

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA MONDAY APRIL 20, 2020, BAISHAKH 7, 1427 BS

Our abject failure in maintaining social distance

Cooperation of all, including religious leaders, necessary

WHILE people around the world have been meticulously trying to maintain social distance in a bid to fight the deadly coronavirus, it seems many people in Bangladesh just couldn't care less about it to contain further spread of the virus. The result is, we are noticing an alarming rise in the number of new infections and deaths from the disease across the country. After the first few Covid-19 cases were detected in the country, the first major risk of spreading the virus across the country was taken when the government announced a national holiday from March 26, before the start of which people in their thousands left the capital for their village homes. The second major risk was taken when hundreds of garment workers were made to come back to the city to join work at the beginning of this month. We have just started to witness the results of these two incidents. And what we have witnessed last Saturday—when thousands of people from different corners of the country gathered at Brahmanbaria's Sarail upazila to attend the namaz-e-janaza of a religious leader, defying government orders to maintain social distancing—could be described as the third major incident that would further spread the virus among people.

Apart from these unfortunate events, shutdown and social distancing measures taken by the government are often being ignored by people in general. Every day, hundreds of people gather at local bazaars, which are believed to be the hotspots of spreading and contracting the virus, to buy daily necessities and poor people queue up on the street to buy subsidised food without maintaining the safe distance. Unfortunately, the law enforcement agencies could do little to make people keep a safe distance from one another and also could not stop people from coming out of home unnecessarily.

And then there are thousands of garment workers who have been protesting on the streets for days to get their due salaries, risking their own lives, but are not getting anything except assurances from the garment owners.

We hope the government will be strict enough to enforce the shutdown and social distancing measures with the help of the law enforcement agencies. It should also seek the cooperation of civil society, including the religious bodies, to ensure that no social gatherings, religious or otherwise, take place in the country during this time of a national health crisis.

Novel innovation to protect against novel coronavirus

Put the cheap technology to use quickly

IT is true that during the worst of times the best in us emerge. And that is what we have seen in many of the people in Bangladesh in various ways—the doctors in the lead, despite acute shortage of personal protective gear. And that includes expatriate Bangladeshis too.

The incremental rise in the number of people affected by COVID-19 is alarming, even more so in Bangladesh. We had been caught off-guard and the entire system, nationally and internationally has been overwhelmed by the disease. Unfortunately, along with the severe crunch in high-end medical equipment, the low-end materials like the PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) have also run out in most countries. And Bangladesh is feeling the crunch too. Given the rate of usage of this one-time use kit, no wonder every country is running out, or will soon run out, of it.

In the face of the frightening prospect of PPE getting exhausted, with prospect of replenishment grim, and given the mad rush all over the world to stockpile as many of these as possible, a Bangladeshi expatriate doctor living in Australia has come out with a novel idea of using germicidal ultraviolet radiation (UV-C) to disinfect and rapidly sterilise PPEs rendering them fit for reuse. His very welcome effort has crossed the first hurdle; the administration has approved the project with utmost speed. We would call upon the administration to speed up the next phase and instruct all concerned to put to use the new method of sterilisation. The authorities should also provide all necessary assistance to the hospitals as well as the team led by Dr Arifur Rahman, whose innovative idea it is, to implement the project.

Let us be under no illusion that the situation is foreboding for Bangladesh. There is a fear that if the number of infected by the virus increases, and with the frontline fighters—the doctors, nurses and other categories of health care workers—without protective gear, the situation can be more overwhelming than we expect. Here is an inexpensive technology that can save many lives. Put it to use without delay.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

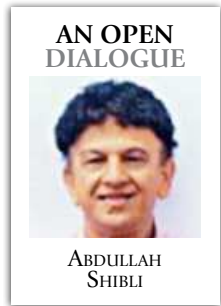
Beware of swindlers

It has recently come to my notice that a dangerous group may be roaming our streets posing as emergency service personnel such as medical staff and law enforcement officials. They are insisting on entering buildings, claiming to have come for COVID-19 purposes, such as testing or transporting patients or victims. Often disguised in PPE and trying to take advantage of the situation, they are in fact burglars.

Therefore, I think it is extremely important that every household should remain alert. And in case if anyone does pay a visit, a verification mechanism to differ between the actual frontline workers from the frauds will surely be of value. Also, I think it will be beneficial if the law enforcement officials regularly patrol the empty streets area-wise, as the solitude tends to welcome miscreants.

Rashif Ray Rahman, Dhaka

Vulnerable groups must not bear the brunt of the coronavirus crisis



THE pandemic and its economic impact will be felt very strongly by the poor. Most of our poor, whether they are day labourers working in the informal sector, semi-skilled employed by the construction industry, small-scale vendors in the kutchra market, or rickshaw pullers, there is no question that they will take a major hit from the shutdown and the joblessness. With very little savings and a weak safety net to help during an emergency, the economic impact of the lack of work and income triggered by the coronavirus will be very similar to the prolonged absence, or death of the only bread earner in a family. Within a few days, each of these families will worry about their next meal and scramble around for household items they can sell or pawn for some extra cash.

The major categories of wage earners in Bangladesh are factory workers, mainly in the RMG; drivers, conductors, mechanics, helpers and office clerks in the transportation industry; skilled and unskilled workers in the micro and small industries, and owner-operators of small businesses in the informal sectors.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 will leave these workers in jeopardy. First of all, "social distancing", whether these workers live in the cities or in rural areas, is going to be difficult to practice. Our country is very densely populated, and the average size of living space per individual is only a few square metres. Garments workers typically live in group quarters or rooming houses where three or four people share a room or even a bed. The situation does not get any better when the workers return to their "village home". Now, they will become guests of family members who probably themselves are seeing an influx of "out-of-town" visitors.

Secondly, when RMG workers become sick they can get some basic medical care at the factory, or at a community clinic. Once they go back to their village, medical care might be difficult to find. Family members also might be prioritising their needs and flu-like symptoms is often ignored. This

will lead to a rapid spread of the virus, as well as absence of treatment. Sick people, when they first show symptoms associated with coronavirus, including temperature, coughs and tiredness are less likely to get the test if they are poor and even less if they move to the villages.

Thirdly, many of the slum dwellers in the major cities are particularly vulnerable to any virus transmission. Living conditions in Dhaka's slums, large or small are dire and lack proper sanitation facilities. Without work, the crowding situation will get worse since most of the workers will stay home and move around in their limited perimeter. While the government has taken some measures, such as Open

likely to have a chronic health condition. According to the Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, coexisting conditions can make the coronavirus up to 10 times as deadly.

The New York Times recently reported on research that found that in an epidemic, poverty and inequality can exacerbate rates of transmission and mortality for everyone.

"They are also likelier to die from it. And, even for those who remain healthy, they are likelier to suffer loss of income or health care as a result of quarantines and other measures, potentially on a sweeping scale," the NYT in-depth report concludes.

An example from a supposedly rich country will reinforce the above point. A



Living conditions in Dhaka's slums, large or small are dire and lack proper sanitation facilities.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Market Sales (OMS) scheme under which rice will be sold for Tk 10 a kg, this does not benefit those who have lost their job.

The Daily Star Reported on April 3 that Sylhet's Mayor said the government allocated 52 tonnes of rice, which is insufficient to feed more than 2.5 lakh members of 66,000 unprivileged families in the slums.

Fourthly, poor people with underlying medical conditions are vulnerable during any epidemic season, such as dengue or cholera, and this risk goes up significantly when a pandemic starts making its inroads. Studies show that people at the lower ends of society are about 20-30 percent more

report on COVID-19 which is currently wreaking havoc in New York City found that distressed neighbourhoods like Elmhurst, Jackson Heights and Corona—densely packed areas of Queens, with lower-income families and large percentages of non-English speaking residents—were among the hardest hit by the disease.

Fifthly, lack of income affects the poor like a major epidemic. Income for the poor may come in various forms. In Bangladesh, any direct cash transfer for the poorest in times of crisis is non-existent. Some of the charitable organisations, religious bodies, philanthropists, and foundations

Addressing the rise in domestic violence during lockdown



violence.

Research shows that in emergencies be it conflicts, economic crisis or during disease outbreaks, there has been a repeat pattern of increase in domestic abuse, therefore abusers and their partners having to self-isolate together at home may lead to a rise in new and pre-existing abusive behaviour and violence.

The warning signs were first shown in China where domestic violence reports more than tripled. A similar pattern was reported in Singapore (33 percent increase), Australia (40 percent increase), Brazil (40 percent increase), and India (100 percent increase). With the spread of the pandemic to Europe, there is a surge in the "shadow pandemic" (as UN termed domestic violence) as reported by Italy (13.6 percent increase), Spain (18 percent increase), France (30 percent increase), and Cyprus (30 percent increase). The UK reported an increase of 25 percent and the USA reported upto 35 percent increase in cases.

The situation undoubtedly is no different in Bangladesh if not worse. On April 15, the country saw its first domestic violence fatality since the lockdown began, when Obaidul Haque Tutul brutally murdered his wife, Tahmina Akhter, 28 with a sharp weapon at home while streaming on Facebook Live in Sadar upazila of Feni district. Obaidul then turned himself to Feni Model Police Station and confessed to the killing.

Violence against women and girls has always been a social, cultural and economic problem in Bangladesh. Nearly two-thirds of women have experienced gender-based violence during their lifetime. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 54.2 percent of married women face physical and sexual intimate partner violence. Bangladesh enacted the Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act in 2000 targeting rape, trafficking, and kidnapping and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act in 2010 criminalising domestic violence. Despite having legislation in place the implementation of the laws largely remains complex.

It is well-documented that isolation is generally used by many perpetrators

as a "tool of control" and the conditions created by the pandemic is the perfect opportunity for domestic abuse to flourish. In addition to physical violence, which may not be true in every abusive relationship, spending concentrated periods of time with the abuser potentially means constant surveillance and further restricting their freedom.

As reported by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), between January and March 2020, 42 women were murdered by their husbands in Bangladesh. Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) notes that more than 300 incidences of domestic violence, and 36 rape incidents occurred in March in three districts alone, namely, Bogura, Jamalpur and Cox's Bazar.

In response to mounting domestic violence cases, Italy launched a new app that will enable victims to ask for help without making a phone call and ruled that the abuser must leave the family home, not

In response to mounting domestic violence cases, Italy launched a new app that will enable victims to ask for help without making a phone call and ruled that the abuser must leave the family home, not the victim.

the victim.

The United Kingdom introduced contacting options for help through websites which ensures no record of the attempt is left on the phone and anyone in immediate danger can call 999 and press 55 on a mobile if they are unable to talk. There have been calls to turn underused hotel chains and university halls into emergency accommodation and need for increased public messaging, through supermarkets, pharmacies and other appropriate avenues, to provide information on the means by which victims can alert the police for help; and special police powers to evict perpetrators from homes and for authorities to waive court fees for the protection orders. There are campaigns in the UK (#Listeningfromhome) and Germany that advises and educates people to be vigilant and encourages them to seek help if they hear or observe incidents indicating domestic violence.

In China, women in dire need of fleeing their homes were able to access permits to leave the city and escape their abusers—with the hashtag #AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic trending on social media. India campaigns "Suppress corona, not your voice," and have launched a new domestic violence helpline and engaged female officers to handle cases.

The lockdown pertaining to the prevention of the covid-19 spread in Bangladesh has essentially shattered support networks, making it far more difficult for victims to get help or escape their aggressor. One immediate effect of being confined with the abuser is not only are women more vulnerable to domestic abuse but are also less likely to be able to make an emergency telephone call in fear of being overheard by the abusers.

Additional financial burdens due to increased unemployment, salary cuts, looking after children full-time and more hours at home with increased household labour adds insult to injury. Amid social distancing requirements, restricted mobility preventing relocation to family homes in other areas, and pressing financial constraints, staying with friends or relatives became impracticable. Research suggests that the heightened domestic tensions and concern of financial uncertainty brought by the pandemic only adds to the burden of violence. Victims could be denied medical attention and made to feel guilty for falling ill. Emotional and mental abuse may soon turn physical.

It is likely that in times like this, support groups and police would not be of much help to victims and will ask them to tolerate the violence reasoning this period of lockdown to be not the right time. It is an expected response as a pandemic such as this is unprecedented and the law enforcement agencies are overburdened. However, as with the response to the virus itself, delays mean that irreparable harm may already have occurred. Police need to train and transfer resources in emergency situations especially because it is extremely difficult for women trapped and controlled at home to reach out for help. The recent media coverage of police and military beating and punishing people who were out on the streets may also act as a deterrent to stepping out to report by victims.

Experts warn that as the lockdown continues, the danger is likely to intensify-fear of the perpetrator inside the house and the virus outside. Soon homicide cases, like Tahminas will escalate amidst personal crisis.

It is therefore imperative that the Bangladesh government step in to provide leadership in this area. Urgent steps have to be taken to ensure that anyone

are reported to have come forward with donations in kind. Rice, daal, potatoes, soap, and some other daily essentials. However, this will last only for a few days for most.

One of the most vulnerable section of our population, women and children will be hard hit by coronavirus-induced lockdown and social distancing. The lessons from the recent history of pandemics are clear: they affect women as much as men even if the latter are the principal bread-earners. Some of the most studied cases are the Ebola crisis in three African countries in 2014; Zika in 2015-6; and recent outbreaks of Sars, swine flu, and bird flu. "Everybody's income was affected by the Ebola outbreak in West Africa," Julia Smith, a health-policy researcher at Simon Fraser University, told The New York Times this month, but "men's income returned to what they had made pre-outbreak faster than women's income." The distorting effects of an epidemic can last for years, said Prof Clare Wenham of the London School of Economics. "We also saw declining rates of childhood vaccination [during Ebola]." As a consequence, when "these children contracted preventable diseases, their mothers had to take time off work."

International organisations, including the United Nations and the World Bank have already sounded the alarms. The financial impact of coronavirus will stop almost 24 million people from escaping poverty in East Asia and the Pacific, cautioned the World Bank. It warned of "substantially higher risk" among households that depend on industries particularly vulnerable to the impact of the virus, and this will include our export industries and remittances from abroad. The bank urged the region to invest in expanding healthcare and medical equipment factories, and to offer subsidies for sick pay that would help with containment and aid households. "Proven social protection measures like supporting job and income security, preventing poverty and unemployment, and strengthening economic and social stability and peace is critical," added Tuomo Poutiainen, ILO country director for Bangladesh.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works in information technology. He is Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.

experiencing domestic abuse can seek protection during this Covid-19 crisis and be placed in a safe place. The government should say loud and clear that people should leave home if they need to do so for their safety and that services are open for them.

Dedicated and responsive emergency helpline numbers and websites need to be launched. Domestic violence services should be classified as "essential" and support workers should be classified as "key" workers. Organisations providing domestic violence support and services must get an emergency financial package from the government to ensure shelters and other support services remain operational. Avenues for help including helpline numbers and websites need to be advertised widely at all media platforms including social media platforms, electronic and print media, public messaging, through supermarkets, pharmacies and other appropriate areas.

This must also include simple ways to contact and alert the police of the need of urgent help, such as text messages or online chats, and the use of code words with doctors or pharmacists. Law enforcement agencies need to lodge complaints and take immediate and effective measures while maintaining confidentiality and safety of victims. Cooperation between authorities, law enforcement agencies and support workers cannot be understated to tackle this crisis. Local authorities should turn vacant hotels and public university halls to emergency accommodation where victims could quarantine safely. The women and children who show signs of physical or sexual abuse or domestic violence need to be provided with medical treatment, psychological counselling, and other assistance, like legal aid.

In rural and remote areas of Bangladesh, where possession of mobile phone by households are uncommon or are limited to men, lighter-touch interventions, like less regular community meetings, and check-ins will curb the abusive behaviour of intimate partners as they would believe that they are likelier to get caught if they are abusive. These kinds of programmes are also fairly inexpensive and like the lockdown itself, these could be lifesaving measures.

Being stuck at home because of coronavirus is difficult for everyone, but it becomes a real nightmare for victims of domestic violence. A crucial safety net therefore must be offered to some of the most at risk women, children and anyone vulnerable to abuse in order to triumph over the immediate and long-term impact of this corona virus crisis.

Barrister Fahmida Hasan is a practicing lawyer in the UK specialising in immigration, asylum and human rights laws. Email: hasanfahmida87@gmail.com