

## WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

# COVID-19 must not be a pathogen of repression

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SUNDAY MAY 3, 2020, BAISHAKH 20, 1427 BS

## Still no list of those unemployed by pandemic

*Need comprehensive plan and budget to support them*

**A**N overwhelming number of people, both in the formal and informal sectors, have lost their jobs in Bangladesh due to the pandemic, but unfortunately the government lacks any data on the actual number of people who may have been impacted. Although the Labour Policy 2012 says that the government will take steps to maintain detailed information on employed workers based on each firm and sector, it appears that no such initiative has been taken over the last eight years to make a comprehensive database of workers in the country. Informal estimates suggest there are between 1.3 crore to 5 crore workers who have been unemployed as a result of the pandemic.

When *The Daily Star* contacted the Department of Labour (DOL), Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment (DIFE) and Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation (BLWF) enquiring about a list of unemployed workers, not only were these departments unable to provide any satisfactory answers, but they also seemed to lack any plan of how to help these people tide through the difficult times. Without a comprehensive list, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to design interventions that can provide systematic support to unemployed workers. For instance, the labour ministry has formed crisis management committees at the district level, who are tasked with the responsibility of making lists of affected workers and submitting them to local administration for food aid. However, thousands of unemployed workers have not received anything yet and there's no guarantee if, or when, they will receive any support.

Workers in the informal sectors, who constitute a whopping 85 percent of the working population, have been the worst hit by the pandemic, lacking any social or legal protections or employment benefits. Labour leaders point out that there is a Tk 400 crore fund set up under the Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation Act 2006 to support workers in the informal sector, but thus far, no initiative has been taken to use some of this fund to alleviate the sufferings of those who are now on the brink of starvation.

We urge the government to immediately make a comprehensive list of unemployed both in the formal and informal sectors so that it can come up with a holistic plan and allocate sufficient funds to support them, if need be, by exploring untapped resources, such as the Tk 400 crore welfare fund.

## Reduce test seekers' sufferings

*Expand Covid-19 testing facilities, increase hospitals' capacity*

**I**T is a matter of grave concern that we still do not have enough designated hospitals or institutions to conduct Covid-19 tests. While initially only the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) was conducting the tests, later the testing facilities were expanded to various government hospitals and also to some private ones. However, the capacity of these hospitals to conduct the tests is very limited. One of the most trusted hospitals where suspected Covid-19 patients are thronging to get tested is Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), which has also been struggling to give the expected service to its patients. Every day, around 1,000 people are going there for tests whereas the hospital has the capacity to do only around 250-270 tests a day. According to the hospital authorities, they have only one PCR machine to conduct the tests, and they cannot run their activities in full swing because the DGHS gave them the machine but did not give them the biosafety hoods.

As hundreds of patients with fever, cough and other Covid-19 symptoms are swamping BSMMU to get tested, they are at high risk of contracting the virus (if they are not already infected). Introducing an online ticketing system may reduce the risk they are exposed to. It will also reduce their sufferings as they will not have to stand in queue for hours. At the same time, BSMMU being one of the most trusted hospitals among patients, needs to increase their testing capacity. The government should provide them with all logistical support in this regard.

Given that it takes about a week for a patient to know whether or not they are infected with coronavirus—suspected patients have to wait for 2/3 days before they can get tested and then another 3 days to know the result—there are pretty good chances that those who are infected will spread the virus among others in the meantime. Thus, there is no alternative to getting tested as early as possible. But for that our testing facilities need to be expanded and the other labs, apart from BSMMU and IEDCR, that are conducting the tests at present, have to prove their efficiency to earn people's trust.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Don't take the dengue threat lightly

According to a senior doctor, the number of dengue patients this year is much higher than the previous year. Though it is a rather alarming statement, it is not being addressed properly. We are struggling to cope with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic as it is, and if there is a dengue outbreak now, it will make things much worse for our already struggling healthcare system.

I urge all my fellow citizens to remain vigilant. There are various ways we can take protective measures at home to save ourselves from mosquito bites. For example, we should always make use of mosquito nets before going to bed.

Also, the city corporations need to carry out their duties responsibly to ensure that the spread of Aedes is curbed at all costs. Failure to take timely action could prove disastrous.

Dr M Mahboob Hossain, Dhaka



SAAD HAMMADI

As COVID-19 spreads, repression and disinformation have generally followed in its wake. Governments around the world are justified in their concern that the pandemic is being exploited by some to spread dangerous misinformation about the disease and means to cure it, potentially harming the efforts to combat it. At the same time, however, some governments are themselves exploiting this moment—to suppress relevant information uncomfortable for the government or use the situation as a pretext to crackdown on critical voices.

Today is a week short of two months since journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol left his office in the evening and never reached home. His relatives and friends frantically tried, for hours, to reach him over the phone, but the line went dead each time. They filed a complaint with the police but have yet to hear anything about his whereabouts. As the family gathers to break their Ramadan fast on evenings, Kajol's chair remains empty. Now, his 11-year-old daughter and 20-year-old son don't just fear for their father's safety but worry about his health as well, anxious about whether the virus may have infected him too.

A photojournalist and editor of a daily newspaper, Kajol was also facing the prospect of charges under the draconian Digital Security Act. A day before he was disappeared, a lawmaker from the ruling Awami League accused him of publishing "false, offensive and defamatory" material on Facebook. Three hours after he was last seen, another case was filed against him, under the same act, by a member of the ruling party.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has come to dominate the news, people who have been critical of the government's response have found themselves subject to hostile attention from the authorities. On April 26, an op-ed that questioned why the government had failed to procure low-cost testing kits suddenly vanished from the website it was published on.

Netra News, a Sweden-based platform for investigative journalism, edited by journalist and researcher Tasneem Khalil, reported on a leaked UN internal memo that estimated Bangladesh could see as many as two million deaths as a result of the pandemic without interventions. Netra News' own website has been inaccessible to readers in Bangladesh ever since it reported allegations of corruption involving high-ranking officials, Khalil told Amnesty International. Now, its mirror website has been blocked, too, as was that of BenarNews, an online affiliate of Radio

Free Asia, which carried the Netra News report.

Khalil, who is based outside Bangladesh, said that members of an intelligence agency visited on April 9 the home of his mother and warned her that he was "tampering the image of the country". At least 20 journalists ("It is an attack on freedom of expression", *The Daily Star*, April 29) have been recently intimidated, assaulted or harassed by members of the ruling party, and in some cases detained and accused of criminal offences by the police for reporting pilferage, corruption and lack of accountability in the relief distribution meant for the poor during the lockdown in the country, noted Forum for Freedom of Expression, Bangladesh.

The police registered a case on April

April 23, many governments are seeking to restrict access to information without meeting the basic conditions of legality or necessity. The pandemic, Kaye warned, has led to several incidents of journalists and human rights defenders around the world being intimidated, detained, questioned and harassed for their work.

Social media users in Bangladesh are also being ensnared, targeted for posting comments online about the pandemic. At least 50 people (BBC) now face criminal allegations of spreading "false news" and "rumours". Some Muslim religious leaders in Bangladesh, who have been telling people that they are immune from the virus by virtue of their piety, are unfortunately hardly contested by the authorities for such misinformation that can put lives of people at risk.

Institutions. In the process, people have been faced with prison sentences of up to 5 years simply for expressing their opinions of people in power. Human rights standards are clear that, when a person claims that their honour or reputation has been damaged, it should be treated as a civil matter, not a criminal one.

The growing number of cases filed against journalists and social media users during COVID-19 simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression are anything but rights-respecting. Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be provided by law and be necessary and proportionate to a pressing social need, as clearly established by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a state party.



Family members, friends and colleagues of missing journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol form a human chain demanding his safe return.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

17 against four journalists, including the editor of *bdnews24.com*, Toufique Imrose Khalidi, citing "deteriorating law and order" and "false, offensive and defamatory content" after they published allegations that relief funds were being misappropriated.

In the meantime, signed on a letterhead on April 12, the Association of Television Channel Owners issued a notice conveying a "request" from the Ministry of Information to avoid "all negative discussion and criticisms" about COVID-19.

As noted by David Kaye, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, in his report to the UN Human Rights Council on

The incidents described here demonstrate deeply troubling layers of repression exercised by authorities and people in positions of power. The Digital Security Act criminalises legitimate forms of expression under vague and overbroad provisions. There is no clarity about how Khalidi and other journalists could have "deteriorated law and order" by simply publishing a report about misappropriation of relief materials. The journalists, if convicted under the charges they have been accused of, could face up to seven years in prison.

Several cases under the Digital Security Act registered before and during COVID-19 have used defamation charges as the pretext to stop allegedly false or malicious accusations against politicians and State

It is important that authorities urgently respond to dispel disinformation or any rapid spread of rumours, gossip or unreliable information, to protect communities and public health but a disproportionate penalisation hardly meets the objective. Instead, the authorities should invest into promoting access to prompt, reliable, evidence-based and trustworthy information. This is a more effective way to protect public health and ensure that people have a better chance of being able to stay aware of the measures that are being taken to protect public health, address the pandemic and abandon rumours.

Saad Hammadi is Regional Campaigner for South Asia at Amnesty International. His Twitter handle is: @saadhammadi

## Blocking media access during Covid-19

### A self-defeating strategy



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

**P**RESS freedom in Bangladesh has been in decline long before the coronavirus came to our shores. Over the last decade, thanks to increasingly repressive media laws and highhanded

measures adopted by the authorities, the health of journalism has been deteriorating in such a way that even the stalwarts of the fourth estate began to worry if the damage could ever be reversed. Yet, an outcome few would have expected during the Covid-19 crisis—which was expected to unite the people and their leaders against humanity's most dreaded enemy in decades—is the tightening of the noose around free flow of information, which holds the key to this unity. It's a self-defeating strategy that hurts not only the general people and the media, but those tightening the noose as well.

There are plenty of cases to illustrate this point. Take, for instance, the restrictions put in the way of journalists covering daily briefings from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). A report by *Prothom Alo* on April 30 charted the changes in the DGHS' media engagement policy that show how the government has been restricting access to information about the coronavirus. First, the journalists were robbed of the opportunity to ask questions when, on April 8, the online media briefings were repackaged as "daily health bulletins". It is common knowledge that questions are an essential part of any press briefing. They help journalists glean necessary information, challenge statements and demand clarifications if need be. But these so-called live "bulletins", conducted by a top health official, basically offer a bland,

pre-scripted communiqué that demands blind faith on the part of the audience, without any recourse to verification. Then, starting April 11, information on the government's stock of testing kits was airbrushed from the bulletins. From April 24 onwards, information on daily sample collection in each testing laboratory in the country (there are 31 now) was also removed.

Could these be mere acts of omission? Should we take the statements from the administration—which has been roundly criticised for its failure to expand testing, ensure adequate safety gear for all frontline health workers, check irregularities in relief distribution, enforce social distancing regulations so essential to "flatten the curve" of the virus, and to protect the most vulnerable groups in society—at face value? Should we keep our faith in another BTv-like partisan tool of communication?

That certainly seems to be the conclusion of the administration. There is no denying that the coronavirus has created an unprecedented situation in Bangladesh as in many other countries. There is no exit strategy good enough for a crisis of this magnitude. It's also true that the virus is as much a public relations issue as a medical one, given how public perception/response can dramatically change a situation. Manufacturing approval is thus vital to the continuity of the government's efforts. We have ministers who keep telling us how Bangladesh has fared better than the likes of the US, Italy and Spain. However, such optimistic but grossly misleading claims belie the fact that Bangladesh lags far behind even its neighbours in dealing with the crisis. There are growing fears that the actual numbers of infection cases and deaths are much higher than the figures released by the authorities. The flinching response of the authorities has justifiably made the country a case study in what *not* to do in a pandemic.

The list of things going haywire is quite

stupefying, as a cursory glance through any newspaper will reveal. For the media and free speech activists, this essentially meant suppression of vital information, tightening of control of the social media, efforts of the administration to impose its version of journalism, threats of lawsuits, arrests and imprisonment for those speaking out about the crisis, etc.

On April 18, four journalists including *bdnews24.com* Editor-in-Chief Toufique Imrose Khalidi and *jagonews24.com* acting editor Mohiuddin Sarker were sued under the Digital Security Act for reporting on alleged embezzlement of aid for coronavirus victims in Thakurgaon's Baliadangi Upazila. They were charged with publishing "offensive, false, defamatory or fear-inducing data or information," following a complaint filed by a ruling party leader. One of the accused, local journalist Ianvir Hasan, claimed that the lawsuit was filed to stifle journalists so that they do not report on corruption committed by ruling party politicians. "Police have acted swiftly in taking on the case. It's an attempt to stop us from writing about corruption," he told the *Deutsche Welle* (DW).

Since mid-March, according to the Human Rights Watch, the authorities have targeted or arrested a number of individuals including doctors, academics, students and opposition activists for their comments about the coronavirus, most of them under the draconian Digital Security Act. All this adds up to a grave warning: there is a systematic effort in place to silence those who express concerns about the government's handling of the crisis. Often this is done in the name of preventing the spread of "rumours" and "misinformation". As if to bolster the information suppression claims, on April 23, Health Minister Zahid Maleque directed officials not to talk to the media, since it "creates misunderstanding" and "it is against the government's policy." He said this while speaking at the daily online "bulletin".

True, the government has a responsibility to prevent the spread of misinformation about Covid-19. But this doesn't mean it can or should silence those with genuine concerns or criticism of its handling of the situation. According to Brad Adams, Asia director at the Human Rights Watch, "the government should stop abusing free speech and start building trust by ensuring that people are properly informed about plans for prevention, containment, and cure as it battles the virus."

Regardless of the circumstances created by Covid-19, Bangladesh's struggle with press freedom has been a constant challenge. In this year's World Press Freedom Index released by the Reporters Without Borders later last month, the country has ranked 151st out of 180 countries, while its position was 150th last year. It is instructional to take a look at these figures as they remind us how far down the rabbit hole have we fallen. Clearly, the problem hasn't been exacerbated by the coronavirus, but suppression of information and press freedom poses a greater challenge now as it has very real health consequences. This much should be obvious to anyone who cares for their life and that of their loved ones. This goes for those in power as well.

And this is precisely why journalism is more vital now than ever before. The Covid-19 pandemic has placed independent media front and centre in providing reliable, fact-checked and potentially life-saving information. An independent press can ensure our leaders and officials remain accountable and their measures are scrutinised. This will only help improve the government's response to the crisis—as will an emboldened citizenry free to voice their legitimate concerns and grievances. The opposite of it, as they say, is "pure, unadulterated chaos".

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com