

New stimulus package to absorb economic shocks

Marginalised groups, small businesses must receive special attention

THE Prime Minister's announcement of four new stimulus packages of Tk 67,750 crore, along with the previous Tk 5,000 crore package, is a bold and reassuring step for the entire country, which is in a state of extreme uncertainty. This stimulus package is intended to overcome the inevitable economic shock from the ongoing shutdown, which is crucial to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The four packages aim to increase public expenditure, widen social safety net coverage and increase monetary supply.

The business community, in particular, has welcomed the various packages as they will alleviate much of their worries. While this is a welcome package that targets primarily the economy, the biggest challenge is efficient and proper implementation of these policies. This includes making sure that vested groups do not try to take undue privileges and the allocations are distributed to the right groups.

The government has devised a formula through which commercial banks will provide loans at low interest rates. The interest rate of this loan facility will be 9 percent, of which the loan takers will provide 4.5 percent while the government will provide the rest of the interest to the respective banks as subsidy. Here we urge the government, as some economists have, to make sure loan defaulters do not take advantage of this facility. The government and central bank must devise ways to assist the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that have to pay rent for their shops and offices as well as pay their employees.

As we know, this crisis will hit the lower income and marginalised people the most. Therefore, the stimulus package must also target farmers, migrant workers and all those people who work in the informal sector. Without being assured of a financial assistance and social safety net programme, it will be hard to sustain a shutdown as people will be forced to come out to earn their living. So far, we have not heard of a specific amount to be allocated to these groups. Direct cash transfers through mobile financing can be part of this effort.

In order to get the maximum benefit of the stimulus packages, the government should collaborate with the huge network of NGOs and other development organisations, economists and social welfare experts to make sure that the most vulnerable groups and businesses are helped. The implementation of these policies must be done in a transparent, timely and efficient manner.

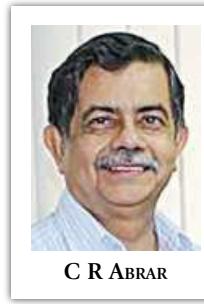
More than just cogs in the machine

Owners' divisions, greed perpetuate workers' sufferings

WITH a *de facto* lockdown in place across the country, the vulnerability of garment workers in Bangladesh has come to the fore like no other time before. On Saturday, uncertainty over their jobs and unpaid salaries as well as mixed messages from their employers and the authorities set off a frantic rush to return to Dhaka and other garment manufacturing hubs, despite the growing threats of a coronavirus outbreak in the country. With regular communications suspended, many walked for miles in close proximity, and travelled in crammed pickups and trucks, only to be met with closed gates when they finally reached their destinations. We are told that the desperation with which they returned was the same that forced them to leave their squalid, overcrowded living quarters in the first place, when the lockdown went into effect, fearing exposure to the virus. And then they returned, as the reports by *The Daily Star* show us, because they were told that factories would reopen and they would be paid.

It is the same story everywhere—a self-perpetuating cycle of uncertainty breeding desperation. What we find shocking in this whole fiasco is how the workers suffered and compromised public health during this emergency because of the greed of some factories, divisions among the industry leaders, as well as inefficiency of the relevant authorities. There was no central command, no specific guidelines from the government or BGMEA on factory closure, resulting in arbitrary action. "The situation could have been avoided had the factory owners notified the workers about the extension of the government's general holiday up to April 11," said an inspector general of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment (DIFE). But the DIFE, which had allowed the factories to operate provided they had emergency safety protocols in place, cannot avoid responsibility for failing to give an unambiguous directive and act in unison with the government's central decision to implement a "lockdown". Unfortunately, the government, even now, is refusing to call it a lockdown, instead labelling it as a "holiday", sending out mixed messages about its importance. It has announced a massive stimulus package to pay the salaries and allowances of workers and employees of the export-oriented industries, but clearly that benefit is yet to trickle down to those at the bottom of the chain of command.

Such indecision and lack of direction can have devastating consequences during this period of crisis, as we are already witnessing. Workers are not just cogs in the well-oiled machine of our RMG sector. They deserve protection, just like any other citizen. Equally importantly, if the community transmission of the deadly coronavirus is to be stopped, their role, as well as that of all people in the informal sector, is very vital. We urge the government to intervene in this matter and take appropriate measures.



C R ABRAR

HUMAN-KIND is under attack. People of all races, colours, countries, religions and social classes stand on a common platform to face the massive onslaught of the coronavirus. While

health professionals and other service providers gallantly commit their lives to save those infected, policymakers scramble to frame appropriate strategies; scientists and virologists search for antidotes, and social activists engage in raising awareness about dos and don'ts and struggle to provide much needed support to those who are on the margins of society. In sum, the universal resolve to combat and conquer the virus has united the peoples of the world.

The very nomenclature of the virus—"novel"—shows that the world is dealing with an unknown bug. Fighting an enemy that one knows very little about is a daunting task. However, the collective experience of the world community in dealing with deadly epidemics over centuries provides us with important lessons. The knowledge of countries that were hit by the ongoing pandemic also provide us important insights about the paths that we should tread in trying to contain the spread of the virus and thus its lethal impact.

In these trying times, conducting tests, maintaining physical distance with other individuals using soap and hand-cleansers and keeping premises in hygienic order are the principal codes of conduct that every individual and institutions should adhere to. Unfortunately, if there is one single institution that cannot match even the rudimentary levels of the code, it is the prisons. This problem is systemic and persists in almost all countries of the world, rich and poor.

Past epidemics have taught the valuable lesson that prisons and detention centres could be the hotbeds for the spread of contagious diseases. After looking at the potential spread of the coronavirus in locked establishments weeks ago, Richard Coker of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine concluded that as many as 60 percent of prisoners could become infected with the virus. "It's an existing health nightmare and then you add a pandemic that requires social distance and sanitation—it's a powder keg", Coker bemoans.

Coker was referring to the UK experience. It does not require much imagination to surmise the devastating impact that coronavirus is likely to have on Bangladeshi prisons, many of which are in a state of disrepair and infested with rats and cockroaches. Days ago, acclaimed photographer Shahidul Alam, narrating his experience of Keraniganj prison, the most modern penal facility of the country, wrote: "The "lisi file" or "kechki file" (jail speak for the way prisoners are stacked like sardines to ensure maximum fit in overcrowded cells) had been introduced to in prison, involved physical contact of an extreme kind. It was a daily occurrence in Keraniganj jail".

A little more than a week ago, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights made a fervent plea to the states for releasing older detainees who are sick and low risk offenders. She observed that the virus has begun to strike prisons and detention centres. Unhygienic conditions, inadequate or almost non-existent health services and impossibility of ensuring

physical distancing and self isolation all constitute fertile grounds for spread of the virus, she noted. Another UN report maintained that people in prisons tend to have poorer health, including chronic conditions that make them more vulnerable to Covid-19. A Health and Social Care Committee of UK Parliament (2018) finds mortality rates of people in prison is 50 percent higher than general populations, reflecting their poor health.

Inadequate health care for prisoners is contrary to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), which provides that everyone has a "right to the highest attained standard of physical and mental health". The UN Nelson Mandela Rules explicitly states that those in prison are entitled to the same standard of care as is provided outside the prison.

Another stark warning came from the World Health Organization (WHO). In a guideline published on March 23, the health body noted that the world can "expect huge mortality rates" from Covid-19 unless immediate actions are

Turkey has announced new legislation that would halve the sentence of inmates except those convicted for terrorism, narcotics and sex offences, and except repeat offenders. Another measure taken was sending some inmates to spend one-fifth of their sentences in supervised release. The enactment of this law would lead to the release of almost one-third of 30,000 prison inmates of the country.

In the US, the Attorney General announced the release of at-risk inmates to home confinement for the remainder of their sentences. It will include those with pre-existing conditions and the elderly. The state and local authorities in the US have also developed strategies to release prisoners with minimal crimes. Thousands of inmates in various states, including those convicted of nonviolent crimes and nearing the end of their terms, have been released. Germany also announced release of prisoners who have served most of their terms, excluding sex offenders and violent inmates.

Early this month, the Bangladesh government announced it was considering

By taking cue from other countries, those in the high risk category (having specific health conditions), those above the age of 65 (excluding the sex offenders and those convicted of violent crimes), those who have been convicted of non-violent offences or minor infractions, those who have been sentenced to imprisonment for two years or less, and those who have served most of the term of their conviction (say 75 percent of the total period) should be considered for release.

In Bangladesh, a major blot in the criminal justice system is that thousands remain incarcerated for long periods before their conviction, some even before they are charged. In those instances, an accused who has served two year terms should also be considered for release. Another important category for release should be the prisoners of conscience (those incarcerated for expressing their opinion and political beliefs) and the women prisoners.

The time has come for those in charge of prison administration in Bangladesh to move beyond the much

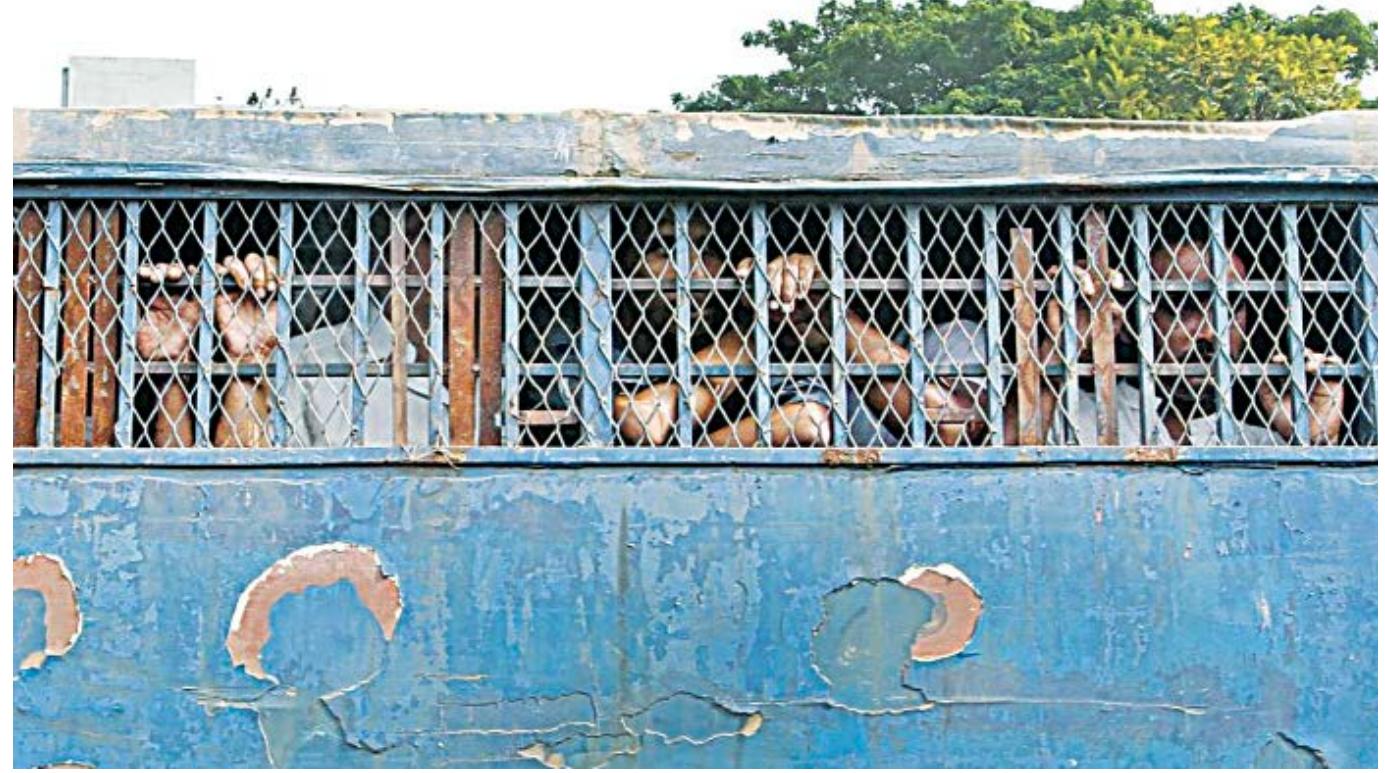


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

taken. WHO warns that efforts to stem the virus flow to the wider community will fail unless strict measures to stop infection are taken in all places of detention. The organisation provides a dire warning that in a worst case scenario, Covid-19 "is going to be exploding in the prisons" and "will be a security issue".

Events in Brazil, Colombia and Italy corroborated these concerns. In Brazil, 1,400 prisoners escaped from four semi-open prisons; in Colombia, prison riots led to the death of 23 inmates and in Italy, unrest in 23 detention facilities led to 12 deaths. All these were triggered by the fear of coronavirus.

In order to stave off the outbreak of the disease in detention facilities, releasing prisoners has been the single most important strategy pursued by a host of states. A little more than a week ago,

facing a massive eruption of the virus, Iran announced the release of 85,000 of its 190,000 prison population. Ten thousand of the cohort will be granted pardons. Those released were serving sentences less than five years. "Health of prisoners is important, regardless of their status as security prisoner or regular prisoner", announced a senior functionary of the state

releasing on bail some 3,000 prisoners, including those under trial and jailed for bailable offences, to lower the chances of coronavirus transmission in crowded jails. "It's still at a discussion level", noted the Home Minister.

Public health experts apprehend that many prisoners might contract coronavirus in densely congested jails with unhealthy and unhygienic living conditions. Prison directorate sources inform that against the capacity of 41,244, there are around 89,000 prisoners in 68 jails across the country. The health services available in the prisons are atrocious; there is only one doctor for a staggering number of 10,000 inmates.

In September 2019, the Inspector General of Prisons informed the media that there are "9 doctors for 141 posts". It was further reported that there are only five thermal scanners for 68 detention facilities.

Such dire conditions in the country's prison system demand that decisive actions should be taken to reduce the number of prisoners in this health emergency. The laws of the land empower the authorities to commute or suspend convictions to release prisoners. The criteria to qualify for bail or presidential pardon is a matter to be worked out by the competent authorities.

needed introduction of infra-red thermal thermometers, restricting visiting hours, physically distancing new inmates and allowing inmates to make phone calls to their loved ones once a week. The release of 3,000 prisoners, though a paltry sum, is a good start. An unequivocal commitment to stop the spread of coronavirus requires an urgent release of substantial numbers of prisoners, perhaps to the tune of tens of thousands, as was done in Iran and Turkey.

Extraordinary times demand bold, decisive and quick actions. It is true that the crisis is taking a huge toll on national resources but in confronting it, the authorities should not abandon those who are behind bars. Those at the helm of the state should realise that in all likelihood, prisons will amplify and enhance coronavirus transmission beyond the confines of their walls and even a rumour of spread of the virus in prisons may trigger violence, posing major security challenges. And finally, it is incumbent on national leaders to ensure that "jail sentences should not potentially become death sentences".

C R Abrar is an academic. He is a founding member of the Committee for the Protection of Fundamental Rights.

World needs to use or lose Bangladesh apparel industry



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

IT has taken more than four decades of incredibly hard work to build up the Bangladeshi RMG industry. In fact, the first export-oriented RMG industry of Bangladesh began when Daewoo of South Korea established a joint venture in 1977, almost 43 years ago.

As I write this now, there is a very real and serious threat that those 43 years will be wiped out in just three short months. That is the scale of the challenge we are facing. It is without precedent in all our lifetimes.

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 outbreak, orders are being placed on hold by buyers and retailers at a rate that we have never before witnessed. Business for the Bangladeshi apparel industry has fallen off a cliff. Without orders, factories cannot pay their workers' wages. Factories cannot remain operational. Factories will go bust.

And I am not just talking about one factory. I am talking about a whole industry, an industry which, as I say, took four decades to build from scratch.

There is a reason it took four decades to build our RMG industry. It required

decades of learning. It required the development of new knowledge and new skills. Our human resources became global experts in the field of garment production techniques.

On factory floors, production techniques have been honed and fine-tuned in a process of continuous improvement over four decades. The net result is that the Bangladeshi apparel industry is now the most responsive, client-focused producer of apparel in the world.

If the Bangladeshi apparel industry is allowed to fail, we will lose all of the above overnight—and it will take years to come back from this. In a worst-case scenario, it may not even come back at all.

Be in no doubt, without Bangladesh, the global fashion industry will change as we know it. For years, major fashion brands have been getting designs from the catwalk into production and onto the shelves of shops within weeks. That's in a large way thanks to the seamless operations of Bangladesh.

Want affordable, stylish fashion on a budget? Look no further than Bangladesh. Want high quality denim at competitive prices? Again, Bangladesh has the solution. A minor revolution has been underway in global apparel production in recent decades, and Bangladesh has been at the heart of it. Our country now exports

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apparel to more than 165 countries across the world.

The apparel industry of Bangladesh has shown amazing resilience to be where it is today. It has overcome huge crises, including Rana Plaza, following which it implemented an unprecedented safety overhaul which was supported by all leading international apparel brands.

Billions of dollars have been invested to make the Bangladeshi RMG industry as safe as it is today. If our industry is allowed to disappear, all of that money, all that time and effort, will have been for nothing.

My question to the global community is, do they still want Bangladesh to have a garments industry in three months? Do they still want the iconic "Made in Bangladesh" label to be part of the world? If they do, then they need to support Bangladeshi factories now.

We need monetary support to keep the Bangladeshi RMG industry alive. Organisations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and International Finance Corporation should come forward and support the Bangladeshi apparel industry at this critical time.

The world will keep turning after Covid-19 is beaten. And the whole world will still need apparel supply chains, unless people across the world decide to stop wearing clothing. Global industry could be getting back on its feet by the summer and, while there is no doubt that the apparel industry will take a huge hit in 2020, there will still be demand for good quality fashion at affordable prices. There will be a "bounce" in business at some point.

If the world wants Bangladesh to be part of that industry, we need support now before it is too late.

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