

## Pilferage of rice in time of crisis

*Make example of these criminals*

**I**T is a sad reflection on the society that at a time of such unprecedented national crisis some of us continue to be slaves of our baser instincts. Otherwise how is it possible for a human being to misappropriate rice allocated by the government for the most indigent section of the population all over the country?

This is not just any other disaster. The outlook is bleak, as much as due to the impact on public health as the economic fallout of the pandemic. The lockdown has created some associated problems the most acute of which is the loss of earning for daily wage earners and those that were already dependent on various government relief programmes. The government has taken a timely decision to provide rice at Tk 10 per kg to those who are affected by the lockdown. But that effort is being blunted in some parts of the country.

Admittedly, the quantity made available so far may not be enough but even that small amount cannot get to many of those it is meant for. It is shocking that those who are entrusted with the distribution responsibility have misappropriated a good part of the rice. There are reports also of irregularity in distribution.

There have been 22 incidents of misappropriation of rice in 20 upazilas and as many as 2,832 sacks of rice each containing 50 kg of rice have been recovered in the last fortnight, according to the local administration and police. And only the day before yesterday the Rapid Action Battalion seized all of the 168 sacks of rice, weighing 8,400 kg, meant for open market sales from a house and warehouse of a local Awami League leader in Nandigram upazila of Bogura. Can there be anything more appalling?

Profiteering at the time of a grave national calamity is the worst form of criminal offense. The offenders must be dealt with most severely without any consideration of party affiliation. These incidents also bring to the fore the need for strict monitoring of the distribution of all relief items whether cash or food so that the efforts by the government to mitigate the effects of the crisis are not nullified by such pilferage. Otherwise the needy will suffer.

## Boro crops must be harvested on time

*Provide labourers with necessary safety gear*

**A**LTHOUGH every year during this time farm labourer from different regions of the country go to the haor areas to harvest boro paddy, this year farmers are facing a labourer crisis to harvest their crops. The fear of the coronavirus infection and the lockdown enforced by the government are the reasons behind this. Although harvesting boro is a major source of income for many of our labourers across the country, this year some are willing to let go of the income while others are either not finding any transport or do not have the money to go to the boro producing areas for work due to the country-wide shutdown. We are concerned because if the boro harvest cannot be started in a week in the haors, either rains or flash floods will destroy the crops.

Since boro is one of the major crops grown in the country, it is crucial to harvest the crops on time to ensure food security. The government should make a proper plan and implement it within a week to ensure that crops are harvested in due time. It has already taken some measures to solve the problems our farmers in the haor areas are facing. The agriculture ministry has allocated Tk 110 crore to help farmers buy harvester machines at a subsidy and is also making special arrangements for transportation of labourers from different districts to the haor areas. Also, the prime minister already announced a stimulus package of Tk 5,000 crore to provide financial assistance to the small and medium farmers, which is commendable.

However, for the time being, the government should focus on boro harvest and solving the labourer crisis. Allocating money to help farmers buy harvester machines will do little to help the small and marginalised farmers. We think, agricultural equipment—combine harvester, reapers, transplanters, etc.—should be provided to the farmers free of cost. Since even the rich farmers do not want to buy the machines because they only have to use it once a year, bringing the machines from other districts to support them seems like a good idea.

However, there is no alternative to bringing in more labourers to harvest the crops, ensuring that they take proper precautions and are provided with appropriate safety gear. Since there seems to be some confusion regarding transporting labourers from outside the Sylhet region amid shutdown, the ministry should give a proper directive on this. Also, non-agricultural workers of the respective districts who have lost jobs due to the shutdown can be engaged in agricultural work to solve the crisis to some extent. But before doing that, the government should develop a mechanism to oversee that the workers maintain the physical distance and take necessary safety precautions while working in the field.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Help the animals on the streets

I have noticed the terrible state many of the dogs in my neighbourhood are in. And to make matters worse, some people suspect them of carrying and spreading the virus, thereby preventing the possibility of these animals finding shelter. With barely any human interaction, the dogs on the streets are finding it difficult to eat with each passing day. They seem weaker and more helpless. It is evident that they are suffering, one simply needs to look at them to comprehend their state. The situation for these dogs and perhaps many other animals, is dreadful. I therefore, urge the responsible authorities to show some compassion upon these animals so that they could at least be fed and taken care of.

Abu Sayem Khan, by email

TOFAI AHMED

**C**ORONAVIRUS pandemic has changed not only actions and attitudes but also the doctrines and philosophies of states and economies worldwide. The market doctrinaires and market fundamentalists have overnight converted to state interventionists, the authoritarians and totalitarians showing liberal attitudes and liberal democracies are imposing bans on free movements. These are all the compulsions of the time and fundamentalists to existence.

The old classical capitalist attitude towards society is, people are needed for economy and production. People's labour power is more important than their lives. The clever and enlightened capitalists since world war two transformed themselves to welfarists for generational supply of labour power for a sustainable productive system of capitalist growth and capitalist reproduction. The recent outbreak of Covid-19 added radically new dimensions to it. Because, it is not only a threat to economy and production, it poses threat to the very existence of Homo Sapiens on the planet irrespective of economic and social positions.

Political stars like first line heir to the British Crown, British Prime Minister, Iranian Ayatollahs to Canadian First lady; film stars, sports stars, business and media stars who are not in the attack and death list! Globally it created a "pandemic war" like situation which may be moving towards a new world order, which is unprecedented in world history of economic crisis, pandemics and wars. No hitherto fought wars affected so many countries and states at a time within five months. No pandemic after 1800 CE has been so devastating in terms of spread. A new world order is going to emerge which is creating a new economic order too, may be known as "pandemic driven economic order" for a decade.

The USA may be in the lead. The current US administration declared a two trillion-dollar pandemic package which is about 10 percent of US GDP. The Indian government's initial package is Rs 1.7 lac crore which is 1 percent of their GDP. The great economic minds of India globally famous such as Amartya Sen, Avijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, Aravind Subramanian, Kausik Basu, Amit Seru and many others are advising government to increase the package to at least 6.7 lac crore, 4.5 percent of the GDP. Bangladesh also declared a stimulus package of Tk 72,750 crore. All these are initially hesitant or careful steps towards the mitigation of the crisis. Still there are a lot of uncertainties around it.

We have not heard yet any notable statement from Bangladeshi economists, only politicians are making all optimistic and stray comments. TV talk shows are busy airing corona guidance and sporadic talk shows. Philanthropy and donation news are also seen along with community and voluntary initiatives

from concerned citizens. I may be wrong and also not properly informed. But our corona responses are too little, too late. We still lack far sightedness and seem unready for long-term consequences. Our stimulus package is industry, production and economy based, not human centred. Garment seems at the centre of our industrial stimulus package which contribute 6 percent to the GDP. The agriculture, rural and urban informal sector, expatriate workers and rest of other industries and services contribute the other 94 percent of the GDP. Growth is important but as a non-economist I believe at this moment, people and people's lives are more important than growth and all medium and long term economic concerns. Our immediate concern is saving lives.

community clinics, union health centres, Upazila health complexes, district level hospitals and medical colleges. Eighty percent investments of health are contributed in buildings and ninety percent revenues are spent on salaries. Real health service capacity is under scrutiny. Rich people do not take treatment here, middle class depends on private sector, and part of the poor only depend on public hospitals and clinics. Under the above circumstances, we have to have quick assessment of our capacity in terms of means, materials and health professionals (which include doctor, nurses, medical technologist, hospital beds, ICU, ventilation facilities, etc.) and the demands of the crisis. The whole nation needs to be mobilised under a single agenda, i.e. combating the

may not be started before mid-May, 2020. Allow limited train movements with half the seat capacity, in the same way domestic airlines by filling half of the seats may start flying and the truck movements with all medical precautions have to be kept going from mid-April. A large truck fleet can be mobilised for the easy movement of goods all over the country. The Chittagong port may operate with its utmost capacity. All offices and educational institutions may start limited operation online after April 15 to keep the country on the move.

In the second line of priorities are the followings: i) Farmers and farm families have to be supported to keep agricultural production flow intact and public procurement of farm products need to be thought of as an option. It is not only rice or paddy, other perishable products as well may be procured to make those available to the people and also to keep control on price. It will be an incentive to sustain growth and employment in agriculture; ii) Natural calamity season is also in the offing, adequate preparation for that is also to be kept in mind; iii) In cities like Dhaka, dengue outbreak has to be kept in check; iv) The greatest Muslim religious occasion Ramadan and Eid festival are going to be observed during the month of April and May. Necessary support and restraint need to be observed in observance of Ramadan and eid; v) Side by side, in dealing with coronavirus, hospitals and doctors have to be separated to treat other critical patients. Current arrangements for advising patients with minor complaints through medical hotlines are appropriate measures.

This is the time also to consider massive enhancement of resources for building our health care system. We can also consider spending 4 to 5 percent of our GDP in health care. Government may appoint a taskforce to identify the projects and sectors from where money can be diverted to health. Total safety net budget, PM's special fund, and community and NGO efforts may be directed towards feeding the people in need in the cities and villages. Designing complicated projects with target group is irrelevant under the current situation, especially safety net, anybody and everybody

irrespective of former economic status are entitled to have support. Then people will not be desperate to move and stay calm. At this time, we need not be very wise but must act quick and smart in distributing food for the needy. It is not a trade-off, only a crash programme for six months on health and social safety. Economic recovery could be the agenda we will be pursuing from the end of May this year. But for now, saving lives must come first. The economy cannot flourish on the dead bodies of people.

Dr Tofail Ahmed is a local governance expert and vice-chancellor of Britannia University, Cumilla. E-mail: tofail101@gmail.com



I like to echo here what the world famous economist are suggesting to Indian government. First of all, what they are saying is, growth and economic sustainability is important. There cannot and should not be any trade-off between economy and lives. Economic sustainability is also important for supporting lives. But the crisis of a particular "time" is a very important factor to fix priority. Their advice is, within the next 12 months, economic recovery is possible. At least for the next three months, all efforts need to be devoted to combat the virus with all the possible ways and means and keep the food supply along with supply of other basic minimum necessities running. Three month's regimented effort is needed for taking total control of the pandemic crisis.

The Chinese and South Korean experience shows the way in that direction. Our health infrastructure (Bangladeshi) does not match theirs. We live under a very fragile health care situation. We have village based

coronavirus. The health professionals here are the front line fighters. They are the infantry, the artillery, armour, supply, signal, all have to be in their support. The general administration, police, army, politicians, local government leaders, all should be in the second line in support of the frontline. On the other hand, community management is another front which has to be strictly managed.

The four priority actions at this moment though late, but better late than never, are suggested for consideration of the government and the people: i) Completely lockdown all the "hotspots" for at least one month and restrict indiscriminate movement everywhere; ii) Massive efforts for identification through proper tests and separation and treatment of identified patients; iii) Ensuring food and other necessities at the door step of the needy; and iv) Procurement of medical essentials and their supply and utilisation (equipment and medicines) in all competent hospitals and health outposts.

The relaxation in people's movements

## Demonising of probashis has damaged Bangladesh's efforts to contain coronavirus



**NAJRUL KHASRU**

**O**N March 14, a group of probashis (expatriates), arriving from Italy, were transferred to a local facility to go through the government's newly initiated coronavirus screening procedures. At one point they started shouting and screaming, some incoherently, others complaining about lack of food and water, uncomfortable environment and inordinate delay in carrying out the procedures, which they felt was unnecessary as they had undergone similar procedures in Rome and Dubai with negative results. The police appeared to handle the situation superbly, managing to calm the group and persuade them to co-operate with the authorities. Thereafter, the appropriate procedures were carried out without any further incidents. The matter should have ended there. But it did not.

Within hours, the foreign minister decided to speak, expressing his strong displeasure at the behaviour of the group, and holding probashis responsible for "importing" coronavirus to Bangladesh. He then added that probashis behave like "nobabzadas" (royalty) whenever they come to Bangladesh. A few days later the state minister for health told the press that a probashi from Italy had come to Bangladesh and then returned to Italy after transmitting coronavirus to his own mother.

Bangladesh is one of the very few countries where coronavirus still appears to be at the containment stage although the number of cases are significantly rising as more people are being tested. Bangladesh, being a part of the global village, has had tens of thousands of people arriving into its territories in the last three months from various destinations through land, air and sea. They include probashis, foreign nationals,

sailors, business people, government officials, travellers and so on. Any one of them could unsuspectingly carry the virus and transmit to others, some might even have left the country after unwittingly transmitting it to locals. It is impossible to know how and when the virus was transmitted in Bangladesh as many carriers remain asymptomatic while spreading the virus.

Therefore, if or when coronavirus does spread in Bangladesh it could be for numerous reasons and from numerous sources, some identified others not. In these circumstances using words such as "importing" and pointing a finger at probashis was neither wise nor factually correct. In the same breath, mocking the probashis was not only deeply offensive but also, as it transpires, designed to provoke hatred.

On March 21 the foreign minister announced that the dead bodies of probashis, particularly those who had died abroad of Covid-19, a disease caused by coronavirus, should not be sent to Bangladesh for burial. This was a bewildering announcement.

By then the WHO's guidance on disposing of such dead bodies was well known and governments were burying or cremating them following strict public safety measures with very little contact from the families, let alone allowing them to go through the country's air cargo procedures to be shipped abroad. It must be said that the announcement was not only unnecessary, it was devoid of any empathy for the dead and their families.

There was immediate backlash against probashis on social media. This was followed by numerous reported incidents of threats, verbal abuse and physical aggression on probashis all over the country. They were mocked, abused and spat at. Their properties were vandalised. There are allegations of some law enforcers extracting money from probashis using the threat of torture for, allegedly, not obeying the government's instructions to stay in home quarantine. There have been instances of red flags

being hoisted to identify where probashis live, not dissimilar the way the fascist thugs were going around identifying Jewish properties in Nazi Germany. There have also been reliable reports of deaths occurring of patients due to hospitals' refusal to treat them simply on accounts of being probashis, even though they were not exhibiting any symptoms of coronavirus.

This probashi bashing campaign has no doubt harmed Bangladesh's efforts to contain coronavirus. The government's clear instructions to all citizens to stay at home, frequently wash hands and

**On March 21 the foreign minister announced that the dead bodies of probashis, particularly those who had died abroad of Covid-19, a disease caused by coronavirus, should not be sent to Bangladesh.**

maintain social distancing were clouded by the erroneous perception held by many that the probashis were the carriers and spreaders of the virus and only if they were forced out of circulation, everyone else could continue a near normal life. Hence, rather than adhering to the government's instructions to the letter, many were involved in atrocities described above. Many shops and buildings put up signs and instructed security guards not to allow any probashis in, whereas the proper thing, as practised in many countries, would have been to deny entry to anyone who had any recognised symptoms of coronavirus regardless of who they were.

A verified account of a probashi who returned to England a week or so ago tells an astonishing story. He had arrived in Bangladesh in January 2020 and in early March started a coronavirus awareness campaign in his locality which included advice for people to do their prayers at home rather than at mosque to avoid congregation. This angered some locals. One evening a group of 20 of them marched to his house to tell him that he has coronavirus and therefore he must stay at home at all times or return to England. He pledged to return to England. In his own words: "As soon as I said that, they became euphoric and started shaking hands and hugging each other. I knew that if any one of them had the virus then their behaviour was putting them all at risk. But I was too scared to say that because they would have beaten me up."

The extent of the damage this distortion has caused to the government's containment effort will likely crystallise in the next few weeks. Furthermore, this demonising of probashis has come at a time when many of the 9 million so called remittance fighters are going through an unimaginable level of anxiety and hardship all over the world. Many, alone without families, or resources in coronavirus hotspots around the world, are in daily fear of hunger and death. Reports are now coming in on hourly basis of deaths of probashis in Europe, Middle East, America and other parts of the world, some in the most heart-breaking, loneliest and horrific of circumstances. No word of empathy, compassion or gesture of kindness has been shown towards them from the Bangladesh authorities, except that they are not wanted in Bangladesh dead or alive. The are apparently not included in USD 8.5 billion stimulus package. While these people were hailed as heroes and remittance fighters in good times, if they now feel they have been jettisoned by their own country at the first sign of a crisis, then would they be so wrong?

Najrul Khasru is a British Bangladeshi barrister and a part-time tribunal judge in England.