

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY APRIL 21, 2020, BAISHAKH 8, 1427 BS

Timely harvesting for food security

Govt's interventions may save the crops

FARMERS in Sylhet's haor region are deeply worried that they may lose their crops to flash floods due to heavy rains that have been forecasted for later this week. These lowlands produce a major supply of the rice that feeds the country. Therefore, loss of these crops will have a huge impact on food security of the nation, apart from bringing financial ruin to these farmers. Helping these farmers to save their crops must be done at all costs. The government is trying to address this emergency in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, which makes the job all the more daunting.

The forecasts by experts say that at least 11 rivers of the region may overflow—water levels have already risen dangerously. In fact, all four districts of the Sylhet region may experience flash floods and so far, only 10 percent of the harvesting has been done, according to the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Sylhet. Travel restrictions and a nationwide shutdown to contain the coronavirus spread have resulted in drastic shortages of labour to help harvest the crops. Farmers are finding it very difficult to save their crops on time because of this.

It is therefore a reassuring development that the government is trying its best to address this crisis of manpower by mobilising workers from different parts of the country, especially from the northern region, and sending them to the haor areas to harvest the paddy. According to an official of the DAE, labourers of sand-lifting and stone-lifting sectors, as well as tea garden workers, have been engaged to harvest the crops.

No doubt it is a challenge to transport workers to the haors during a nationwide shutdown while ensuring their safety. Thus, it is laudable that the government is making special arrangements to transport workers safely, as well as taking other measures such as strengthening embankments to keep the water out and giving farming tools to the labourers. We hope that these measures are done expeditiously so that the paddy can be harvested on time and the farmers get a fair price for their crops. One of the biggest concerns of the shutdown, which is necessary, is the possibility of food shortages. Government interventions like this are crucial to ensure food security and survival of those who ensure it—the farmers.

Govt should involve NGOs during Covid-19 crisis

Their hands-on experience can be invaluable

AT a time when the government is engaged in the multifarious activities involved in crisis management during the ongoing pandemic, it is encouraging to learn that the non-government organisations (NGOs) are emphasising their eagerness to share their expertise and experience with the government to help in tackling the crisis too. Various alliances of NGOs have expressed this at a virtual press conference recently.

There is no doubt that these organisations can significantly help the government in its fight against Covid-19. With their widespread presence at the grassroots level, NGOs have been working alongside the government during times of disaster for decades. And such collaborative measures have proven successful in various aspects. Moreover, the presence of the surging cases of dengue, along with the approaching flood season, will surely weigh heavy on the crisis and make matters more challenging in the days to come. Thus, a collaborative means of preparedness between the government and NGOs will help ease some of the suffering during such times.

With hands-on experience in dealing with vulnerable groups and disaster management, among others, NGOs can be involved in various spheres of operations—from helping farmers save their crops to the distribution of relief and much more. Furthermore, with government assistance, micro-finance NGOs can also operate to help boost rural economic activities as the moderately poor are entering the bracket of the ultra-poor. NGOs can also assist in implementing the activities at the core level under the government stimulus package declared to tackle Covid-19 impacts. The possibilities are many and will prove promising once the collaborative efforts are put into practice.

It is to be noted that people's lives and health are at stake here, not to mention the adverse economic impact on the entire nation. The government should therefore take advantage of this opportunity to involve NGOs and their human resources to tackle the Herculean task that looms. Needless to say, during these challenging times, people's wellbeing in terms of health and the economic situation should be kept above all other considerations. The government should take all the help it can get.

CORRIGENDUM

In our Editorial titled "Novel innovation to protect against novel coronavirus" in yesterday's paper, the name of Dr Md Arifur Rahim was misspelt as Dr Arifur Rahman. We would also like to clarify that Dr Rahim is a chemical engineer, not a medical doctor. We sincerely regret the error.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Prevent gatherings at all cost

I recently had the bitter experience of going to the Palli Bidyut Zonal Office, Mirzapur, Tangail to pay the electricity bill for an irrigation pump. There were two long queues of mostly farmers from different villages who have little knowledge of social distancing, and who had to face great troubles to get there as there is hardly any transportation. No proper guidelines have been given about postponing or waiving the fine on late payment of bills for irrigation pump owners. The authorities should deal with this immediately, or more lives will be put at risk for this simple task.

Mir Mohammad Minhan, Tangail

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

PRESIDENT Donald Trump's decision to halt funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) in the midst of a global pandemic is not only reckless and irresponsible, but will also exacerbate the threat to global public health. In the single stroke of a pen, President Trump has put millions of lives around the world at risk and jeopardised global human security and US national interests. The decision will have catastrophic consequences and will add to the ongoing global humanitarian crisis. It is meant to placate the supporters of Trump in an election year and during an economic crisis, which may become a make or break issue in his re-election in November. It is a testament to Trump's myopia about global politics, which has been the marker of his foreign policy from day one of his presidency.

Domestic considerations, precisely his focus on his support base, as the driver of his policies—domestic and foreign, have brought disastrous consequences for the United States in the past years. That he and his supporters seem to have very little regard for data, science and diplomacy is on display here, once again. The decision, surprising as it may be, is consistent

The WHO cannot be the means to hold China accountable. The timing is wrong. Global support is necessary for such an endeavour, which this step will not engender. Defunding the WHO serves no purpose.

with Trump's previous actions and his contempt for multilateral institutions. The so-called "America First" policy, which has essentially become the "America Alone" policy, is behind the decision and will further isolate the US from its allies and engender aversion of many towards the US.

President Trump, whose negligence can be described as a contributory factor in the deaths of thousands of US citizens from Covid-19, was facing

Yet the President downplayed the risk, continued to send misleading messages, and tried to blame the Democrats for the "hoax". All of these led to the mounting numbers of deaths. As reported by the New York Times on April 11, "The chaotic culture of the Trump White House contributed to the crisis. A lack of planning and a failure to execute, combined with the president's focus on the news cycle and his preference for following his gut rather than the data

that. Instead, he has used it as an excuse for posturing rather than pressing for more transparency from China. If he had been interested in transparency of the Chinese authorities, he could have raised it with President Xi during his telephone call on February 7. Undoubtedly, the lack of transparency of the Chinese authorities, particularly in the early stages of the spreading of the virus in Wuhan, warrants scrutiny. But President Trump has not demonstrated any such desire. The WHO cannot be the means to hold China accountable. The timing is wrong. Global support is necessary for such an endeavour, which this step will not engender. Defunding the WHO serves no purpose. Additionally, his decision of halting US funding for the WHO, which makes up 22 percent of its budget, will help China's efforts to expand its influence within this and other multilateral organisations.

In the past years, the global standing of the United States has eroded and its influence waned, thanks to the changing global political landscape, the rise of China and Russia, the abject failure of leadership of the Trump administration on global issues, the distance with allies through unilateral foreign policy, and withdrawals from various multilateral arrangements. The failure to contain Covid-19 has revealed a serious weakness, not just in public health infrastructure, but in the entire political system of the US. On the contrary China, on the heel of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been engaged in an aggressive diplomacy since the epidemic began, taking active measures to rewrite the narrative—absolving its responsibilities in the spread of the virus and remaking its image as a "friend in need."

The decision to defund the WHO shows the absence of empathy and a disregard for the people of the world—none of which helps the United States. The ongoing global pandemic and the imminent global economic crisis will require global effort and cooperation among countries. The global leadership position will not remain vacant. This myopic policy of the Trump administration sends the message that the US is abdicating its claim to the leadership.

Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University, and a nonresident senior fellow of the Atlantic Council, USA.

Have faith in our researchers



HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

OUR current understanding and response to the ongoing "corona crisis" are results of extensive, fast-track research. The possible transfer of the new coronavirus from wild animals to human; its symptoms, spread patterns, and treatments; the need for social or physical distancing, for example, were all discovered by researchers. The new knowledge was then quickly picked up by the World Health Organization (WHO) and countless government and private agencies in order to widely broadcast to the public.

Besides fighting and surviving Covid-19, we do benefit from research at every point of our lives. Sometimes these are so deeply ingrained in our lifestyle—ballpoint pens, pen-drives, mobile apps or antibiotics—that we do not even remember these are products of experiments and research. But what is research anyway? One of the most amazing answers to this question was given by Hungarian biochemist Dr Albert Szent-Gyorgyi—"Research is to see what everybody else has seen, and think what nobody has thought."

The quote from Dr Szent-Gyorgyi, who received a Nobel Prize in 1937 for his research on Vitamin C, essentially separates researchers from the rest of us. In addition to thinking differently, researchers tell the world of something "new" that nobody knew before. In the ongoing pandemic, we are seeing such creation of new knowledge in real time on TV, newspapers and social media.

Further to adding new knowledge, researchers are also part of a "knowledge legacy". If we have been building a path called "knowledge", our individual pieces of research are the stones we lay on it. Our pieces would not fit or mean anything if previous stones had not already been laid out. For example, knowledge of past epidemics and pandemics (Spanish flu, SARS, Ebola) is helping us to face the current crisis. This connection across time makes researchers, and their work, timeless. They all travel towards the "horizon of the unknown" by appearing at different points of time.

Needless to say, researchers belong to diverse groups—they are divided by their countries, academic disciplines and the institutions they work in, as well as the philosophical points of view they hold. But as they do research, they all follow some basic standards and practices that

bind them together. Researchers identify a problem to be solved, a question to be answered, or a situation to be explored. They choose appropriate methods to collect data or conduct experiments. They analyse the information, collate the results, and tell us what the new knowledge—be it a solution, an answer, or an insight—means to us.

Although their main task is research, it is only part of a much larger arrangement called "research system", made up of four interconnected components. Before a researcher takes up a research project, she must look at the past research—this is called "accessing research", the first component of a research system—to learn the current knowledge we have on a particular research topic and what knowledge gaps we need to fill in. Then comes designing the research and actually conducting it to find new knowledge—the second part of a research

components of a research system is quite obvious in the corona crisis. Once a research, for example, on Covid-19 patient management in China, is published, it becomes part of the global research pool or "knowledge legacy" of coronavirus, and guides actions and new investigations in this discipline. Similarly, as the research findings from China are used, say in Spain, the Spanish experience can further help the doctors and researchers in Bangladesh, for example, to improve the critical care management in its ICUs for Covid-19 and other infectious diseases. In this way, researchers of a discipline, despite being spread out all over the world, essentially work together in making our knowledge more useful and impactful.

Unfortunately, we often ignore what researchers say. Our indifference towards scientific information produced by researchers often has nothing to do with



Coronavirus test samples in a lab in China.

PHOTO: THOMAS KIENZLE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

system.

Once the work is done, a researcher has to share the newly gathered knowledge through research reports, academic journal articles, conference presentations, press conferences or other media—the third part of the research system, called "communicating research". This leads us to the final part of a research system—"utilising research". The new knowledge now needs to be used to improve our environment, society and systems of knowledge. Only by using the research outputs can we have an impact—the ultimate goal of any research.

The relationships among the

our education, our position in society, or the country we live in. Our sheer arrogance, negligence, and drive for economic profits are to be blamed. That is why, we have seen many oil companies and heads of governments undermine climate change research; last summer, we saw the Bangladeshi dairy industry and related ministry challenging research on pasteurised milk adulteration; and, more recently, national governments downplayed the warnings from scientists of the possible coronavirus pandemic.

As I write this, the total number of confirmed Covid-19 case has passed 2.4 million in 210 countries and territories, with over 165,000 deaths. As a third

of the world's population is now on lockdown, countless brave scientists, technicians, nurses, doctors and other professionals are restlessly working around the world and around the clock to test for the virus, to treat patients, and to lay to rest the lives that have been lost. But we should not forget numerous researchers all over the globe who are working in the background to improve the treatment and to find a cure for the deadliest infectious disease of our lifetime.

The media is now flooded with assumptions and predictions of what the world would look like after the pandemic is over—a new world with new global leadership, new economic structures, novel development models, and perhaps, a contactless lifestyle? As the pandemic is far from over, only time will tell what changes it will really bring in to this world, if any.

However, I really want to believe that our all-consuming efforts in this chaotic and panic-laden emergency will rejuvenate our trust in research and researchers. This will help us to realise why we must show patience and invest in research continuously to overcome numerous societal challenges, not only of human health, but also in different arenas of sustainable development, including social justice, economic development, and environmental sustainability. I want to believe that this crisis will lead us to create and practice a worldwide culture where policy decisions are made based upon research and evidence, and are not influenced by prejudice, ego and selfishness.

Dr Haseeb Md Irfanullah is an independent consultant working on environment, climate change, and research systems. His Twitter handle is @hmirfanullah.