

We must protect our healthcare providers

The health of the nation depends on them

We are deeply saddened to hear of the death of an assistant professor of Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital, who succumbed to the coronavirus at the Kurmitola General Hospital in Dhaka on Tuesday. He is the first doctor to have been killed by the virus in Bangladesh, and his death raises questions about the safety of our healthcare providers who are risking their lives for the public during the pandemic.

The first two weeks of April have seen Bangladesh follow a disturbingly steep trend on the coronavirus curve, with 20 times more cases now than the number of officially confirmed infections on March 31. During this crucial period, we need to have the healthcare system at its most functional to be able to deal with this mounting crisis. However, according to the Bangladesh Doctors Foundation, around 100 healthcare workers, of whom 54 are doctors, are already confirmed as being infected by Covid-19. This is extremely worrying—not only is this a huge personal risk for healthcare providers and their families, but it also means reduced capacity of the health services that are absolutely essential for the country right now.

We have, time and again, reiterated how crucial it is for all healthcare providers to receive personal protective equipment (PPE). According to a report in this daily, the colleagues of the deceased doctor said it is possible that he picked up the infection while working in a private hospital in Sylhet. This only demonstrates, once again, how important it is to provide adequate protection and follow the World Health Organization guidelines regarding hospital planning, administration and organisation during a pandemic, in both the private and public sectors. Since many patients may be infected but asymptomatic, healthcare providers must be protected, regardless of whether they are treating patients who are confirmed to have coronavirus, and they should also have the option of being tested as soon as they start to display Covid-19-like symptoms. We must remember that healthcare providers are taking great risks during this crisis, and all hospitals should make provisions to ensure that their staff have the option to self-isolate when needed, and that all necessary precautions are taken and correct protocol is being followed while discharging their duties.

Saving the poor and vulnerable families during lockdown

Govt should provide 1.9 crore families with direct cash

ALTHOUGH the government announced a special stimulus package for the country's poor and extreme poor families recently, according to economists and researchers, it is hardly enough to feed people who are most vulnerable during the ongoing lockdown due to the Covid-19 outbreak in the country. While the government has aimed to help only 34 lakh poor families, planning to provide them with Tk. 2,000 to 3,000 per month for three consecutive months starting from April, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) suggested that the government should provide Tk 8,000 to each of the 1.9 crore vulnerable families to save them from hunger during the shutdown. According to the civil society think-tank, if the government provides this specific amount to the households for two months, it will create domestic demand for goods and services of Tk. 186,500 crore in the economy, stimulating local small business activities. Moreover, it will also be an indirect stimulus for the large businesses involved in the supply of essential commodities.

Since the enforcement of the countrywide shutdown, the government declared a number of stimulus packages to address the impacts of Covid-19. It has announced Tk. 72,750 crore package for the large industries which are relatively more capable of dealing with the shocks of the shutdown, while the poor and extreme poor families are left with no opportunity to earn a living and are eagerly waiting for the government's food and financial assistance to survive.

Given the situation, the CPD's proposal to provide Tk 30,000 crore to 1.9 crore poor families, covering 7.5 crore out of the 16.6 crore population (according to the Labour Force Survey 2016-17), seems to be well-researched and so should get the government's immediate consideration. Needless to say, the lockdown strategy and social distancing measures will only be successful if the state is able to protect its lower income population from hunger and provide them with necessary financial assistance on time.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Lessons from lockdown

When the whole world is struggling due to Covid-19, nature is deeply engaged in healing itself. Our planet was distorted gradually through our irrational behaviour. That's why nature, the source of vitality and the reservoir of life, has pulled the reins in on the misguided actions of human beings. As everyone remains confined within their homes, nature continues to heal itself while promoting tranquillity.

As a result, global warming is slowing down, the ozone layer is reconstructing itself and the earth is getting greener. On the other hand, as people are spending quality time with family members, road accidents have reduced drastically. Crimes like robbery, drug abuse, smuggling, trafficking and rape have reduced significantly too. Nature never seems to lose its glory. Our actions are what cause the sufferings. I hope this lockdown serves as a lesson for the people and may all the cities across the globe revive their zeal.

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EDITORIAL

COVID-19 For The MARGINALISED

No one, nowhere, should go hungry or die without care

PHILIP GAIN

THE coronavirus has affected us all—rich and poor alike. Yet, giving attention and care to communities considered excluded, marginalised and invisible should be a priority for the state and well-to-dos. The majority of these communities are not only poor or extreme poor, they also face the triple challenges of poverty, vulnerability and exclusion. Many may go hungry or starve. Snapshots of how these communities are doing during the current lockdown may be useful.

The tea workers in 163 tea gardens in Sylhet and Chattogram divisions have continued to work as usual to the great satisfaction of the owners. Like the garment workers, they also demanded holidays with the payment of wages and fringe benefits (ration). But the government and the owners decided that these “tied” workers must work because they assume the tea workers live in safe enclaves and that there is no harm if they work to keep the tea gardens operational. Needless to say, the tea gardens are not yet included in the government's stimulus packages meant to address the impacts of the coronavirus on the country's economy and health.

There is another serious issue in the tea gardens with half a million people. Generally, a tea worker's family has one worker earning a daily cash pay of Tk 102, plus some ration. This is not sufficient for a family of five to survive on. At least one person from each tea worker's family goes out of the tea garden every day to work as day labourer in agriculture, brick kilns, orchards, houses and so on. “The number of people who explore daily work through contractors or themselves far exceeds the total number of tea workers,” says Nripen Pal, joint secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), the lone union of around 100,000 registered tea workers. These extra workers continued to explore work outside the tea gardens even after the countrywide lockdown had begun. “But most have eventually stopped going out to sell labour, which has pushed the tea workers and their families in great difficulties,” says Rambhahjan Kairi, general secretary of BCSU.

The tea workers still want holidays covered by the government's recovery package plan. As regards the surplus and unemployed labour forces, it is time for the government, owners and BCSU to quickly list these people and bring to them adequate relief support and safety that are reportedly lacking at workplaces and the labour lines.

A non-Bangalee occupational community, Harijan, also known as sweepers and cleaners, live in congested Harijan *pallis* (colonies) under the city corporations and municipalities. Most of the Harijan *pallis* that shelter around 100,000 souls are located in the dirtiest places of the cities. The supplies of relief

and safety materials are reported to be very inadequate in these colonies. “The city corporations in Dhaka gave us some soap and bleaching powder just once,” says Krishnalal, president of Bangladesh Horijan Yokkha Parishad (BHYP), an organisation of the Harijans.

Like in the tea gardens, those from among the Harijans that are not registered workers work in government and non-government offices and respond to calls for cleaning. Now at this time of lockdown, these “social outcasts” or “Dalit” do not have work. They need special care from the state.

The life of the Bede community, a floating people with a population of 75,702 (according to the Department of Social Services—the Bedes estimate their

The 10,000 Hijras or transgender individuals (government account) are no better than the street-based sex workers because streets and bazars are basically places where they beg and collect alms from. A big percentage of them are also sex workers. At this time of crisis, sex workers and Hijras are crying for helping hands.

A seafaring Hindu fishing community, the Jaladas, with a population of 150,000 in Cox's Bazar and Chattogram districts, have been restricted from fishing in the sea. Dr Harishankar Jaladas, noted educationist and writer from the Jaladas community, reports, “Relief materials are not reaching many Jaladas in coastal villages.” The local administration should look into the allegation and scale up

coronavirus pandemic.

Dilip Mondol, a pig trader from Jashore, was in Shariatpur recently with his herd of 600 pigs and 15 *rakhals*. “The people of Shariatpur pointed their fingers at us as if we are criminals,” says Mondol, “and asked us to leave the area immediately. I walked the pigs to Narail.” The Kaiputras cannot market their pig during the lockdown at all.

Rishis (cobblers and leather workers), also identified in derogatory terms such as *muchi*, *chamar* and *charmokar*, are being equally affected. Although their main concentration is in Jashore, Satkhira and Khulna, they are found in all districts. Those who repair and polish shoes around the country and make bamboo produces have no work now. “Rishis of the southwestern districts are hardly getting any government relief materials,” reports Milon Das, director of Parittran, a Satkhira-based organisation working for the Rishis and Dalits.

Of at least two million ethnic populations, those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts that are dependent on *jum* (shifting cultivation), living in remote areas, and dependent on subsistence economic activities (selling agricultural produces) are faced with a very difficult time. “Scarcity of food is evident in the CHT, already in the crisis months of the year,” says Han Han, a development consultant.

The district and local administrations are aware of the situation. “It is difficult to reach food in some remote areas,” said Prakash Kanti Chowdhury, member of the CHT Development Board (CHTDB). “In reaching the needy during the food crisis, we are following the lists prepared by the UNOs and Union Parishads.”

In the plains and outside the tea gardens, the ethnic communities, particularly the farmers, day labourers and those who work in rail stations and live in slums, need extra care from the government.

There are a number of other excluded and marginalised communities who need special care at this time of crisis. The disabled, Napit (barber), Dhopa (washer-man), Tati (weaver), Darji (tailor), Hajam (unqualified doctors for circumcision), Kasai (butcher), blacksmiths, and so on are among these affected communities. Let us also not forget the people who beg and live on the streets.

The entire country along with the whole world is in deep grief. We do not know exactly how long the pandemic will continue. However, in the fight against the coronavirus, the government and the well-to-dos in society should be caring to the estimated seven million people of these already excluded and marginalised communities. It should be our pledge that no one, nowhere, will go hungry or die without care.

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PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

A typical temporary Bede camp. Bedes are among the excluded and marginalised groups that need urgent attention and care during this time of crisis.

population at up to half a million), has been hit hard by the coronavirus. Most of them living in tiny tents and roaming around the country are caught in the fields or roadside. They are not members of local communities when in the fields and are unlikely to get proper care from the local administration and elected bodies. The government with a directive to local administration can take better care of the Bede community.

Of the nearly 100,000 female sex workers, only around 4,000 are based in 11 brothels in the country that have been literally locked. What the brothel-based sex workers have been getting from the government sources is reported to be just nominal. The situation of 36,593 street-based sex workers, many of them lacking even accommodation, is appalling. There are another 36,539 sex workers working from residences and 15,960 are hotel-based.

assistance to the fishers of the Jaladas community.

Approximately 300,000 Urdu-speaking Biharis, living in inhuman condition in 70 camps in 13 districts, are getting almost no attention. Of these camps, 33 are in Dhaka. “No government relief has reached any of the Bihari camps yet,” reported (on April 9) M Shoukat Ali, general secretary of Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC). “We are confined to the camps. We need food and safety materials.”

A tiny community of around 12,000 people, the Kaiputras (who rear pig in the open space)—inhabiting 41 villages in the southwestern districts of Jashore, Khulna and Satkhira—are also in trouble. The Kaiputra *rakhals* (who live with pigs to feed them in the open fields) and their pigs are going through unimaginable hardships at this time of

Will Covid-19 change how we hold climate change talks?



SALEEMUL HUQ

AS nearly the entire globe remains in lockdown and international travel is almost at a standstill, international meetings are being cancelled and often replaced by conference

calls on Zoom and other online meeting platforms. Many universities and even schools are hosting classes online as well. And there is no end in sight to either the pandemic or its economic consequences around the world.

In this situation, the government of the United Kingdom, which was supposed to host the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow, Scotland, in November 2020, has decided to postpone it to sometime in 2021 although it hasn't specified the exact dates yet.

While the decision to postpone the COP was undoubtedly a correct one in light of the pandemic hitting the UK so hard, the climate change impacts are unfortunately not taking a break because of the pandemic. Just a few days ago, a devastating typhoon hit Vanuatu and Fiji in the Pacific and caused significant devastation which has only added to the problem of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing measures required to deal with it.

Similarly, climate change impacts around the world, including in Bangladesh, will no doubt continue and add to the miseries being felt due to both the public health and economic consequences of the pandemic. Hence, climate change discussions cannot be put on hold, and we will need to come

up with a plan to complete some tasks in 2020 and not just postpone everything to 2021.

Below, I would like to offer some ideas for consideration by both the Secretariat of the UNFCCC and the COP26 Presidency to take necessary actions forward without losing momentum.

The first point to note is related to a somewhat interesting aspect of the decision to postpone the COP—that it will now be held after the presidential election in the United States, and there is a strong possibility (and indeed hope) that Trump will be defeated and the incoming Democratic president will immediately rescind Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Having the US back as a major player to implement the Paris Agreement will be a significant game-changer in taking necessary global actions to tackle climate change.

Another action that was supposed to happen at COP26 is for every country to submit their revised action plans to tackle climate change (called Nationally Determined Contribution or NDC) in order to raise their ambition levels to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases commensurate with keeping the global temperature below at least 2 degrees Celsius, if not 1.5 degrees.

An interesting fallout of the global economic shutdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic is that fossil fuel prices are dropping drastically as there is a glut of oil on the world market. The oil-producing companies and their client governments are desperately trying to keep prices high and also bail out the companies using taxpayer's money. Such actions are to be opposed, and we need to allow the fossil fuel companies that are unable to survive without subsidies to go bankrupt. The clean air and clear skies as well as nature that have returned

to some parts of the world can indeed be kept if the shift to clean energy sources is allowed to accelerate, rather than letting the polluters go back to polluting. Such an opportunity will not come again.

The second point is to take a cue from a major lesson of the Covid-19 crisis—which is even more relevant for the even bigger crisis of climate change—that every day that passes without taking necessary actions in advance of the problem getting out of hand matters, and decisions have to be made and implemented forthwith.

Hence, the most important part of tackling the climate change emergency is to make the necessary investment and public health decisions required to both tackle the ongoing pandemic and reduce the impacts of climate change. This means that, both at the national and global levels, the huge amounts of fiscal and economic stimulus that will be needed to get the global economy back on track must support a radically different, green economy for the future—and certainly not the old polluting economy that had caused the emergency in the first place.

In this context, the meeting of representatives from nearly two hundred governments at the annual COP of the UNFCCC should itself be streamlined to focus on the essential elements while actions to effectively implement the Paris Agreement, which was decided in COP21 in 2015, need to be taken in every country by both governments and other actors.

I would indeed question the need for tens of thousands of people to congregate in a different city every year at the COP. Perhaps we should allow the permanent representative of every government in major UN centres such as New York or Geneva to host the COP every year. As it happens, the intersessional meeting of the UNFCCC happens quietly every year in Bonn, Germany, where the Secretariat is located. While I have attended all

the 25 COPs held so far as an observer and certainly feel that it has been a rich gathering of civil society and other stakeholders to meet and network, nevertheless I feel that we don't all have to come together in one city every year to achieve our goals.

Indeed, many meetings are now being held virtually, and it may well be worth exploring how more of the negotiations could be held virtually, while ensuring that access for the poorest and most vulnerable countries is not compromised.

A good example that may be worth emulating—at least for the civil society actors who go to the COP every year—is the Fridays for Future movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg of Sweden, where now millions of schoolchildren in hundreds of towns and cities around the world, including in Bangladesh, have been joining hands in solidarity every Friday. Even that movement has adapted its global Friday event to being online due to the need for social distancing because of Covid-19.

So, we need to find a way for the government representatives to be able to discuss and negotiate effectively without compromising the ability of all countries to have an equal opportunity. At the same time, other stakeholders such as civil society groups need to find more innovative ways to join forces across the globe to get their messages across.

The Covid-19 pandemic can indeed be an opportunity for us all to collectively think out of the box about improving our effectiveness without holding a massive jamboree every year. After 25 years of doing the annual COPs in a business-as-usual manner, the time has come for some radical new ways of going about the business of climate change negotiations.

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