

Are we ready for Covid-19?

Testing and treatment must be of international standard

WHILE we should perhaps consider ourselves lucky that we have not been as severely affected by the coronavirus as many other countries of the world, there is no reason for us to be complacent regarding our preparedness should an outbreak of the virus take place. What is concerning is the lack of information we have regarding the standard of testing facilities, isolation units in hospitals and other logistics that are essential in order to contain the virus.

The ministry of health has recommended a restriction on the visa-on-arrival service for citizens of Iran, South Korea and Italy which have been badly affected by the virus. But there are many other countries from which people are coming and they could have been exposed to the virus during their travels. Can we possibly restrict entry of people from all of them? Obviously not. So what precautions are we taking to best handle a possible outbreak?

If people are tested positive for the Covid-19 virus they must be kept in isolation units that have very specific features to make sure the virus does not spread. This includes a negative pressure room, a separate ICU for the quarantine ward and even a separate bathroom for only those affected. Although the health ministry has said that isolation wards have been set up in every district hospital, we cannot help but wonder whether these wards are equipped with such specific features. And there is every reason to have such misgivings considering the poor state of regular facilities in most public hospitals. Also there should be more laboratories (with specialised safety features) in the country besides the one in IEDCR (Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research) which is the sole facility for testing coronavirus. Thus although the government has a National Action Plan to face a possible outbreak, it must be more efficient in making sure that detection, testing, isolation and treatment of patients as well as personal protection gear of health professionals (and others) are of international standard.

As we have seen in many countries, it starts with only one or two people being detected and then spreads very fast making it very difficult to contain. Already 73 countries have been affected with over 90,000 people infected around the world. We should therefore implement exactly the precautionary instructions recommended by WHO and our own experts to avoid a possible epidemic. In addition, the health ministry must be more transparent regarding the steps it has already taken or is about to take to prevent unnecessary speculation and panic.

Air pollution shortening life expectancy

Does the government have any concrete plan to address this?

IT is shocking to note the apathy of our policymakers in addressing the issue of air pollution which has been taking its toll on public health for long. A recent international research found that air pollution shortens lives by nearly three years on average and also causes 8.8 million premature deaths annually, mainly as a result of increased mortality from cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and respiratory infections. The study mentioned that compared to other causes of premature death, air pollution kills 19 times more people each year than malaria, nine times more than HIV/AIDS, and three times more than alcohol and also poses a larger public health risk than tobacco smoking.

According to the 2019 World Air Quality Report, air quality in Bangladesh is the worst in the world with Dhaka's air being the second worst among the capital cities. Moreover, a 2017 *Lancet* report said that the highest number of deaths associated with air pollution took place in Dhaka. Reportedly, the main sources of air pollution in the country are the smog generated from brick kilns, black smoke from unfit vehicles and dust generated from construction sites, including the mega projects.

Worldwide, a major source of air pollution is coal-fired power plants which emit dangerous levels of sulfur dioxide (SO₂), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and fine particulate matter (known as PM_{2.5}), long exposure to which pose a huge threat to human health. We also have a number of coal-fired power plants operating in the country at present while some of them are under construction. Reportedly, the government has planned to build 17 coal-fired power plants in Cox's Bazar by 2031. Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon and Waterkeepers Bangladesh released a report in November last year according to which Cox's Bazar will be one of the most polluted places in the country when all the power plants start operating. As more and more reports are being released by national and international research organisations on the quality of air that we breathe, the government can no longer downplay the issue anymore. It's time for the government to abandon coal-powered projects and look for renewable sources of energy. At the same time, it should take some basic policy decisions, including shutting down the operation of illegal brick kilns, using eco-friendly bricks, containing pollution in the construction sites using standard methods, identifying and making sure vehicles emitting black smoke are taken off the streets.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Rise in juvenile delinquency

Almost daily we see media reports of youngsters involved in gruesome crimes. They are engaged in gang violence, murder, eve-teasing, rape, the list goes on, indicating that moral values in society are on the decline. Law enforcers alone cannot bring the situation under control. Parents and schools have a major role to play as well, as they should instil ethical values in children from very early on.

Guardians must supervise the company their children keep and ensure that they stay away from drugs—because it is often reported that juveniles involved in crimes also tend to be drug users. If this is to be mended, we must all actively engage in finding the right solutions.

Pushpan Chowdhury, Chattogram

ROHINGYA IN KSA

What will the Kingdom gain from deporting them?

NAY SAN LWIN

IF you look at the major cities around the world, from New York to London, you will find the Rohingya are there. You can be sure that wherever they are, be it in Riyadh or Vancouver, they have gone by one of three routes—seeking asylum, UN agency resettlement or entry with a counterfeit passport from a third country. And so it is, that an estimated 42,000 Rohingya are in Saudi Arabia. Worryingly, they face deportation to Bangladesh.

The situation has arisen because in the last four decades, there has been mass exodus of Rohingya from Rakhine State in Myanmar, which is their native land. Unlike other Asian migrations, we are not talking about transnational labour migration. We are talking about permanent deportation and displacement. Bangladeshis know all too well that recently this resulted in the fastest growing refugee crisis the world has seen.

The reasons are well known, so much so that António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, recently said: "I have no doubt that the Rohingya people have always been one of, if not the, most discriminated people in the world, without any recognition of the most basic rights starting by the recognition of the right of citizenship by their own country."

The very grave situation has led to a genocide trial against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In January 2020 the Court declared the Rohingya a protected group and slapped no less than four binding orders on Myanmar, including one to stop any acts of genocide against them.

At the same time, the International Criminal Court is investigating crimes of deportation and crimes against humanity by the Myanmar regime.

This is why Rohingya are fleeing Myanmar—to save their lives and the lives of their families and out of despair for the future. What the world has vowed over and over again not to let happen again, is happening—that is genocide.

A million Rohingya refugees reside in the camps of Bangladesh. There have been failed attempts at sending them back. Not surprisingly, not a single humanitarian agency or rights group judged the conditions in Rakhine state to be safe. Rohingya also have a memory like other human beings.

There have been repeated forced repatriations. These were followed by repeated episodes of catastrophic violence. Some Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are third time refugees. Additionally, Rohingya within Myanmar continue to be held in Internally



Rohingya refugees walk down a hillside at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar on November 27, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

Displaced People camps. They have seen no material difference in their lives whatsoever. They are prevented from working and are dependent on miserly handouts. Medical facilities are atrocious.

Why then would any right-thinking person want to go to Myanmar?

Under these genocidal conditions at home, and very challenging circumstances in the camps in Bangladesh, Rohingya have favoured two survival options. One has been to take an extremely hazardous boat journey to Malaysia and the other has been to get smuggled into Saudi Arabia by holding a counterfeit Bangladeshi passport. People have chosen one of these two options in their desperate, and often painfully problematic belief, that this is the only way to feed their families who remain in Myanmar or in the camps in Bangladesh and to somehow survive.

Paraphrasing a report by Fortify Rights: In the period 2012 to 2015, an estimated 170,000 Rohingya men, women, and children arrived in Thailand and Malaysia on countless boats. Human traffickers working together with various authorities operated many of the boats. Traffickers killed an untold number of refugees at sea and in on-shore human trafficking camps over the period.

In May 2015, human traffickers abandoned boats at sea carrying thousands of Rohingya (and Bangladeshi) survivors of human trafficking. Thailand and Malaysia took a hardline approach and reinforced their borders. They refused

to allow the disembarkation of survivors, resulting in an untold number of deaths. The Thai and Malaysian authorities went so far as to tow boats of refugees out of their territorial waters, leaving them adrift at sea.

And in Saudi Arabia, matters stand like this: 42,000 people are facing deportation. According to my sources, Jeddah Shumaisi Detention Centre houses 1,600 Rohingya. About 620 have been incarcerated since 2012.

These have been very costly decisions for my fellow Rohingya refugees. I have been campaigning for the release of these detainees since early 2017. I have had no luck till date. Rohingya refugees in the Bangladeshi camps have been begging the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for their release by sending video messages, letters, etc. There is not much else they can do. The toll on families and individuals has been immense, and the psychological impact on those locked-up with no hope of release is immeasurable.

But does it really need to be like this? Saudi Arabia assumed the presidency of the G20 in 2019. It will be host to the world's most powerful gathering this year. The Kingdom is also surging ahead with its ambitious Vision 2030 plan. It is liberalising across various fronts. It has a preeminent role in the OIC, and this year, through its support, The Gambia has managed to secure the landmark humanitarian decision at the ICJ that was mentioned above.

Given these massive developments,

what would Saudi Arabia gain from the deportation of these Rohingya? The old adage, "let us help them in their own country" does not apply here. They cannot be sent back to Myanmar where they actually come from, as Myanmar will not take them.

Sending them back to Bangladesh will just shift the problem elsewhere. We know what is happening in Bangladesh—that there are many kinds of pressure. And this is why refugees make life-endangering journeys every month. It was only days ago when a smuggler's boat on its way to Malaysia from Bangladesh sank, and many Rohingya drowned. Bangladesh does not even accept trafficked Rohingya back from India—why would they want these Rohingya from Saudi Arabia who took the opportunity presented to them by a lax passport system? What kind of pressure is being applied to get Bangladesh to agree?

Sending people back does not work and it is clearly not a safe solution. A recognition of who these people are, what they have been through and what their home country is going through attests to one solution—that Rohingya in the Kingdom should be regularised. This would be a just outcome. In the brave new dispensation the Kingdom is intending to carve out, an amnesty for the Rohingya would be a fitting course of action, and it would chime with the role Saudi Arabia aspires to in the world.

Nay San Lwin is Co-founder of the Free Rohingya Coalition.

How social media platforms are empowering women entrepreneurs

AROKA CHOWDHURY

SINCE its inception in the early 2000s, social media platforms like Facebook have mainly been used by people to stay connected with their friends and family. However, with time, Facebook has vastly evolved from being just a social media platform, to being a versatile business platform.

With its access to wide user data, Facebook can create customised ads dedicated to attracting particular user groups. Upon being convinced by the ads, the user only needs to send an order to the advertiser, and the product gets delivered to the user's doorstep. As such,

groups, starting from primary school students to our retired parents and even grandparents. Statista also ranked Bangladesh among 15 countries with the highest Facebook users (2020). As such, young women entrepreneurs of the country were quick to jump into action and utilise the opportunity. Apart from ease of marketing, business platforms based on social media come with several other advantages, which particularly benefit women entrepreneurs.

One of the primary concerns of starting a new business is the operational cost associated with the business. Unfortunately, we are still skeptical when it comes to investing

either. All one needs is a laptop or a smartphone with an internet connection to get up and running with her Facebook-based business venture.

With a global user base of 2.35 billion and 25 million in Bangladesh, Facebook is undoubtedly a great platform for business based networking and client hunt. While Facebook allows you a boundless audience reach, at the same time, it also allows you to target specific user groups, who are most likely to be attracted to your products. As such, Facebook can offer excellent marketing opportunities for your business with minimum investment on ads. Furthermore, apart from paid ads,

her society and family in a meaningful way. Platform-based business models provide a solution to this. Every business needs dedicated time and effort to reach success, however, for Facebook based businesses, the owner gets to decide the work hours, and the level of effort to provide, allowing her the freedom to manage her personal life as she pleases. This allows her to balance her work and life the way she wants to.

Every individual wants to have the joy of success and acknowledgment. Unfortunately, in our social context, we see a large population of women retiring very early from professional life, considering family responsibilities. In doing so, they not only sacrifice all the hard work they have put into their studies and career development, but also the resources the government invested in their development. While it won't be easy to change our social order and mindset soon, at the very least, platforms such as Facebook are creating opportunities for all our talented women who have the courage and desire to accomplish something. It allows them to try out different ideas with minimum risk and learn in the process, until success appears. However, the platform is surely not limited to early retirees, it is also a vessel for young and courageous entrepreneurs, especially women who wish to step into the business world early and succeed with their hard work and determination.

Every technological advancement comes with pros and cons. While millions are complaining about excessive use of social media and their influence on our lives and privacy, its business platform is certainly serving as a boon of great hope for our women in a male dominated society. It is wonderful to see that with the help of such platforms, our women are moving forward with their ideas and willpower to achieve success in professional life, while fulfilling their family responsibilities.

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Aroka Chowdhury is currently working in one of the leading investment banks in Bangladesh and as a part time faculty in a private university. Email: aroka.chowdhury@yahoo.com



shopping in the chaotic city of Dhaka has become much easier. Interestingly enough, a large number of the Facebook-based business ventures have been formed, and are run and managed by women, which directly and indirectly contributes to women's empowerment in the country.

According to Statista, Bangladesh has an internet penetration rate of 18 percent (2017), which is increasing year-on-year due to government and non-government initiatives. In the major cities, social media literacy also remains high among different age

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