

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 18, 2020, AGRAHAYAN 3, 1427 BS

Rising infections mean health guidelines are being ignored

Heed the signs and enforce preventive measures

It is of great concern that many regions in the globe are having a second onslaught of Covid-19, belying predictions and dashing hopes of the impending demise of the pandemic before the end of the year. Unfortunately, Europe has had to go back to closing down once again, and the US has been witnessing a quantitative rise, both in the number of new Covid-19 cases as well as deaths. The world is facing another prospect of an economic downturn. How is Bangladesh faring?

The situation in Bangladesh, regrettably, is not much different from what we are seeing in many other countries although in a smaller dimension, and India is faring the worst of the South Asian countries. Perhaps the warning of the prime minister of a second attack of the pandemic is starting to come to pass. The 24 hours ending on November 16 saw the highest number of infected cases—2,139. This was the highest reported in a single day in the last 70 days. This was also a big increase from 1,845 cases reported on Thursday. What is most worrisome is the positivity rate which is nearly 17 percent. While there is hope that effective vaccines are in the offing we do not know how long it will take before they will be available to Bangladesh. Thus the health guidelines as recommended by experts are the only way to combat a second wave.

Unfortunately in spite of the PM's warning, it seems that it is business as usual in Bangladesh. There is no serious effort to follow or enforce the guidelines. And the publicity and information machinery of the administration seems to have gone into hibernation. The government order of no-mask-no-service is being continuously disregarded which is a dangerous situation when infection rates are so high. This must be strictly enforced, not by sporadically fining a few transgressors but constant oversight and strict enforcement measures. The screening of incoming passengers at the international airport must continue. We suggest cheaper and more testing facilities be made available. Early detection and treatment can save many lives for which testing and quarantining those who test positive is so important. The government must also ensure that hospitals have the proper protective gear and life-saving facilities such as oxygen supply and ventilators for patients who need hospitalisation. We all have to remember that this is not the time to let our guard down.

Steady flow of remittance gives us hope

But what of the migrant workers struggling without support?

It's heartening to know that Bangladesh has been witnessing a steady flow of inward remittance over the past few months, defying grim predictions triggered by the pandemic and its impact on overseas labour migration. The country has earned a record USD 1.2 billion in remittance in the first 15 days of November, according to the finance ministry. In October, it earned USD 2.11 billion, which was the third-highest monthly flow in history, behind July's USD 2.59 billion and September's USD 2.15 billion. Overall, from July 1 to November 12, remittance inflow stood at USD 9.69 billion, up 43.42 percent from USD 6.89 billion year-on-year. Such a performance is indeed cause for optimism, and we commend the government for introducing the two-percent cash incentive for money sent through formal channels which is partly responsible for the recent uptick in official remittance flows.

The migrant workers are, of course, the real heroes. They continue to bring in foreign currency even in the middle of a pandemic, with little recognition of their efforts and often little support from the officials and manpower agencies concerned. The challenge for the government now is to ensure the upward trend holds in a post-pandemic reality, when things begin to settle into business as usual. Besides the cash incentive scheme, the current trend has been also linked to diversion of remittances from informal to formal channels due to the difficulty of carrying money (through the hundi system) under travel restrictions, as per a recent World Bank statement. It has been also attributed to laid-off workers bringing back all their savings and some expats in North America and Europe keeping their money in Bangladeshi banks that offer some interest on their deposits, as opposed to the almost zero interest in their host countries. Clearly, a host of factors—not just one, as the finance minister has claimed—worked in favour of Bangladesh, making it post the highest year-on-year remittance growth of 53.5 percent among the top 49 recipient-countries in the third quarter of 2020.

We urge the government to conduct a calmer appraisal of the situation and prepare for all possible scenarios in the coming months, when global trade likely returns to normal. It should make remittance earning part of a wider strategy that protects the long-term interests of prospective and existing migrant workers, revitalising its manpower and labour wings so they can play a more supportive role. We have already seen how laid-off returnee workers had to suffer without support at home and how outgoing workers struggled at every stage of their return journey because of the incompetence and red tape of the administration. This doesn't inspire confidence. The government's actions must match its rhetoric about the contribution of the migrant workers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Teen gang violence

Teen gang violence has become a major concern for law enforcement agencies, as more than a dozen teenagers have been killed over the last four months by juvenile offenders. Those involved in these gangs soon get involved with other illegal activities including petty crimes, murder, stalking, rape, mugging and drug abuse.

We cannot let our youth go astray like this. A joint effort by guardians, teachers, law enforcement agencies could help curb this menace.

Mardia Khan, by email



BADRUZZAMAN BAY

OF MAGIC & MADNESS

If you're as keen an observer of what's trending on social media as I like to think I am, you must have come across reports on one of the following incidents in recent days: i) superstar all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan receiving a death threat for his role in the inauguration of a Kali Puja festival in Kolkata from a man on Facebook Live, who accused him of blasphemy and threatened to cut him to pieces with a machete; ii) a large gathering at the Dhupkhola Math under the banner of Touhidi Janata Oikya Parishad, protesting with threats of dire consequences, the planned installation of a sculpture of Bangabandhu; iii) a five-star hotel being built by Sikder Group in the hills of the Mro community in Bandarban, potentially leading to their displacement, dispossession, and loss of livelihoods; iv) four Hindu houses and a family temple being vandalised and torched in Cumilla's Muradnagar area; v) rape and sexual abuse; and vi) harassment of journalists and online activists.

I cite these incidents not to add my two cents to the debates swirling around them or to dissect the social media diet of local netizens, but to merely show a common thread running through them all: violence. These are all textbook examples of different types of violence: psychological, spiritual, economic, cultural, sexual/physical/domestic, and virtual—precisely in that order. The list doesn't end here, of course, nor is there a shortage of illustrative examples.

I remember there was a time when, owing to my youthful naiveté, I would think that living is more than surviving. That life doesn't have to be a code word for struggle and suffering. In reality, living, for most people, was surviving. But now, especially since the outbreak of the

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SALEEMUL HUQ

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

At the time of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change which was approved by all countries in 2015, every country submitted its intended Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) in which they made pledges and commitments for mitigation by reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. They also agreed that each country will update and submit their revised NDC every five years—so the deadline for the new NDC is December 31, 2020.

By adding up the pledges from each country, it is possible to aggregate the total impact of each country's NDC on global mitigation and see whether it will lead to the global goal of keeping mean atmospheric temperature below 1.5 degrees Centigrade or at least below 2 degrees.

Unfortunately, once the mitigation pledges of all countries submitted in 2015 was added up, it was estimated that it would lead to nearly 3 degrees Centigrade increase—so it is essential that the revised NDCs being submitted in 2020 should enhance their pledges to reduce their emissions beyond the pledges made in 2015.

One way to measure and compare how a country pledges to do so is by setting a deadline by which time it will reach zero emissions, or at least net zero emissions. Thus many countries have been setting their target year for reaching net zero emissions such as 2060 for China, 2050 for European Union, 2035 for Costa Rica and even California has set a target date of 2045. The incoming Biden presidency will have to set out its target year if it wishes to re-enter the Paris Agreement. Since he won't be sworn in as US president until January 2021, we can give him a time extension beyond December 31, 2020.

Kindness can heal what blind faith cannot

pandemic, living has become more of an exercise in trudging through one horror story to another, each day like a new episode, each scarier than the one before. In this time of alt-truth, hysteria and militant intolerance, perhaps it is natural that the threats of violence and cruelty, both online and offline, are never far away from us.

The lack of empathy and understanding, as demonstrated by the aforementioned incidents, is deeply unsettling. But often, how we approach a problem mirrors not just the reality in which we live but also what we think to be its solution. We, regardless of where we belong in the liberal-conservative spectrum, seem to think that if faith doesn't work, applying force will. If emotion doesn't take us far, cold, dispassionate reasoning will. If the

concern for and connection with another being—constitutes a basic aspect of our nature shared by all human beings, as well as being the foundation of our happiness." Theologian Dan Harper expands on this philosophy by saying: "While religions may differ in their metaphysical views, the Dalai Lama says that religious and secular views converge in the realm of ethics. He believes compassion is central to the ethical systems of all religious approaches, including theistic approaches like Christianity, non-theistic approaches like Buddhism, as well as non-religious secular ethical systems."

In short, kindness is the common thread that runs through all faiths and nonfaiths. As such, it should appeal equally to adherents of all belief systems. No, it is not the solution to all our

kindness is not always easy to sustain, as one columnist noted, and as a society we are clearly struggling to be kind to certain groups, especially those who think or act differently. Shakib had to apologise for his "behaviour" even though he violated no law, no social convention. The Hindu community in Muradnagar had to go through unimaginable sufferings even though they did nothing to warrant such cruelty. True adherents of Islam who understand its principles would never do something like this. These are challenges that proponents of the kindness movement have to address going forward.

The most beautiful thing about kindness is that it brings as much joy to the giver as to the recipient. The history of this land is replete with such small, selfless and often undocumented acts of



Volunteers of Bhalo Kajer Hotel distributing food packets among underprivileged people.

PHOTO: COURTESY

past doesn't unite us, the future will. If you're not speaking in my terms, you're not speaking at all. This either-or binary dominates our perception of problems. In our heart, there is no place for the "sinner", no rebuke for the "faithful", even when their roles intersect. We seem to have all the answers ready. All the solutions that can bridge the widening crack in our social fabric. Yet division and violence thrive, which makes me wonder: what questions should we be asking that we are not?

One question that often remains unasked, in my view, is if there is a way that can give both sides of the liberal-conservative spectrum something that isn't up for interpretation—a common ground in their search for solutions. Kindness, it is believed, offers such a way. As the Dalai Lama once said, "It is my fundamental conviction that compassion—the natural capacity of the human heart to feel

sociocultural problems. But in a society as diverse and as increasingly cruel as ours, building a culture of carrying out small, random acts of kindness can trigger a snowball effect which may eventually lead to a fairer and kinder society.

This month, we have had two related occasions within the space of four days—World Kindness Day on November 13 and International Day for Tolerance on November 16. Unfortunately, none of the days are observed officially here. The celebration is limited to publishing articles only. As a society, we would benefit greatly from a wider promotion of these days, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic which has brought to the fore the importance of citizen-led voluntary initiatives to help those in need. "Be kind" has been a recurring message in 2020. Our gratitude to the frontline workers shows how much we appreciate kindness. Yet

kindness. I see strangers on bus leaving their seats for older people and women with children, people reaching out with help unbeknownst to others, blood donors hundreds of miles to help unknown patients. When I suffered a major road accident two years ago, a stranger came out of nowhere and took me to hospital, and then vanished into thin air, without giving me a chance to thank her. Such is the potential of our people to do good and heal wounds, purely driven by compassion. We need to nurture this culture, promote it systemically, and spread the message of compassion and empathy so far and wide that the dark forces of bigotry and zealotry find little support for the heinous crimes they intend to commit.

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Why Bangladesh should submit its Nationally Determined Contribution by December 31

The Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) countries under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have already launched a high level global campaign called Midnight Climate Survival demanding that all countries submit their NDC with enhanced pledges for reducing emissions to keep global mean atmospheric temperature below 1.5 degrees.

The nearly 50 CVF countries themselves have already pledged to rely 100 percent

pledge in terms of reducing our total emissions of greenhouse gases from these three sectors that we would reduce emissions by 5 percent by 2030 compared to business-as-usual projections but that we could reduce up to 15 percent if we were to receive additional finance as well as technology from the global community.

The updating and revision of the NDC is currently being carried out by a group of national experts under the guidance

associated with different activities and sectors and then identifying ways on which the development in each sector can be de-linked from use of fossil fuels. This will in practice depend on enhancing the use of renewable energy like solar as well as wind energy going forward. At the moment the extent of solar energy is not very high and wind is not a factor yet. Nevertheless the potential for renewable energy to become more efficient and cheaper will need to be factored into our development plans. It is entirely possible to transform our energy use within the next decade if we create the conditions to do so.

One aspect of the NDC that is important to note is that while the mitigation pledge is mandatory for every country to include in the NDC, they could also include adaptation but on a voluntary and not compulsory basis. As it happens, the vast majority of countries have chosen to include adaptation in their respective NDC and so has Bangladesh. This is an important fact to note as all countries now realise that they will have to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change while also reducing their emissions of greenhouse gases at the same time.

As all countries are now gaining interest in making the transition from a fossil fuel based energy, transport and industrial economy, this needs to be accelerated to ensure that we don't cross the threshold of 1.5 degrees global temperature rise.

Bangladesh, as a vulnerable developing country is not a big emitter of greenhouse gases and is also not under any strong obligation to take significant actions on mitigation. But as the leader of the CVF group of countries, our prime minister has challenged all countries to submit their respective NDCs by December 31, 2020. Hence for Bangladesh to retain the moral high ground it is important that we also submit our NDC before the deadline.

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A file photo shows floods in Jamalpur district exceeding previous levels.

PHOTO: REUTERS

on renewable energy by 2050 which they are developing long term development plans to achieve.

However, in the near term, as the CVF countries are demanding that all countries should submit their respective revised NDC by December 31, it is expected that Bangladesh should also meet this deadline for submission of its own NDC.

Bangladesh's original NDC submitted in 2015 at the time of the Paris Agreement touched on only three sectors, namely power, transport and industry. The overall

of Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC), with support from UNDP, and it is hoped that they can submit, at least an interim, revised NDC by end of December with a full NDC in 2021. The revised NDC will also include two additional sectors which were not included in the original NDC, namely waste and land use which are more complicated to calculate so will take somewhat longer to do.

This will require a better estimation of the current baseline levels of emissions