

Why are we still not following Covid-19 health guidelines?

The message must be loud and clear

THE advent of winter has brought a spike in Covid-19 cases and one of the reasons for this, say experts, is the “super-spreaders”—people aged between 20 and 40, who are the most exposed to infection as they must go outside to earn their livelihood. While many of them have mild to no symptoms, they can infect those who fall under the vulnerable category. People aged 50 years and above and those with pre-existing conditions are at the highest risk. The death rate is higher for this group, about 79 percent, as stated by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

So what is the message that should be made loud and clear to the public? As the director of IEDCR has said, it is crucial that the super-spreader group maintain the health guidelines—wearing masks, washing hands with soap frequently, and maintain physical distancing. But what we see in public spaces is quite the opposite of that. Buses are filled with people, many people have stopped wearing masks, and whether they wash their hands or sanitise them is questionable. This is because there is a kind of indifference regarding these guidelines which need to be disseminated more vigorously by the health authorities through national TV, radio, loudspeakers and other public awareness campaigns. Enforcing these guidelines is difficult if people are not really convinced about how important these are and that following these makes the difference between life and death. They should be made aware that their disregard for something as basic as wearing a mask or maintaining social distancing can actually cause the death of their loved ones, their neighbours or those who they don’t know but may come in close contact with.

Covid-19 is now closer to home than ever and we just cannot afford to be so lackadaisical about our adherence to these guidelines. In cities like Dhaka and Chattogram, social distancing is practically impossible but at least those who are in the super-spreader category can wear masks and stay away from those in the vulnerable category, who should also wear masks whenever there is a possibility of exposure.

Specialists have said that the daily figures are just a “snapshot of the whole picture”, and to get the real scenario, we need to do at least five lakh tests daily. This is indeed disconcerting given that our testing is way below that. The health minister has urged people to get tested especially since the antigen testing has also been introduced to selected areas to increase testing capacity. He has also said that people are reluctant to test. The government should make testing easier and affordable. Outdoor testing camps with proper social distancing can be introduced to minimises exposure.

As we battle a second wave of Covid-19, we must learn from our past experiences to better combat this deadly disease. Better, more accessible testing facilities and strict adherence to health guidelines will go a long way. It will save lives.

Stalling of circular bus services

Why are new routes launched (and stalled) without proper feasibility studies?

ALTHOUGH the lockdown on transport was lifted in May, the circular bus services introduced by Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) on two routes in Dhaka still remain suspended. BRTC had launched the circular bus services—Dhanmondi-Azimpur and Uttara-Airport Sector 12—last year in order to reduce gridlocks, ensure smooth vehicular movement and bring discipline to the capital’s transport system. Within a week of its launch, however, the Uttara short circular route was suspended, while the Dhanmondi-Azimpur route remained suspended since the government enforced a nationwide lockdown on March 26. However, BRTC is still operating the Uttara-Gulshan circular route on a limited scale due to low turnout of passengers. BRTC intends to resume operations on the Uttara-Sonargaon Janapath and Airport sector-12 route once educational institutions reopen.

Officials say these routes are no longer financially viable. Experts, however, highlight that the pandemic isn’t the only thing to blame for the stalling of services. When the routes were introduced, no proper in-depth study was conducted to assess the viability of the projects. Moreover, no steps were taken to rid the roads of alternative transportation such as rickshaws and to divert buses of other routes, resulting in redundancy of the buses. As such, the state-owned bus service is now making profit at a bare minimum. How could the authorities have taken such a huge decision without analysing the situation thoroughly? The buses that are now collecting dust exemplify a waste of taxpayer’s money.

The circular bus services need to be properly utilised for their intended purpose. BRTC can operate on a partial scale on the suspended routes. The privately-run Gulshan and Hatirjheel circular bus service, which has proven beneficial as no rickshaws or buses of different routes ply through that road, can serve as an example.

Moving forward, there needs to be accountability of how resources are allocated and projects implemented. We hope this will serve as a lesson for our authorities about doing their homework first before taking such leaps.



WHEN the sky isn’t looking clear anymore, to say you are watching the clouds go by with the hope of a better day is being cautiously optimistic. If there’s rain in the process, one gathers that it is what it is and a sense of ease settles in, looking at the freshly cleaned landscape. With Covid-19, it’s been neither clouds nor rain. It’s been a clear sense of a lingering thunder which has frightened humanity and shooed us to our cubbyholes. There’s no bravery that’s been able to confront this monster, no shield that’s been enough. The world, at the most, has just watched it unfold and handled it to its limited capacity.

Throughout the world, Covid-19 is indeed being approached with caution and advisories at all levels. Governments all over the world have reacted and rescued; businesses all over have waited and suffered. Yet, through all the losses and tears, trepidations and predicaments, many lives and enterprises have learnt to cope with the oscillations of the pandemic.

At our end, the single largest industry of readymade garments had to deal with the crisis of such magnitude. The impact of the pandemic on the lives, livelihoods and the overall economy cannot be overstated. The USD 3.15 billion worth of cancellations put a dent on the essence of trust between the suppliers and the brands, and the inevitability of repatriation of funds had become a reality overnight. At a time like that, the impact could have been more severe in the absence of the incentive packages and policy interventions announced and implemented by the government. Quite often, we hear about bureaucratic hurdles (“*amlatantrik jotilota*”) but, during this pandemic, the promptness and efficiency of the bureaucratic response had given the industries in Bangladesh a fresh air to breathe in.

We are grateful to the prime minister for providing the critical direction to the industry and for having saved industry-related livelihoods. We also salute our workers who have literally saved the industry from being doomed. And we must also applaud the finance ministry, commerce ministry, Bangladesh Bank and



IT’S been almost one year since the novel coronavirus was identified in China and reported to WHO. During the past year, the pandemic caused by Covid-19 has spread to the entire world, over six and a half crores have been infected, and over 15 lakhs have died. We have seen countries suffering from multiple waves of the pandemic, different types of responses to the health challenge, severe crisis hitting the global economy and different types of measures taken in response to the latter. So much was unknown about the disease during its early days that there were differences even among scientists and epidemiologists on measures needed to contain the spread of the virus and mitigate its adverse effects. In the history of civilisation, this is one of the most serious challenges faced by mankind. It is perhaps time to look back and see what are the major takeaways from this experience.

Why have some countries/regions been more affected than others?

It is well-known that some countries and regions have been more affected by the pandemic than others. Globally, Europe, America, parts of Latin America and parts of Asia have been more affected than Africa and parts of Asia. Scientists have scratched their heads and research has been done to understand this variation. Explanations ranging from genetic differences and basic hygiene practices of certain races to the timeliness and stringency of measures undertaken at the beginning of the outbreak have been put forward. And yet, it is not clear whether there are convincing explanations of why, for example, the number of infections per million of population is only in double digits in China, Thailand and Vietnam as opposed to thousands in not-too-far-away countries like Bangladesh and India.

Maintain social distance, wear mask and wash hands

On how to contain the spread of the virus, it is customary to recite the trinity of social distancing, mask wearing and hand washing. But the real challenge is their implementation. Human being is a social animal; and the experiences of countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Brazil or Germany show how difficult it is to persuade them to abstain from socialisation and to maintain distance from each other when they do so. People consider attending religious congregations their pious duty and right. Whether it is Eid or Thanksgiving, people are extremely reluctant to forego celebration with their

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Covid-19, Industry and Bureaucracy

all other ministries and departments of the government for their fast response and painstakingly implementing the incentive packages. These were absolutely crucial for re-coursing the industry from obvious destruction.

At the very outset of the calamity, the concern that grappled us immediately was saving the livelihoods of four-million workers and their dependents from any possible financial crunch. As the industry embraced the tsunami of cancellation resulting in export slashed by 85 percent in April, the severity was foreseen by the government, and the BDT 50 billion loan stimulus meant for paying workers’ wages



The RMG industry needs continuity of the supports received so far to stay afloat in the coming days, along with additional supports to withstand any adverse impact.

DS FILE PHOTO

in April, May, June and July marked the first turning point for the industry to stay afloat during the peak of the storm, i.e. April-July 2020.

As far as the salary packages are concerned, the integrity of the disbursement of incentives could not be questioned. The farsightedness and pragmatism of the government had made the digital wage payment possible, and this itself ensured transparency. Needless to say, at a time when the West came to a dead halt by lockdowns and emergencies, the “financial flow” came as the lifeline of the industry. Thanks to the Ministry of Finance for efficiently stitching up the much-needed rescue package for the

support to a large proportion due to the nature of business and conditions set out to access the incentive.

However, while enthralled by the revival in exports since July (by 0.82 percent during July-September), albeit short-lived, the emergence of the second wave of Covid-19 is extremely worrying for the industry. The dwindling retail sales in the West and further slowdown in export since October could be early signs of a resurgence of the situation we have passed through earlier this year. The approval of vaccines is a great source of hope, but as far as trade is concerned, the worries may still persist as the global economy may take time to generate momentum

Ten takeaways from one year of Covid-19

near and dear ones. Maintaining social distance during such occasions gets low priority. Younger people even in developed countries have been seen to go to any extent to arrange and attend parties (there were instances of parties held in remote forest areas as a way of evading law enforcers).

As for wearing masks, issues like personal freedom and democratic rights come into play. While it is easy to preach frequent washing of hands, it can be a far cry for millions of people who have to walk miles just to procure a jar of water for drinking. So, when one is asked what else can one do other than wearing mask and maintaining social distance, the inevitable answer is: precious little.

Well-thought-out strategy and clearly articulated messages are important

Countries that were able to put together well-thought-out strategies and send clear messages to the people attained greater success in containing the virus. There are different models of such success stories ranging from authoritarian regimes like in China to democracies like Australia

(Bangladesh) and to transfer patients to nearby countries (The Netherlands) are indicators of a general malaise: neglect of the health sector in public policy.

Effective shutdown helps, but for how long can that be done?

One way of ensuring social distance is to shut down public life, and its effectiveness has been demonstrated in a wide range of situations ranging from Wuhan to New Zealand, and to a number of countries in Europe during the first wave of the virus in the spring of 2020. However, apart from the issue of jeopardising livelihoods, issues like democratic rights of people to move freely have been invoked in various countries. In several countries of Europe, there have been street protests against shutdown of economic activities.

Influencing human behaviour, raising public awareness

At least two of the measures that are critical to fight the pandemic—viz., social distancing and wearing mask (and to an extent the third one, greater attention to personal hygiene, also)—require changes

The importance of clearly-laid-out strategies is also illustrated by the difference in the experience of the same country at different points in time. In Switzerland, for example, the success of containing the first wave could not be replicated during the second wave because of ambivalence and delay in putting in place the needed strategy.

and New Zealand. At the other extreme are countries (e.g. the USA, Switzerland—the latter, during the second wave) that could not put together such a strategy at the national or local level, and as a result, failed to contain the virus. The importance of clearly-laid-out strategies is also illustrated by the difference in the experience of the same country at different points in time. In Switzerland, for example, the success of containing the first wave could not be replicated during the second wave because of ambivalence and delay in putting in place the needed strategy.

Health services put to test in developing and developed countries

When the pandemic hit, health service infrastructure was strained and put to test not only in developing countries like Bangladesh but also in high-income countries in Europe and America. In general, the strain was felt more in countries where health service is over-dependent on the private sector. Scrambling to erect makeshift hospitals in parks (USA) and convention centres

in human behaviour. Although people in a number of East Asian countries became familiar with and used to wearing masks when they fought viruses before, the concept of social distancing is rather new. If lack of public awareness about it at the early stage of the pandemic was a major factor, influencing human behaviour continues to remain a challenge even after a year of the fight against the pandemic.

Dilemma between saving lives and livelihoods

The dilemma between saving lives and saving livelihoods is a reality not only in developing countries but in high-income developed countries as well. Support was provided to businesses affected by the shutdown and the economic crisis that ensued. But given the prolonged recession, a repeat of shutdown to contain the second wave of the virus provoked resistance from the business community in several high-income countries.

Has coronavirus acted as the great equaliser?

in employment, consumption, spending and trade. The double-edged sword of the pandemic is slicing the price. Data suggests that our RMG has been consistently losing unit value by around 5 percent since September.

The industry has contributed so much to our nation, and we only have a nominal share in the global market, thus we have a great potential to grow further. We have painstakingly prepared ourselves for the renewed opportunities over the past few years in the area of industrial safety, sustainability and eco-efficiency. Therefore, the needs of the industry are clear: 1) The industry needs continuity of the supports received to stay afloat in the upcoming days, along with additional supports to withstand any adverse impact; 2) The industry would expect the empathy of the authorities in ensuring legal protection for our exporters who dealt with bankrupted buyers to deal with the losses and outstanding liabilities, because without resolving these issues, the affected factories (supposedly employing hundreds of thousands of workers) cannot fight back. And essential alignment between the policy makers and the industry must continue.

While exports dip and concerns are heightened, this should not be taken as a cry-wolf syndrome. With the cry and the ask also comes the promise of turning around by 2021. With the vaccines, a better time and a better consumption trend will surely set in. Besides, we are better-placed than most of our competitors. Ethiopia is politically troubled, Vietnam’s export basket isn’t prioritising RMG and won’t grow capacity overnight, Myanmar is questionable in terms of capacity and ethical sourcing, and Cambodia has just lost its GSP. Therefore, it’s important to stay on course and be hopeful.

There’s no alternative to depicting the real picture. Reality cannot be exaggerated. Projections cannot be amplified. The only answer is to handle the situation as it comes and hope that the policy makers stand by our side and help us swim through the troubled waters, as they have in March 2020. It’s an industry where 4.1 million workers are engaged. The numbers cannot be ignored, the impact cannot be underestimated, and the potential cannot be insulted by scepticism.

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From the early days of the pandemic, people of all classes ranging from heads of governments, political and social leaders, business executives and stars from different fields to ordinary citizens were infected. And that gave rise to a view that the virus would act as a big equaliser in society. But after a year’s experience, there is enough reason to doubt whether that has been so in reality. Although anyone can be infected by this virus, the probability of certain classes of people being infected seems to be higher. Lower-income people living in congested housing, immigrants, and minorities face a higher degree of risk compared to higher-income people. Also, the impact of the economic crisis that has followed from the pandemic is not neutral to classes—with the poor, the youth and women suffering more.

The pandemic has accentuated existing challenges

It is not only the challenges of eradicating poverty and reducing inequality that have become tougher in the pandemic-affected world. Other challenges—e.g. domestic violence, gender differences in the labour market, differences in educational opportunities—have also been accentuated by the pandemic and related developments. Irrespective of the level of development of a country, domestic violence has increased, women find themselves at greater disadvantage in the labour markets and sometimes withdraw from the labour market, and students from lower-income households are dropping out of education.

Fatigued by fighting pandemic

The evening applause for doctors and other front-line workers, which was a practice in several countries during the first wave of the pandemic, was no longer there during the second wave. People no longer accepted shutdowns without question. They started ignoring calls and exhortations for minimising contacts. Policymakers started showing ambivalence in extending support to their economies and saving them from further damage. In sum, societies seem to have been taken over by a kind of fatigue.

Fortunately, vaccines are around the corner, and there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel. However, a key question is whether people will have access to them in an inclusive manner irrespective of the level of development of their country, level of income, race, and social strata. While there will be practical challenges in the roll-out of the vaccine, no less a challenge for mankind is to rise over “vaccine nationalism”.

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