

Antigen test at last

A very welcome decision

FOR the last two days, newspaper headlines were dominated by dire warnings of a second Covid-19 onslaught. The PM's caution was fully backed up by the experts committee's opinion and the causes are not far to seek. In spite of the continued cases of infection, it is business as usual in the country, with the exception of educational institutions. Mass gatherings in shopping centres and crowded local kitchen markets have become normal, social distancing has become a forgotten phrase, and health guidelines have become irrelevant. The likelihood of a new wave of the pandemic is enhanced by the increased infection rate, in India particularly, and resumption of international travel, which may be limited but where the rule of mandatory self-quarantine is constantly being violated.

Given the above, and the experience of our slapdash response in the first phase, the approval for rapid tests is a very welcome development. Antigen-based testing has been permitted in all government hospitals, district hospitals, government PCR labs and all health institutes as per the proposal of the health directorate and the interim guideline of the World Health Organization.

Considering our shortcomings, especially the lack of capacity to perform adequate testing, many of those who should have been tested have not been. The only way that we can stem the infection rate is to test, identify and separate the infected persons for appropriate treatment. Considering the limited number of labs with PCR testing facilities in the country, with most of those being concentrated in Dhaka, the outlying districts, upazilas and villages will now finally have the facilities for mass testing.

Rapid testing would allow us to test more people in quick time (it being cheap), give results in a matter of minutes and, like the genetic tests, reveal an active infection. What we would like to see is a test that is quicker, cheaper and more accurate, although experts agree that all three may not be achievable since with antigen tests, the chances of misdiagnosis remain. But we are also told that chance is minuscule. In any case, no system is error free, and a minute chance of misdiagnosis is more acceptable than no diagnosis whatsoever.

Who empowered millionaire DGHS driver?

Top health officials cannot avoid responsibility for low-level corruption

THE story of driver Abdul Malek of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), who was arrested on Sunday for allegedly accumulating immense wealth during his 35-year stint at the DGHS, is proof—if any more proof was ever needed—of how entrenched corruption has become in Bangladesh, and how deep the rabbit hole goes, from the top brass down to the lowest level of hierarchy. According to a report by *The Daily Star* quoting Rab officials, Malek has amassed wealth worth more than Tk 100 crore. He owns two seven-storied buildings consisting of 24 flats in the capital's Dakkhin Kamarpura area. He also owns several plots in different parts of the city. In one of these plots in Dhanmondi, he has a building now under construction. He also has a dairy farm on a 15-katha land plot in Dakkhin Kamarpura.

Initial investigations reveal that Malek borrowed a familiar playbook to build his little empire: abusing his connections to allow illegal recruitments, including of seven members of his own family, manipulating transfers and promotions, and even trading in "fake currencies". He used the front of his Health Directorate Drivers Association, of which he was the president, to exert his influence. Could a driver have done all this on his own? Who were his enablers and connections? How could someone so corrupt survive for so long without scrutiny or facing the consequences of his actions? These are questions that investigators need to look into and act upon.

Unfortunately, when it comes to facing corruption charges, we have often seen how low-level government employees were charged and investigated while their enablers—high-ranking officials without whose blessing and support they couldn't have gone far—elude detection. More often than not, even investigations into low-level corruption eventually fall by the wayside, thereby creating a culture of impunity that benefits all in the nexus. We're told that the Anti-Corruption Commission has been carrying out enquiries against 45 officials and staffers of DGHS, including Malek, since 2019. Recently, notices were issued against 12 of them—all low-level or mid-level employees. But what of their enablers? Are we to believe that their superiors had no knowledge of what was going on right under their noses? Unsurprisingly, Malek's former boss at the DGHS denied any knowledge of his corrupt activities.

The government must break this culture of deniability if corruption is truly to be eradicated. Malek must face the consequences of his actions. But he was not a lone wolf, and so any investigation into his crimes must look into the role his superiors and enablers played in his rise up the ladder. Unless those powerful backstage players in the DGHS and the health ministry are also brought to account, transparency and accountability, which is so crucial for the operation of these vital public institutions, will remain a distant dream.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Will the pandemic ever end?

It frightens me that despite the worsening conditions in Bangladesh, its business as usual whenever I step out of the house. It seems that the public has given up on safety measures that need to be followed. There is no social distancing, and masks are not being worn properly either. Our prime minister has warned of a second wave with the approaching winter. I earnestly believe that we must brace ourselves and take every possible precaution to prevent Covid-19 from spreading further and causing greater damage.

Anika Tabassum, Sylhet

M ABU EUSUF and MD RABIUL ISLAM RABI

THE Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted educational activities across Bangladesh, with the closure of educational institutes affecting the regular learning activities of nearly four crore students. Also, the economic slowdown, triggered by the pandemic, is affecting learners as well as their families. Evidence from the Ebola outbreak reveals that protracted closure of educational institutes leads to learning loss, increased dropout and higher inequality. The economic shock deteriorates these damages by suppressing education demand and supply as it adversely affects households, particularly disadvantaged ones. In the long-run, these will impose costs on human capital and welfare.

Pandemic induced shocks to the education sector is adversely affecting those who demand education—students. Access to education resources is particularly a challenge for students in low-income households, with worsening poverty incidence adding to their sufferings. According to various estimates, the poverty rate in Bangladesh is expected to be around 35-40 percent, in contrast to the pre-pandemic rate of around 20 percent. Increased poverty disproportionately affects lower-income households where survival trumps education. This is expected to trigger child labour as families look for income generating opportunities. Some studies indicate that a one percentage point rise in poverty leads to at least a 0.7 percent increase in child labour in certain countries. Also, rise in poverty incidence is likely to increase malnutrition, child marriage and other vulnerabilities.

Even before the pandemic set in, Bangladesh was struggling with a high dropout rate across education levels. According to BANBIES data, the dropout rate is highest in secondary education (37.6 percent). Corresponding figures for primary and upper secondary levels are 34.8 percent and 19.6 percent, respectively. Analysts opine that the dropout rates are likely to spike due to the pandemic. In fact, experiences from the Ebola crisis indicate that when schools reopened after the outbreak, girls were 16 percent less likely to be in school.

Shocks also affect the supply side in education. Media reports reveal that some private schools may close as parents fail to pay tuition. Subdued government spending on education is another pressing concern. In fact, we observed that the share of education in the total budget for FY21 is less than that of the revised budget of FY20. So far, there is no definite recovery plan to address the challenges of the education sector.

Adopting online teaching has been suggested for mitigating this ongoing crisis. The government initiative to broadcast lessons through television is praiseworthy. But, it comes with a downside also—creating inequality in terms of access to education. Even inside urban areas, poor households lacking television and internet access are deprived of lessons imparted through distance learning. This problem is even more pronounced in rural areas.

In many instances, there exists a lack of family supervision to monitor and assist

in learning activities, which was otherwise partially offset by teachers' classroom supervision in the pre-pandemic period. A recent BRAC Institute of Governance and Development survey on 5,000 students from urban slums and rural areas across Bangladesh indicate that study hours of students have declined by 80 percent due to school closures. The study showed that only 16 percent of students watched educational programmes like "Ghore Boshe Shikhi" and "Amar Ghorey Amar School" on television. Among the students who watch the TV programmes, majority did not find them helpful. Besides, only one percent of students watched educational programmes on the internet.

Data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2019 shows that nearly 5 percent of households do not own a mobile phone and almost 50 percent do not own a television. Only 5.6 percent of households own a computer and around 37 percent have access to internet at home. Internet access is still a limitation as 53 percent of households



Dressed in school uniform, a child looks on from her balcony in Barisal city, waiting for the day she can meet her friends and teachers at school again. PHOTO: TITU DAS

have access, while corresponding figures for rural areas are only about 33 percent. There is more to this story, as women and girls tend to have limited access to digital devices due to the power dynamics in family structures, exacerbating the problem even more. A recent report from Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) reveals a worrying picture—a whopping 46 lakh mobile connections were discontinued during the pandemic. Although it is difficult to ascertain the exact reasons behind this, it has been anticipated that people tend to cut back on mobile usage during a crisis, prioritising livelihoods instead.

As health and safety are now top priorities, governments across the globe have been confronted to rethink access to education and ensure quality academic activities. Needless to say, the pandemic reality has forced traditional teaching and classroom activities into the backseat. The new reality now requires innovative approaches to address the crisis in the education sector.

Due to the unprecedented nature of the crisis, there is limited evidence on actual impacts of interventions or different approaches to action, coordination, funding or prioritisation in the education sector. However, lessons learned from the

Ebola outbreak can help devise recovery and coping strategies.

First, we need to adopt and deliver new learning and evaluation methods. While adoption of online learning methods can only partly address the problem, focus should be given towards promoting inclusive alternative learning methods to build back better on our already ailing education system. As described earlier, Bangladesh is far from embracing full-fledged online learning solutions. A study by Global Partnership on Education found no evidence that online learning, screen or mobile-phone based technologies had played a positive role in supporting at-home learning during Ebola.

The claim that this pandemic is "ed tech's moment" appears to be somewhat misplaced in Bangladesh's context. Rather, in developing country circumstances, the use of radio seems more promising. A UNICEF estimate indicates that more than one million children were reached through radio education during Ebola. Then again, we must not lose sight of the

fact that accessibility will be a key concern. In this regard, low-cost yet simple mobile phones with radio options can be a way forward. Mobile phone radio is expected to be the mass media with greatest outreach, quickest start-up and least likelihood of being a vector for Covid-19 transmission. Integrating telecommunication services, radio channels, educational bodies and NGOs into a single platform can constitute a possible policy response in this regard.

Paper-based self-study materials (SSMs) may be considered as an option to facilitate learning. Self-study materials need to be tailored to children who may be at very different levels of attainment. It is important to note that self-study really means that a huge portion of students will not have access to literate family members who can support their study. Paper-based learning materials also come with logistical challenges, which should be carefully dealt with. With regards to conducting exams, creative yet effective evaluation methods can be designed, at least temporarily.

Secondly, we must take an all-out approach with proactive policies to prevent dropout. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is collaborating with the UN World Food Programme to distribute high-energy take-home biscuits to nearly three million school children throughout

Bangladesh who are missing out on their school meals due to school closures. This programme is spread across 15,200 primary schools across 104 upazilas. Similar interventions should be rolled out to act as incentives for households with school going children. Measures should be also targeted to address the nutrition needs of the children who are not enrolled in school.

Social safety nets should also be ramped up. Existing stipend programmes need to be revamped. New and innovative awareness campaigns should be put in place to reach the general population. Besides education and nutrition, policies should also aim to provide psychosocial support to learners and their families. We are already aware of stigmas triggered by Covid-19. Extending psychosocial support and raising awareness can thus be important ways forward.

Thirdly, we must prepare and enforce appropriate and strict health protocols as per the guidelines of WHO before reopening schools. It is anticipated that we may experience periodic outbreaks. Therefore, adjusting to the "new normal" will require early action and stern containment measures.

We must also focus on training teachers, since educators are also struggling to cope with new teaching methods. Ensuring teacher's training is likely to be less of a challenge, as teachers tend to own mobile device even in low-income settings. Evidence from Kenya and Rwanda suggests that smartphones and SD cards loaded with videos of teaching practices are used to support coaching and training. In the recent past, Bangladesh has also been cited as a success case in imparting teacher's training through mobile phones implemented via the English in Action project. Therefore, remote teacher training might be feasible and impactful to facilitate learning activities now and in days to come.

There is a need to ensure the judicious spending of funds as well. The government must exploit every possible opportunity to chip in the funds required for the recovery and continuity of this sector. As funds from development partners have started flowing in, judicious and accountable spending of the money can help navigate through the pandemic. While capacity and resource constraints will inevitably prioritise sectoral action, funding can be channelled towards near rapid responses, or empower existing interventions to adapt to evolving predicaments.

Finally, the government should aim at generating good data and evidence, as these are considered to be sound long-term investments. For recovery and building back better on education, a sound evidence base will help devise informed policy inputs. Early action in this regard will help government agencies to initiate evidence-based educational responses to address the challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and for future possible outbreaks as well.

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Indonesia in good position to revive world pressure on Myanmar

MARZUKI DARUSMAN

THE latest batch of Myanmar's Rohingya minority refugees landed in Aceh recently, prompting ASEAN in its ministerial meeting last week to urge and express readiness to help Myanmar to work out its plan to repatriate the refugees.

Also last week, eight countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany urged Myanmar to immediately enable "safe, voluntary, sustainable and dignified return of refugees", and to comply with the orders of the International Court of Justice, which in January had ordered Myanmar to prevent genocide against the Rohingya.

In fact, however, international pressure on the Rohingya issue has decreased, among other things, since the replacement of Yanghee Lee, the United Nations special rapporteur for Myanmar, whose term ended in early 2020. Without multilateral support, Bangladesh, which hosts around one million Rohingya refugees, feels alone, and has resorted to bilateral arrangements with Myanmar, including securitising the issue to mitigate extremism and preventing the Rohingya refugees from interacting with local society in every way possible.

All this has caused weakened political leadership of the Rohingya to fight for themselves. They need to be empowered.

The four most urgent measures are first, involve the Rohingya in talks on their future, meaning recognising them as a party; second, mobilise resources and funds to support Bangladesh and improve refugee shelters; third, start the discourse on third party countries providing asylum to Rohingya who fear returning to Myanmar; fourth, resume multilateral mechanisms at the United Nations to enable all these measures, to more intensively shine the spotlight on Myanmar's behaviour.



Local Aceh fishermen helped Rohingya refugees ashore in June, defying authorities who didn't want the asylum seekers to land. PHOTO: AFP

And Indonesia is in a good position to drive all these initiatives given its underused nonpermanent seat on the UN Security Council.

It doesn't matter if Indonesia's term ends this December. All is not lost. Indonesia has world credibility. Foreign Minister Retno LP Marsudi would be the world's foreign minister who has made the most visits to the Rohingya refugees. Through various engagements, Indonesia has come to understand that the Rohingya are very communal; they don't want to move individually or with just their own families, but with their entire villages.

So forget for now conventional international mechanisms with individual assessments for refugee placements. No need either to heed allegations of Indonesia's "Islamic agenda", as everyone knows our humanitarian motives for neighbours.

What we need is to be creative and active. Creativity without being active is no

use and vice versa. We cannot be spectators of one another, but we must coordinate and support each other on the issue.

We need an open mindset, not unrealistic interventions like pushing for a change in Myanmar's citizenship law, although we certainly follow nondiscrimination principles. And Myanmar's ally China, even for its own economic interest, has provided funds and transportation for refugees' safe return.

The demand for citizenship was not even absolute for all refugees as the independent fact-finding mission learned. Some just wanted to return and live safely as their first priority, likewise hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who are still in Myanmar. Now it's difficult for refugees to return as their homes and villages have been bulldozed.

Making demands or appeals at Myanmar is no use. What's needed is effective interaction between the UN secretary-general, the UN special

rapporteur for Myanmar and the secretary general's special envoy for Myanmar. These are the forces that could effectively push the Security Council in Geneva and the General Assembly in New York to pressure Myanmar.

It is not possible either to expect ASEAN's strong role as it safeguards its unity, and it's also dependent on New York and Geneva. Efforts are really needed, mainly from Indonesia, for if persecution of the Rohingya continues it is very possible that minorities in any country, particularly in Southeast Asia, who the rulers suddenly decide they do not like, could face discrimination and abuse.

Nonstop pressure against Myanmar is needed as during the term of Prof Lee, such pressure came among others from the European Union, Latin America, Africa and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Any international economic sanction is unlikely to work, as Myanmar has shown when it was in isolation for 50 years. And now Myanmar has China's support, apart from other economic partners.

The international community needs to first accept that some of the refugees wish to return and others may want to resettle in Europe or Canada, for instance. Such discourse is still nonexistent as all parties are insisting on safe repatriation, with Indonesia jumping on the wagon too.

In the 1970s, Indonesia and France were involved in international cooperation in assisting refugees from Vietnam on Galang Island in Riau province. Why don't we continue such arrangements? Many look to Indonesia's experience because that was extraordinary.

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