

The Daily Star

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DHAKA WEDNESDAY JULY 29, 2020, SRABAN 14, 1427 BS

With so few tests, any claim regarding Covid-19 is dangerous

Govt must expand testing as an urgent priority

A problem unacknowledged or left unaddressed for long doesn't make it go away. If anything, it leads to bigger problems. For some strange reason, this simple wisdom has eluded our health authorities who continue to turn a blind eye to the need for increasing Covid-19 tests, despite the high price being paid in unaccounted-for deaths and infections. There are a few theories for why this is the case. One that seems increasingly plausible has to do with the political fallout of expanding testing: more tests could mean more infections, a situation that doesn't sit well with an administration seeking validation of its Covid-19 response. We've seen similar reasoning in the US that linked rising infections to improved testing. But this theory is dangerously wrong, as experts point out, since a growing case count is the result of a worsening outbreak—not a by-product of increased testing. And given its poor testing record (now hovering around 10,000-12,000 tests per day) and the high infection rate of 21.56 percent, Bangladesh may well be staring down an explosion silently sweeping the country.

There's no arguing that expanding testing can help explain why test positivity is so high in Bangladesh and where specific interventions are needed in terms of contact tracing, isolation and even lockdown. It can also help us make better strategies to stem the infection. Unfortunately, among the 18 countries that have recorded at least 200,000 cases, Bangladesh has the lowest levels of testing, with only 6,823 tests per one million people. The number of daily Covid-19 tests has declined over the past three weeks. We continue to do the opposite of what we need to do, but that has hardly dissuaded our policymakers from defending their position. On July 27, the health minister claimed, against evidence, that the country's health sector is no longer in the fragile state it used to be. The same day, an additional director general (admin) of the DGHS, citing declining case numbers, said we are now past the coronavirus peak, hence people's lack of interest in testing.

But the truth is far from it. As an investigative report of *The Daily Star* about the lack of Covid-19 cases in Dhaka's slums shows, besides the lack of tests by the authorities, a number of factors are also responsible for the decline in interest, including imposition of testing fees at the government-run facilities, long delays in getting tested and receiving test results, lack of awareness campaigns, and growing distrust of the accuracy of the test results, especially in the wake of several scandals involving fake Covid-19 tests and issuance of forged certificates. The absence of an initiative to expand testing and restore public confidence is actually covering up the real situation, with far-reaching consequences. The government must not allow this to continue. It must bolster its testing drive by raising the daily test number to at least 20,000, as experts have suggested. Anything less will not be enough to curb the spread of a virus that has already devastated our life and economy.

Pandemic has created social disorder


Govt programmes must alleviate the despair of the jobless

AMONG the several deleterious and long lasting consequences of the coronavirus pandemic is the battering countries' economies will take. And no country, big or small, will be unaffected by it. For a country like ours, the informal economy would be the most vulnerable, on which a good part of our middle and low income groups survive and derive sustenance from. Thousands have lost their sources of income; some have been forced to switch to lower paid employment. Many have been left with no options, with only government support to survive on. The problems have been severely exacerbated by a large number of migrant workers returning home with no ostensible source of income.

The pandemic has caused a serious disruption in the entire system and dealt a severe blow to economic life, not without the associated consequences. It is no accident that after a period of lull and fall in crime rates at the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, we notice a spike in petty crimes like theft, robbery and mugging, as reported in this paper yesterday. Police put it down to job losses and the decline in earnings of low-income people during the outbreak.

Indeed, rising crimes is one of the indices of the adverse effects of the pandemic on the economy. It is an inevitability and unless a well thought out, efficient programme is undertaken to provide monetary help to these people, as well as help the informal economy to revive, serious economic and social disorder is a real possibility. Without the government widening its social safety nets and providing monetary help, such as a one-time grant or loans on very easy terms, there will be more and more people becoming desperate and resorting to crime. Thus we are likely to see more of the likes of people like the street hawker of clothes and seasonal fruits, who, having lost his only source of income during this pandemic, resorted to extortion and murder; or the simple three-wheeler driver who started waylaying buses to make up for his loss of income. While criminals must be apprehended and justice must be meted out, it is crucial to alleviate the financial hardships many individuals are facing because of income loss, compelling them to take the wrong path to make ends meet.

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

As Bangladesh is inundated by severe floods not long after being hit by super cyclone Amphan, we are seeing the adverse impacts of human induced climate change in reality. It is therefore time to deal with this loss and damage from climate change more seriously, both at home as well as internationally.

At the international level, over the years, the vulnerable developing countries have been arguing that the international community must deal with the inevitable loss and damage that will be caused due to human induced climate change under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

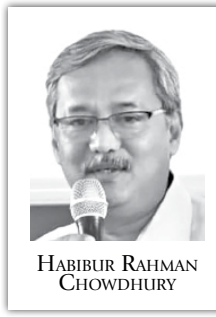
While there have been some success over these years, such as the setting up of the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) on loss and damage at the 19th Conference of Parties (COP19) in Warsaw, Poland in 2013, and then the setting up of the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage at COP25 in Madrid, Spain last year, we have not been able to establish any financing mechanism beyond insurance.

One big stumbling block in order to achieve this has been the difficulty of attributing climate events such as cyclones and floods to human induced climate change, as these are naturally occurring events.

However, over the last year, the scientists who study this aspect of attributing human induced climate change to climatic events have made a significant breakthrough in their ability to establish, with credibility and speed, the level of intensification of each event due to the existing level of human induced climate change that has already occurred until now.

For example, as Cyclone Amphan was gathering energy in the Bay of Bengal, it became a super cyclone due to the abnormally elevated sea surface temperatures of the Bay, which was quickly attributed to the fact that human induced climate change has already

HABIBUR RAHMAN CHOWDHURY



ACCORDING to a World Food Programme projection, up to 265 million people in low and middle income countries will face acute food insecurity by the end of 2020 as a result of the economic impacts of Covid-19, unless immediate action is taken. These figures, in fact, are nearly double compared to the numbers in 2019. Without much doubt, we may assume that many of them will also be in Bangladesh. We may also presume that the people in the north of the country are the most vulnerable to this scenario, as they are already the victims of multiple hazards, such as climate change and structural deprivation, from before.

On March 26, 2020, the government imposed the countrywide lockdown to reduce the spread of coronavirus infection. This has had an unprecedentedly huge impact on the lives of the poor and extreme poor. Both the rural agricultural workers and the urban informal sector labourers have experienced a similar loss of income in their respective employment fields during the pandemic. Information from the grassroots reveals that many families in the north and northwest of Bangladesh are already struggling, and the days ahead are only likely to be worse.

As the spread of coronavirus continues, many economic activities have slowed down or are even at a standstill, and the low-income earners of Bangladesh have faced the most severe consequences as a result. Particularly because of travel restrictions, the mobile agricultural labour force lost their chance to work in other districts during the important paddy harvesting season. As we know, many of the agricultural daily wage labourers from the north and northwest of Bangladesh temporarily migrate to the other parts of the country for work. Before the pandemic, they could work and save up enough for the coming two to three months, until the next crop season. Similarly, the urban poor also lost their employment opportunities in the informal sector, such as construction work, rickshaw pulling, work with hotels and restaurants, work in brickfields and so on.

A quick survey conducted in Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions by a development organisation supporting extreme poverty reduction projects came up with the findings that 73 percent of the extreme poor and poor families in the northwest of

Worsening floods linked to human induced climate chnage

elevated global mean atmospheric temperature by over one degree Centigrade. Similarly, the hurricane Hanna that has just hit the coast of Texas in the United States is also being attributed to human induced climate change.

Similar attributions are being made for wildfires that have occurred in Australia last year and in California this year, as well as floods around the world, including the ones we are suffering from in Bangladesh



Non-economic loss and damage, such as mental health impacts on people as well as the adverse impacts on education, need to be identified and managed.

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

and India right now, as well as in China. The magnitude of floods are measured in their return periods. What used to be a "one in 20 years" flood in Bangladesh—as in, floods of such magnitude used to occur around every 20 years for the many hundreds of years for which we have records—has occurred five times over the last 20 years. Hence, what used to be a one in 20 years magnitude flood in the past is now likely to become a one in five or even four years flood in future.

What this means is that the question of attributing adverse impacts due to human induced climate change is no longer in doubt; it can be done with scientific credibility from now on. It is important to point out, however, that human induced climate change does not cause these events, as they are still naturally occurring

Although Bangladesh has improved its disaster preparedness for both cyclones and floods, and loss of human lives has been minimised, the loss to crops and infrastructure is still very severe and people's livelihoods are still badly affected.

Hence, the time has come for Bangladesh to develop our own National Mechanism on Loss and Damage due to Climate Change which the Ministry of Disaster Management has developed a pilot project for. This project will be a public private partnership action research project to identify the different kinds of climate events, such as floods, cyclones, droughts and salinity intrusion in coastal areas, as well as to develop a mechanism for identifying necessary actions to build back better after the events in order to

The poor in North Bangladesh are the worst victims of Covid-19 fallout

Bangladesh are facing severe food-related distress as a result of inadequate income during the coronavirus pandemic. The perspective survey conducted over phone at the end of June 2020 shows that 53 percent of the families are maintaining their living standards by borrowing money from multiple sources such as relatives, neighbours and microfinance agencies. Some of them are also taking money as advance wages from potential future employers, which in turn will cause

In the above mentioned assessment, it was observed that 63 percent of the agricultural workers had less than 30 days of work during *Boro* harvesting time this year. One such member of an extreme poor household, Maleka Begum (not her real name) of Shahagola union of Atrai in Naogaon district, said that her husband used to work at least 90 days during the *Boro* harvesting period in other years, but this year he could manage to work for 22 days only.



It was observed that 63 percent of the agricultural workers had less than 30 days of work during Boro harvesting time this year.

PHOTO: STAR/MINTU DESHWARA

them to lose income during the peak employment time. Some 37 percent of the families interviewed were forced to sell whatever small assets they had left in the family in order to buy food.

In different parts of the country, the time for harvesting the *Boro* paddy is spread over three months starting from April each year, while in the northwest region, it is done from mid-May until the first week of June. According to Mozibur Rahman, a field-based development worker engaged in livelihood projects for the extreme poor in Kurigram, one agricultural daily wage labourer usually earns around Tk 10,000 during this period by working in different parts of the country. However, he said that this year, "this same day labourer could not earn more than Tk 2,000 to Tk 3,000 due to movement restrictions." If they were able to work in full swing, they could bear the costs of at least three months of food for their families from their savings.

The situation of indigenous people in the northwest is even worse, as they are averse to migrating to faraway places for work. This particular situation has been an add-on to the sufferings that they already face due to lack of empowerment and multiple structural deprivations.

The story of urban and semi-urban informal sector workers is not very different than that of the agricultural labourers. From interactions with families in the northern districts, it can be assumed that about 60 percent of such workers have lost their jobs and opted to go back home. These groups of people invariably belong to extreme poor families. It was witnessed that some of them were engaged in selling groceries as village hawkers and others were competing for the agricultural work available in their respective villages. These families, which tend to have one main wage earner, are also facing severe food insecurities.

be better prepared for future events and impacts. At the same time, non-economic loss and damage, such as mental health impacts on people as well as the adverse impacts on education, need to be identified and managed.

However, it is not enough for us to take actions at home alone if the global temperature keeps going up. The government of Bangladesh needs to step up its international efforts to persuade all countries to enhance their ambitions to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions as they agreed in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change at COP21 in 2015. We need to push all countries to fulfil their pledges to keep the global temperature below 1.5 degrees Centigrade.

At the same time, we need to push for a financing mechanism to support developing countries that are suffering from the adverse impacts of human induced climate change. So far, the developed countries have been willing to discuss insurance and set up pilot insurance schemes around the world, including in Bangladesh. However, it is already very evident that while insurance has a role to play, it cannot be applied everywhere and it is especially not useful for poor people who cannot pay the premium.

So the demand from vulnerable developing countries going into COP26, which will be held in Glasgow, Scotland and will be hosted by the UK government in November 2021, must be to agree on a financial mechanism to deal with loss and damage from human induced climate change. As Bangladesh is now the leader of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which is made up of nearly 50 of the most vulnerable countries, we are in a good position to lead the CVF countries to push for finance for loss and damage to be a major outcome of COP26, while at the same time offering to share our own experiences in developing the National Mechanism on Loss and Damage in Bangladesh.

As Bangladesh has emerged as a global leader in adaptation to climate change, we now have the opportunity to also emerge as a leader in tackling the loss and damage that is a result of human induced climate change.

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If the Covid-19 situation lasts much longer, a large number of low-income people living above the poverty line will fall below it, and many moderate poor households will drop lower down the poverty line. The overarching successes of Bangladesh in relation to poverty reduction will disappear as a result of this stagnancy in economic activities. The government has taken different initiatives to support the vulnerable people, such as food support, open market sale of rice at a lower price, and cash support for the extreme poor.

However, compared to the needs of the vast numbers of vulnerable people, the support received is far from adequate. A clear focus on vulnerable people and significant initiatives for bringing them back into economic activities can help reduce the adverse impacts of the pandemic on the poor. The north and the northwest, an area where most of the extreme poor of the country live, need significant and immediate attention in this regard. On top of that, there must be a substantial improvement in terms of governance, transparency and efficiency in the implementation of government initiatives. This situation also calls for international efforts to support countries with limited possibilities in tackling this huge crisis.

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