

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY AUGUST 6, 2020, SRABAN 22, 1427 BS

Rise in export earnings a welcome surprise

We must ensure continuity and fair practices in the export sector

IN recent months, our news cycle has been dominated by the burgeoning health crisis created by the unchecked spread of coronavirus in Bangladesh, the impacts of a global economic downturn on our economy, and the seasonal floods that have swept across the country and affected millions of people. Against this backdrop, the promising rise in exports and remittances in the month of July this year is welcome news indeed.

According to data from the Export Promotion Bureau, exports fetched USD 3.9 billion in July, which is 44.4 percent more from the previous month and 0.6 percent more from a year earlier. The rise in export earnings was led by the garment sector—garment shipments raked in USD 3.2 billion, which is 14.1 percent more than the target set by the commerce ministry for July and most surprisingly, almost the same amount that was earned in July last year.

However, while we welcome these promising prospects in the exports sector, let us not forget the possibility that July's earnings were higher because most of the shipments that were stuck between April and May due to lockdowns all over the world were dispatched in the last two months. As markets began to open up in the rest of the world and retail sales, especially in Europe, recover and potentially return to pre-lockdown levels, we must take this opportunity to bolster our exports as much as possible. This means focusing not just on garments, but on jute and jute goods, home textiles, agricultural products, and primary and pharmaceutical product shipments—the export of all of which picked up in the last month.

At the same time, we must also look to the businesses in our economy that make up these important export sectors, and the workers whose hard labour leads to these highly-valued export earnings. Let us not forget that more than 25,000 garment workers have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. This daily also published an extensive report on at least 1,931 global brands which have either delayed, put on hold, or simply cancelled their orders (worth around USD 3.7 billion) to Bangladeshi suppliers since the onset of Covid-19. We must do all we can to ensure that these Bangladeshi companies and workers get their fair dues during these difficult times.

Confirmed Covid-19 cases and deaths increase during Eid holidays

Why have guidelines not been enforced?

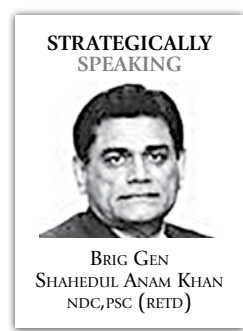
IT is a matter of grave concern that the number of new Covid-19 cases in the country increased during the Eid holidays despite the fact that the number of tests dropped significantly during this time. According to the DGHS briefing, 50 people died of Covid-19 across the country in 24 hours till the morning of August 4 while on August 5, 33 new deaths were confirmed by them. The spike in the number of new infections and deaths is an ominous sign for the country which has apparently failed to ensure that the health guidelines given by the government to contain further spread of the virus are maintained by the people in general.

People have gone to the villages and come back to the cities in overcrowded buses, trains and launches, without maintaining any social distancing and health guidelines. They went to buy sacrificial animals in the local *haats*, went to the bazaars and mosques, hardly maintaining any health directives. Apparently, the authorities took little measures to make people abide by the government directives, which might have resulted in this sudden spike in new cases.

It is extremely disappointing to learn that the infection rate has increased to 24.6 percent in the last few days while it was 22.39 percent before the Eid holidays. While experts and the WHO have been repeatedly asking the government to increase testing coverage to curb the spread of the deadly virus, what we see is just the opposite—it has brought down the number of daily tests. A total of 11,160 samples were tested in 83 labs across the country in the last 24 hours until the DGHS briefing on August 5 while the previous day, only 7,712 samples were tested. And data shows that the number of tests per million people stands below 7,500 in Bangladesh. Despite that, Bangladesh is currently the 16th worst affected country in the world in terms of the number of cases.

Although in view of the situation, the government issued an order extending countrywide restrictions on public activities and movements from August 4 to August 31 and gave a fresh 10-point directive, we wonder if these directives can be properly enforced as the government previously failed to implement many such directives. We have seen how it struggled to enforce the zone-wise lockdown system.

The new directives include keeping markets, shops, and shopping malls closed by 8:00pm; making sure there are temperature-checking and hand-washing facilities, sanitisers, and vehicle disinfecting services at the entries to shopping malls, etc. It also said that people will have to face legal action if they do not wear masks, maintain social distancing and follow health guidelines while staying outside of home. We now hope that the government will strictly enforce these directives and also increase the number of tests to curb further spread of the virus in the country.



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

PERHAPS this was one murder too many by the police. Sinha's is yet another name added to the long list of victims of the law enforcing agencies, killed in gross violation of all norms of law. It is regrettable that many among those responsible for upholding the rule of law and maintaining law and order are themselves trampling the rule of law. Some may well say that my lament is only because the one killed is an ex-soldier. What about the several hundred others killed in similar manner and comparable circumstances? That is indeed so, and I make no apologies for it. But I have not withheld my feelings on this matter regarding other such killings before. Every unnatural and avoidable loss of life pains me, as it must every sensitive human being. This has pained me even more, because Sinha was a kindred spirit, a relationship that neither the difference of age nor absence of direct association, diminishes.

I weep for Major Sinha because he was someone who had undergone a hard grind like all his brothers and sisters in arms, to serve his country. He joined the

The killing of Major Sinha has given rise to many questions, which only an impartial investigation can reveal, for one thing, the contradiction in FIR and the inquest report must be looked into. It should also expose the fact that the police narrative of self-defence is a subterfuge to distort the facts.

I weep for Sinha

military to dedicate his life's service to the country, just as his father did in 1971. He chose to leave the army prematurely, not because of any shortcomings, but because he had developed predilections for other pursuits. He left the army just as he had joined it, of his own volition. But his life was cut short most brutally.

Some have chosen the adjective "unfortunate" to describe the incident. But while that might be a good portrayal of the sad end to a young life, the

behaviour and the blasé attitude of some of its members. Such an explanation would have been acceptable if the killing was a one-off incident. There have been far too many of such instances to admit the killing of Major Sinha as a solo stray occurrence. And were it not also for the rather repetitive explanation regurgitated by the police after every killing, that the victim was killed in crossfire or that he was a known criminal or was an accused

an Indian journalist to sow rift within, what is the most disciplined and well-trained force, the Bangladesh Army. The tone and tenor of this particular piece should raise our concerns. The author has quoted extensively a "senior Bangladesh intelligence official". The aim and objective of the news portal is quite clear from the comments of this particular post. The writer certainly has access to "senior intelligence official" but they are not Bangladeshi intelligence officials. It defies common-sense that a senior Bangladesh intelligence official would choose a foreign news portal, with hostile agenda against Bangladesh, to vent his views instead of using own media resources, if the story is true.

By painting a fabricated story, the piece not only wanted to paint Major Sinha as a drug dealer with international mafia links, but to establish the link of the army as well in the alleged act. The piece has also scurrilously attempted to establish that Bangladesh Army is involved in training ARSA with the purpose of destabilising the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Such fabricated, concocted, and half-baked reports have serious security implications for our country, which one hopes the relevant quarters in the administration would take note of and effect appropriate action.

The killing of Major Sinha has given rise to many questions, which only an impartial investigation can reveal, for one thing, the contradiction in FIR and the inquest report must be looked into. It should also expose the fact that the police narrative of self-defence is a subterfuge to distort the facts.

Sinha has now become one with Nature, but it must be ensured that his reputation is not besmirched by dubious machinations by deflecting the course of investigation and the victim made the accused. Reportedly, the police are trying to implicate an eye witness in a yaba case to discourage any eye witness evidence. It has already lodged two cases against Sinha's companion, one under the drugs control act and the other for preventing government officials from performing their duty.

Justice must be served. And we would hope that Sinha is the last to have met such a pathetic death. It is a chance to prove that the rule of law is supreme, and that nobody is above it. Let the police be made to understand that they are to serve the people, not lord over them.

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



Retired Army Major Sinha Rashed Khan.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

contemptible and despicable act that caused it cannot be adequately described, given the account of the circumstances that one has come to know through various channels. Some have explained away the incident by laying blame on the "poor training" of the police. I submit that the killing has nothing to do with fortune, misfortune or infortune, or training of the agencies either, but everything to do with the psyche of the police force, of all denominations, that drive their actions. The force is driven by the brazen impunity that they have been invested with, which demands no accountability for their behaviour, however illegal the actions might be. The law keepers do not only believe that they are above the law, it would not be remiss to suggest that they are also treated as if they are. But there are of course some honourable exceptions that one should have no grudge in admitting.

Some use the argument that the action of a few should not be used to run a broad brush to paint the entire force as guilty. This explanation is a fig leaf that

in several criminal cases, or he had resisted arrest and fired on the police or some contraband goods or drugs were found in his possession, the police explanation might wash. As if an accused, even if the accusation is true, forfeits the right to live, and his credentials accords the law enforcers to be the judge, jury and executioner at the same time. One understands that there are sinister moves afoot to paint something similar in order to cast Major Sinha as a rogue and a ruffian.

But I am worried about another aspect, an odious attempt, clearly by hostile agencies, to cast aspersions on not only an army officer but also on the entire Bangladesh Army, through tendentious and slanderous comments in newspapers and news portals. One such report was carried in an Indian news portal namely, *Northeast Now* run from Guwahati, on August 4, entitled "Assassinated Bangladesh Army ex-maj was into drugs, training ARSA". One would recall that in the recent past, provocative comments were made by

'Coronavirus Resilient Villages'



BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

BANGLADESH was unable to put in quarantine 213 students who came from the Chinese city of Wuhan—where the coronavirus originated—in early February and the subsequent influx of hundreds of thousands of people from countries like Italy where the virus was causing havoc. Similarly, Bangladesh failed to contain the outbreak of the deadly virus in a few hotspots like Dhaka, Narayanganj and Gazipur early on, causing it to spread all over the country. This "community transmission" was accentuated by the back and forth movement of people from the cities to the villages due to the declaration of the general holiday in late April and two Eid holidays thereafter.

Since the coronavirus does not have an approved treatment protocol and there is no certainty when an effective vaccine will be available, we will have to live with it for quite some time. According to some experts like Dr Anthony Fauci, we may never be able to get rid of the virus. Taking into consideration such expert opinion, The Hunger Project (THP) has launched an initiative in late March 2020 to create "coronavirus resilient villages" around the country.

Although local governments have not been given any direct responsibility by the government for controlling the virus, we have been working closely with Union Parishads in creating coronavirus resilient villages. Our initiative is leveraged on the "SDG Union Strategy", which THP had designed in 2015 to "localise" the SDGs. Village Development Teams (VDTs), self-help groups and the large number of volunteers mobilised as part of the SDG Union Strategy are the bedrock of the initiative.

Broadly speaking, the initiative involves:

First, making a declaration that "we are in it together" based on the realisation that protection of every single person is required to protect everyone from the coronavirus in a community. Such realisation creates community ownership of its wellbeing and community members' engagement in the efforts to contain and mitigate locally the effects of the spread of the virus. Success of these efforts depend primarily on fomenting a social movement to protect the community from the onslaught of the virus. The Hunger Project's trained volunteers have been playing the catalytic role in mobilising their neighbours and creating social capital to collectively

declare and initiate planned interventions to make their communities coronavirus resilient villages, making it a self-interest driven, decentralised and community-led initiative.

Second, raising awareness particularly by promoting 3Ws—washing hands, wearing masks and watching distance—in order to bring about behavioural changes in people to break the chain of infection. The volunteers use leaflets and direct personal contact—while maintaining safe distance—to disseminate information among villagers and motivate them to abide by health guidelines and manage the waste. In this effort, volunteers use the help of the health professionals posted in Union-level community clinics. They encourage religious and community leaders to dispel misinformation and disinformation about the virus. They also sensitise their communities against

households with children and persons with mental and physical disabilities. Volunteers also enrol those who are eligible into the government's social protection schemes, while helping others with money and materials collected locally through community philanthropy.

This self-interest-driven, communitywide and volunteer-led initiative is already making a huge difference. The initiative is underway in about 1,500 villages. As of the middle of July, the volunteers created awareness among over 3 million people. They engaged Imams and other important people to carry out over 5,000 campaigns against misinformation and disinformation about the virus. They collected nearly USD 450,000, in cash and kind, from the local people through "community philanthropy" to support those in distress. They helped enrol over

quickly control the coronavirus pandemic in Bangladesh. For example, Dr Mushtaq Husain, an adviser to IEDCR, recently wrote: "Your 'Corona resilient village' is a model not only for our villages, it may be replicated in our cities and towns. It is very urgent to minimise the numbers of Covid-19 patients from the community. The Covid-19 pandemic will not die down naturally. China, South Korea halted it through active effort of aggressive containment and mitigation measures, not only so-called 'lockdown'... If your model is followed all over Bangladesh, we will control Covid-19 within a month. Other countries will follow us."

The model has also begun to receive recognition from abroad. On July 23, LOGIN Asia—a Delhi-based network of organisations committed to local governance—arranged a webinar to share our experiences. Representatives and experts



Women and children washing hands with sanitiser at a cyclone shelter in Satkhira on May 20, 2020.

PHOTO: STAR

violence against women and children and child marriage, which tend to increase during a pandemic.

Third, identifying, isolating and assisting those showing symptoms of coronavirus and help them isolate in their homes and get them professional medical help, including testing for the infection. The volunteers mobilise villagers against stigmatisation of the "victims" of the coronavirus. They also arrange quarantine for outsiders coming to the village.

Fourth, identifying and supporting households and individuals who are on the verge of starvation due to loss of livelihood. THP volunteers prepare lists of female headed households and

36,000 persons under the government's social protection schemes. Nearly 400 youth volunteers helped farmers to harvest rice from 42 acres.

The World Health Organization issued several technical guidelines to effectively face the coronavirus pandemic, an important one of which is, Risk Communication and Community Engagement, intended to create awareness and community ownership. THP volunteers' corona resilient villages is a reflection of this guideline, which is already making a difference, and earned the accolade of experts.

Many experts feel that THP's approach, if applied throughout the country, could

from many of the Asian countries attended the webinar and showed serious interests in our model.

To conclude, to bring the coronavirus under control, we need to mobilise the people to confront it from the community level. Like in 1971, mobilise volunteers to create resistance against it from their neighbourhoods. The coronavirus resilient villages can be a model for such resistance, and it can be upscaled with the partnership of the government to stop the virus in its track. We seek the attention of the authorities towards this important initiative.

Dr Badiul Alam Majumdar, Global Vice President and Country Director, The Hunger Project Bangladesh.