

Bravo to our remittance heroes!

But what are we giving them in return?

IT is heartening to know that despite the gloomy predictions of remittances going down as a fallout of the Covid-19 crisis, quite the opposite has happened in the last few months. According to a report in this daily, remittances have been pouring in consistently for the last four months with USD 2.15 billion coming in last month, providing relief to the economy in the middle of a pandemic. All this is good news for Bangladesh but as experts have pointed out, we must not be complacent and must make sure that the upward trend in remittance inflows is maintained. We must also explore the reasons for the inflow at a time when thousands of migrant workers have been laid off and forced to come back home because of the pandemic.

Experts have attributed several factors to this unexpected remittance inflow. These include: migrant workers bringing back all their savings after being laid off; the two-percent cash incentive being disbursed since July last year encouraging them to send money through formal channels, especially with the hundi system being stalled; and some Bangladeshi expats in North America and Europe deciding to keep their money in Bangladeshi banks that offer some interest on their deposits as opposed to the almost zero interest in the host countries.

But out of the one crore Bangladeshis living in about 160 countries, most are low-paid migrant workers in the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries, who contribute a bulk of foreign currency in the state coffers. If we want to maintain the upward trend in remittances, we must take strategic steps to encourage the inflows. Sending money through formal channels have to be made more attractive through continued cash incentives and by making the process of sending money fast, simple and smooth. Previously, 49 percent of the total remittance was sent using the non-banking channels. Agrani Bank's recent launch of an app-based system in Singapore to reach Bangladeshi remitters is an example of how banks can make sending money home easier. Of course, all this assumes that most of the migrants who have come back will get their jobs back in foreign lands. The Bangladesh government must, therefore, do its part in facilitating their return through negotiations with the host countries and ensuring that plane tickets are available for those who need to go back to their jobs within a certain period of time.

It is ironic that this uplifting news comes at a time when we also learn of returnee migrants being incarcerated in jail because they have apparently "tarnished the image of the country". This has been because of their undocumented status as a result of them being duped by unscrupulous recruiters and employers. Instead of helping these migrants, many of whom have contributed to the economy through their hard-earned remittances, we have ended up adding to their trauma by treating them like criminals. Thus while we enjoy the fruits of the high flow of remittances, we must also acknowledge the contributions of these workers by treating them with respect, empathy and fairness.

Antigen kits can make a big difference

Step up efforts to procure antigen kits under the WHO plan

ACCORDING to a recent report, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that 120 million rapid diagnostic kits for Covid-19 would be made available to low- and middle-income countries at a low cost. With health guidelines becoming less relevant by the day, along with the continuous surge in the rate of infection, increasing testing is of utmost importance—more so because of the likelihood of a second wave of Covid-19 onslaught in the coming months. Amidst all the chaos, antigen-based testing has been permitted recently 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 WHO.

We welcome such a decision as mass testing is the only way we can efficiently identify, isolate and treat the infected population, not only in the cities but also in remote corners of the country where the sophisticated RT-PCR tests are not easily available. The antigen test involves taking a saliva sample and the results are obtained within 15-30 minutes. What took us so long to approve it, while our neighbour India had already done so months ago, still remains a question.

The need of the hour is for the authorities to take immediate necessary steps in order to obtain the WHO-approved rapid testing kits. Choosing the right kits is extremely important in a scenario where there are instances of unscrupulous individuals supplying fake protective gear such as masks to hospitals. The details about the WHO prequalification of the kits along with the results of the validation tests, which are now in progress at the IEDCR, are crucial during selection. The validation is expected to be complete in a little more than a week's time. The relevant health officials must remain alert and choose wisely to ensure the quality of the antigen kits. Given our limited access to the expensive and time-consuming RT-PCR test, such a move will prove beneficial as it will help patients in getting timely treatment and possibly save their lives.

The elusive zero tolerance for corruption



was a rhetorical question. Then why is it that corruption seems to be skyrocketing? That's the real question.

By now, the story of Abdul Malek, a driver of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), has travelled far and wide. Known to his neighbours as "Mr Badal", a rich businessman in the Bamnartek area where he lived, Malek is an alleged puppet master who influenced the promotion and transfer of hundreds of DGHS employees, and somehow managed to secure jobs for his daughter, son-in-law, brother and nephew at the health directorate.

According to Lt Col Ashique Billah, director of Rab's legal and media wing, Malek possessed more than Tk 100 crore in wealth and is the owner of two seven-story buildings in Dakkhin Kamarpara of Turag. Apart from these, Malek also owns several plots in different parts of the capital, where land value, as we know, is astronomically high.

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How did a driver at a government office become so powerful? Could he have done all this on his own, or did he have associates and enablers? And most importantly, who was pulling his strings?

importantly, who was pulling his strings? Between 2009 and 2010, Malek allegedly had a hand in the appointment of more than 100 health assistants. According to a top official quoted by *Prothom Alo*, Malek was also the "collector" of former Director General of Health Services, Shah Munir Hossain, who denied the allegation as well as any knowledge of Malek's misdeeds. He, however, wasn't the only top official in the DGHS that Malek had an "intimate

the disastrously handled coronavirus outbreak. Only on September 21, this paper reported that an accountant of the DGHS, Abzal Hossain, and his wife Rubina Khanam had laundered about Tk 40 crore abroad. (Too bad for Malek he was only a driver, who was not sophisticated enough to launder his wealth abroad).

But it was more than 19 months ago that the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) sent a report to the health ministry

and other safety gear surfaced even after the Covid-19 pandemic hit Bangladesh around March.

Moreover, on December 12 last year, the ACC handed a letter to the health ministry asking it to blacklist 14 medical equipment providers, who were found involved in misappropriation of public money worth about Tk 108 crore in several graft cases. Ironically, it took the DGHS over six months to blacklist them. Only God knows how much money was misappropriated in those six months—because by the looks of things, we certainly won't.

Just like the health ministry ignored the ACC recommendations (some for six months and others till now), in 2014, a Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) survey similarly revealed information on bribery in recruitment, transfer, posting and promotion in the health sector. Unsurprisingly, the authorities (in what has almost become an unbreakable and sacred tradition) denied it. Had the TIB survey been taken into account, it is possible that the corruption now infesting the health sector could have been avoided, and Malek might have been apprehended a long time ago.

So why is it that the authorities continue to "see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil"? One possibility is, when a driver of a government office can accumulate such enormous wealth, it does not take a rocket scientist to figure out how much money the real big fish are making. And as the saying goes, "birds of a feather flock together". The other likely possibility is that the authorities have begun to swallow their own propaganda when it comes to all the zero-tolerance-for-corruption rhetorical nonsense. Because that's what it is—as the record of corruption from a whole host of different government organisations illustrates.

Of course, it doesn't have to be either/or. It is possible that both are correct. After all, the human psyche is quite fragile. And once someone (or some group) becomes so corrupt, it is likely that he/she would start deluding themselves to believe otherwise. In that case, swallowing one's own propaganda might just be the *soma* pill (from Huxley's *Brave New World*) that one needs.

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relationship" with. According to reports, Malek also drove around and had a close relationship with the current Director General of the Health Services Division who, to no one's surprise, also denied having any knowledge of his crimes. Was Malek that good at hiding his misdeeds? Of course not. Numerous DGHS officials have come forward and shared information about his influence and criminality with the media since his arrest. It seems the Director Generals of the Health Services Division, who also were his direct bosses, were the only ones in the dark!

No wonder then that the DGHS has become a cesspool of corruption, most of which has only come to light after

identifying sources of graft in the health sector, which set alarm bells ringing. One of its findings was that corruption takes place during the purchase of medicines, surgical equipment and other machines due to absence of proper monitoring by the government. According to the report, a nexus of contractors and officials from different organisations under the ministry buys many "inessential machines and equipment to misappropriate money." In the same report, submitted in January 2019, the ACC gave 25 recommendations on preventing graft and other corrupt practices. All those recommendations, however, appear to have fallen on deaf ears as allegations of corruption in the procurement of N95 masks, PPE units

Korea-Bangladesh ties in the face of Covid-19 and LDC graduation



EVERY year on the 3rd of October, the Republic of Korea celebrates its National Foundation Day, Gaecheonjeol, which marks the founding of the oldest dynasty in Korean history. It is a great pleasure to celebrate this important day and honour the legacy of our forefathers with the people of Bangladesh and Korean expatriates living in Bangladesh. The Korean Embassy used to host an annual reception to celebrate this day, inviting friends and partners in Bangladesh as well as the diplomatic community. Unfortunately, due to the unprecedented situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic, we will celebrate it virtually this year on a special website (www.bd-korea.com), which will open at 10 am on October 3. I invite you all to visit the site, join our celebration and enjoy the various interesting contents.

This year, the occasion is all the more meaningful as it coincides with the 100th anniversary of the birth of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. His devotion to Bangladesh's independence and well-being of his people continues to inspire people all around the world. The hearts of the Korean people are with fellow Bangladeshis as Bangladesh celebrates the Mujib year.

Although Covid-19 has adversely impacted each and every corner of our lives, Korea remains committed to strengthening its friendly ties with Bangladesh. From the outset of the pandemic, the two governments have communicated closely with respect to their domestic situations, immigration and aviation policies, and possible measures to jointly tackle the crisis.

To help Bangladesh curb the spread of the virus and overcome the subsequent economic challenges, the Korean government together with KOICA, Korea's aid agency, have provided or committed to render a total of US 1.2 million worth of test kits, masks, PPEs, emergency food, and walk-through test booths. Also, Korea's finance ministry and Korea Eximbank are jointly reviewing a proposal for providing concessional loan to support the economic stimulus package rolled out by the government of Bangladesh. Furthermore, Korea

has actively shared our experiences, best practices and technical expertise accumulated in our fight against the virus with partner countries including Bangladesh via a series of webinars.

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1973, Korea and Bangladesh have strengthened cooperation in various areas such as trade, investment, development, and people-to-people exchanges. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Seoul in 2010 and the then Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon's visit to Dhaka in 2019 marked new milestones in the bilateral relationship.

The total volume of bilateral trade reached USD 1.7 billion last year. Korea's cumulative investment to Bangladesh,

expanding the areas of cooperation into infrastructure, energy, ICT, and electronics manufacturing, Shahjalal International Airport's third terminal, Meghnaghat 750MW power plant, and Matarbari 1200MW power plant are being constructed by Samsung, Posco, and Hyundai, and it is no secret that Korea's major electronics and automobiles companies are eyeing on Bangladesh for potential investment destination.

Korea is also one of Bangladesh's key development partners, having contributed so far a total of USD 160 million in grants through KOICA and USD 1.24 billion in EDCF concessional loan in various sectors including public administration, vocational



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PHOTO: COLLECTED according to Bangladesh Bank, amounted to USD 1.2 billion last year, ranking 6th among other investors and even surpassing China, Japan, and most European countries. There are currently around 150 Korean companies operating in Bangladesh with nearly half of them investing in Export Processing Zones. This makes Korea the top foreign investor in EPZs.

Early on, Korean companies like Youngone have invested heavily in Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) industry, which currently makes up more than 80 percent of Bangladesh's export. While Korea is proud to have contributed to the development of RMG sector in Bangladesh, it is seeking to elevate the Korea-Bangladesh relationship into a higher level, further

training and education, transportation, communication, water management and health. In an effort to empower Bangladesh's health capacity, for example, Korea fully funded the establishment of National Institute of Advanced Nursing Education and Research and is supporting the ongoing construction of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University. In coordination with a Korean hospital, KOICA has also been implementing the "Eye Health Promotion and Prevention of Blindness" project in Savar.

Bangladeshi expatriates in Korea are another important pillar of our partnership. Among the 18,000 Bangladeshi nationals residing in Korea, about half of them are semi-skilled workers dispatched under the

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Employment Permit System (EPS) and nearly 1,300 are students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programmes. The number of visitors from Bangladesh to Korea grew steadily in recent years reaching 18,478 in 2019, which is a whopping 36 percent increase compared to three years before. If regular direct passenger flights between Seoul and Dhaka were introduced, we would see an even larger increase in the volume of people-to-people exchanges.

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Despite the severe repercussions of Covid-19, Bangladesh's economy fared relatively well with a record inflow of remittances and export steadily picking up the pace. With the Asian Development Bank forecasting 6.8 percent GDP growth in FY 2020-21, Bangladesh remains well positioned to graduate from the LDC status in 2024 and reach its goal of becoming a developed country by 2041. Being a strong and reliable partner, Korea will continue to support Bangladesh on its journey to accomplish the well-being and prosperity for its people. Joy Bangla.

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