate infection rate and take necessary follow-up action.

The first step for a decision about school reopening would be to estimate as objectively as possible the upazila-wise infection rate. The testing done now is not done with any epidemiology-based sampling frame. A representative population sample from each upazila

three levels and the different protocols that can be applied for school opening decisions and continuing school operations. Some suggestions are offered below.

Even in a green zone, a cautious approach has to be followed because the risk of a resurgence exists. Masks, sanitisers, washing with soap and water must be available for students and teachers. Distance should be maintained in classrooms keeping a student seat vacant between two students. Classes should be held in two shifts and for shorter hours (perhaps three hours for each shift), because of space limitations and also to limit contact time.

Recouping learning losses should be the main objective, focusing on key foundational skills (reading, writing, math and some play and games at primary level); these plus English and science at the secondary level). Time should be devoted to teaching-learning and not on testing or preparing for testing, either public or annual school

test. Quizzes and exercises in class as part of teaching, known as formative evaluation, are useful.

Blended approach of mixing distance mode and face-to-face should be supported with teachers guiding and helping the students in this respect. Teachers will also need guidance and support for this purpose. A teacher should be assigned to a group of students, say 20, as their counsellor and mentor to advise them and give them mental support and encouragement, keeping in touch with them and their parents by phone.

Financial support should be available for schools for maintaining hygiene and washing facilities. Teacher should receive guidelines for their role and work during the pandemic and recovery phase, and should receive an allowance as an incentive. Support for them and their families' health and safety should be available.

For a yellow zone, all these measures would apply, plus some extra measures regarding distancing in classroom, attendance in shifts, and extra sanitation and disinfection measures.

Distance between students in classroom in the yellow zone should be preferably two empty seats between students. This means only one-third of the normal students can attend at a time. More shifts and shorter hours would be necessary to accommodate all. Students may have to attend school on alternate days—three days a week.

The additional sanitation measures in the yellow zone would be to disinfect and wipe all surfaces and floors every day before classes meet. It appears Eid-ul-Azha ceremonies with animal markets and slaughtering will go on perhaps with some restrictions. There will also be travel to distant villages and homes. There is bound to be a spike in infection two weeks after the Eid. The situation should be assessed then with the epidemiological sampling of the upazilas before any decision is taken regarding school opening. The interim period should be used to prepare for the steps that have to be taken.

Public support and understanding in the communities and of parents and teachers have to be mobilised for the unusual steps in an extraordinary time. NGOs and community organisations should be involved in this effort with government oversight and financial support. The new normal should not be the old business-as-usual.

Unfortunately, the course of the pandemic remains unpredictable. A precarious balance has to be struck between life and livelihood with caution until a successful vaccine is available.

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