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Is the government ready to deal with the consequences of reopening?

It may overwhelm an already overburdened healthcare system

As the government has relaxed the shutdown from May 31, ignoring the advice of the expert committees formed to fight the Covid-19 outbreak, the country may now experience an explosion of new infections. According to the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19, countries that lifted the lockdown before experiencing a reduction in the infection rate, experienced a rise in new infections. The committee has warned that easing the shutdown before strictly implementing the rules and requirements of preventing transmission will increase the number of positive patients and create pressure on our healthcare system. Another expert committee formed by the government has suggested that the government should lift the lockdown in phases. Unfortunately, such advice seems to have not been considered before reopening.

Needless to say, for a country like Bangladesh with a large number of its population living below the poverty line, it is not easy to prolong the shutdown according to the health directives. But the risk to peoples' lives by relaxing the shutdown cannot be ignored. The government could at least have developed is a mechanism to oversee that health safety measures and social distancing rules are maintained everywhere—in shopping malls, bazars, roads, public transport and in offices and factories. Although the government has directed the public to follow a set of health safety guidelines, we wonder how it will ensure that people are actually abiding by these rules. Clearly, law enforcers alone cannot make sure that people are wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing in this over-crowded city if there is not enough awareness among people. We have seen how the law enforcers struggled to disperse crowds before Eid and when thousands of garment workers and residents of Dhaka left the city after a general holiday was declared in Dhaka.

What will happen when all modes of public transport resumes their operations on the city streets and office-goers crowd into the buses? Although buses have been instructed to operate at half their passenger capacity, who will make sure that the drivers and helpers follow the directives? Also, how the offices will ensure physical distancing of their employees in their limited office spaces remains a big question.

Since the government has relaxed the shutdown without achieving the six criteria outlined by the WHO, it is hard not to feel worried. We are especially fearful of how the crisis resulting from new infections will be tackled as we do not have enough hospital beds and ventilators that most likely will be needed.

Covid-19 tests must be done most expeditiously

People's lives are at stake!

It is a frightening prospect for a person showing the symptoms of the virus, having reported for testing for Covid-19, to be asked by the authorities to return after a month. The only way to determine the spread and allow whatever resources that is at the disposal of the authorities, which can be employed to combat the virus, is to put through as many people as possible through the process of testing. We neither have the resources nor the manpower as yet to do that, not many countries have. But the least that our system can do is to have those who show symptoms of the virus tested immediately to confirm or otherwise and not tell them to wait a few days—not to speak of waiting for a month—for the test.

Yet the Savar district authorities are asking the city populace to do exactly that. A RMG worker was asked to return for the test on June 30, after presenting himself for testing at Savar Upazila Health Complex on May 28. And he suffers from some symptoms of the virus. What good would the test be after a month? Do the health authorities realise that in the meantime he may contaminate dozen others, he being a RMG worker. Like him, many people in Savar have been asked by the Upazila Health Complex authorities to wait between two weeks and a month for the Covid-19 test.

Admittedly, the facilities are scant in the outlying areas, but things must be prioritised. And those who need testing ought to be provided the facility. There is no way out but to increase testing facilities and manpower. The logistics system must be accelerated, and quick testing facilities must be introduced without further delay. In this regard one wonders about the fate of the quick testing Gonoshasthaya kit. It has been nearly three weeks since it was submitted for clearance! Can't the process be hastened? People's lives are at stake!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Incredible police brutality

The recent incident surrounding the brutal killing of George Floyd, an African-American man by a police officer in Minneapolis was utterly shocking. He was suspected of using counterfeit money at a store when he was arrested by the police. A footage of the arrest has taken social media by storm, which depicts a white policeman kneeling on the suspect's neck while he was pinned to the ground struggling to breathe as he pleaded for his life. I am sickened with rage by the fact that while the suspect was being killed, other policemen just stood there silently.

The tragic event has sparked mass riots across the United States now and there is anarchy on the streets. Sadly, this is not the first time that citizens are protesting against such police brutality. There have been several other incidents as well. While I absolutely sympathise with the protesters, I do not support the vandalism and looting that has sprouted from this movement. I hope justice prevails and the guilty officer ends up being punished.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram

What balancing act is needed for FY2021 budget?

MACRO MIRROR

FAHMIDA KHATUN

The budget for fiscal year (FY) 2021 is going to be presented in the backdrop of a situation which was previously not experienced in the history of Bangladesh. The upcoming budget comes at a time when the country is fighting to contain the fallout of the Covid-19 (C19) pandemic. Since the outbreak of C19 in China in December 2020, all countries including Bangladesh have been reeling from economic shock due to disruption of production and supply chains both at domestic and global level. C19 has also affected Bangladesh economy due to both domestic disruptions and its interconnectedness with the global economy. Reduced economic activities have led to lower demand as employment and income have been lost. Hence countries across the world are striving to boost both supply and demand in an effort to resuscitate their economies.

Under such circumstances, there is no reason to set our expectations high to turnaround the economy through an annual budget. However, since the budget also reflects the policy direction and priorities of the government, it can play an important role in stimulating the economy. In that case, budgetary process needs to go beyond the mere exercise of setting targets for expenditure and resource mobilisation. In view of the ongoing Covid-19-induced crisis, the need for the upcoming budget to take that role has become all the more important than ever before. So, this budget for FY2021 should prioritise allocation for the affected sectors and provide directions for economic recovery in the coming days.

What lies ahead

Before the outbreak of C19 in Bangladesh, the key economic indicators were already under stress. Coronavirus hit the country early March 2020 in the midst of economic slowdown which were being manifested in many ways. Except for remittances, other indicators such as exports, import, private investment, foreign direct investment, revenue collection, and balance of payment situation were on the downward trend. With C19 on the horizon all numbers, including remittances deteriorated. Export earnings have fallen further since March 2020, and remittance flow fell substantially in April 2020. Due to country-wide lockdown the last quarter of the fiscal year, which sometimes is termed

as the vibrant quarter, will experience lower economic performance. Projections by the international organisations on growth, trade, employment and poverty at the global level are alarming. For Bangladesh, growth has been projected to be 2 percent in FY 2020 according to the International Monetary Fund. Similar projections have been made by other organisations also.

Additionally, the economy is also faced with medium to long-term challenges such as increased unemployment and inequality which blurs much of its shine that was visible due to its high growth.

In such conditions, recovery of the economy requires boosting aggregate demand by putting money into the hands of the people. This will require higher government expenditure on



productive activities so that people have employment and income. As the economy has been growing steadily during the past decade or so, demand for higher public expenditure has also risen. In the recent past, much of such expenditures have been allocated for infrastructural development which also created job opportunities. For FY 2021, the government has planned a fiscal budget of about Tk 560,000 crore. This is 7.0 percent higher than the original budget of FY2020 and 11.3 percent higher than the revised budget of FY2020.

Given the higher demand for more public expenditure in view of the ongoing C19 situation this increase is welcome. However, one would like to see its implementation which is not quite optimal in Bangladesh. During the July-February of FY2020, the implementation of Annual Development Programme (ADP) has been only 38.5 percent. Due

to lockdown, ADP implementation has been affected since March 2020 which may result in a much lower implementation rate than the previous years. For a growing economy and large population, underperformance of the ADP is worrisome.

While, the government's effort should be to increase public expenditure and expedite its implementation, financing of such expenditures will have to be designed judiciously. One of the challenges that a slowing economy faces is shortage of resources to underwrite its expenditures. With the slowdown in growth, tax revenue growth also slows down unless specific targeted measures are taken to increase tax revenue.

In the current circumstances, global uncertainty combined with domestic

FY2021 to face the emerging economic shock due to C19.

Balancing the choices

How will the government strike a balance between increased expenditure requirement and low resource mobilisation effort is a matter of concern. C19 crisis has brought the welfare issue at the forefront. Government expenditures will have to be continued and increased for employment generation. But the poor and the vulnerable, the daily wage earners, low income earners and people in the informal sector will need government support for some time.

The government of Bangladesh is committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The country is also on a journey towards graduating from least developed country (LDC) to developing country category by 2024. For all these ambitions to be fulfilled, social sector development is important. A large section of the population depends on public provisioning for some basic services such as healthcare, education and nutrition. Therefore, adequate public spending on social sectors and efficiency in the delivery systems are critical. The need for more allocation for some of the ever-neglected sectors has come to the fore during C19 crisis. Healthcare, social protection, agriculture and education are the ones which demand more attention in terms of higher allocation and better management. This might also warrant an optimisation of the defence and public administration budget.

The path less travelled

The existing and the C19-induced challenges cannot be resolved overnight. But the Ministry of Finance can formulate a fiscal policy to address these challenges which is close to reality. Instead of following the beaten track of the previous years, budget for FY2021 and beyond should focus on three areas.

First, the revenue mobilisation target should be realistic. There is no need to imagine without a basis. Revenue estimates should indicate clearly how much revenue NBR can mobilise given its existing capacity, and how much will have to be generated from other sources, such as from bank borrowing, savings certificate, and foreign assistance. Second, revenue targets will have to be fulfilled through strong monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Third, the ministry should also not shy away from undertaking reform measures if it is genuinely interested to maintain a strong fiscal framework and lift the economy out of the ditch.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Global locust population surge: Should we be worried?

A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

While the world grapples to contain the spread of the coronavirus, a different breed of pesky pestilence is threatening the food security of many regions, including some parts of Asia—locusts! These little insects with their voracious appetites have already ravaged crops in the African Horn, Middle East and some parts of Asia. Following the routes of the ancient invaders, the desert locusts—scientifically known as Schistocerca gregaria—have now travelled all the way from Iran and Pakistan, through Afghanistan, and entered the northern states of India, and are now on the way to the very heart of the country—its capital: Delhi.

But this happens every year. This is not an unusual or exceptional phenomenon— locusts typically begin their onslaught in the western parts of India around June and carry on with their campaign of pillage and ransack till November. Except this year, these insatiable crop-thirsty bugs had been spotted as early as April. The result: the worst locust infestation India has experienced in almost three decades. According to a report by the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle, this year the locusts have already destroyed over 50,000 hectares of cropland.

The situation in Pakistan is perhaps worse, which as per Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates, will “incur losses of about 2bn pounds in winter crops, such as wheat, and a further 2.3bn pounds in the summer crops being planted now.” The country, already struggling to contain the rapid spread of Covid-19, had to take support from its all-weather ally, Turkey. According to reports, Turkey has provided purpose-built Piper Brave spray aircraft along with four crew members to the Pakistan Air Force to fight the resilient insects.

This rapid and sudden upsurge of

the locust population that is unleashing destruction globally can be attributed to aberrant and erratic climatic behaviour triggered by global warming. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations suggests that “Heavy rains and cyclones have triggered a recent surge in desert locust populations, causing an outbreak to develop in Sudan and Eritrea that is rapidly spreading along both sides of the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia and Egypt”.



PHOTO: AFP

Agriculture officials spray pesticides to kill desert locusts, the most destructive of the locust species, in a field in Pishin district of Pakistan on May 14, 2020.

And while it is apparent that climatic malfunctions are resulting in disasters in many parts of the world, the most pressing question for Bangladesh is, how much of a risk these theologically ominous insects are to us? Especially in the context of the recent attack of a similar locust-like pest in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf upazila, where the insects consumed leaves of several trees in the compound of a house. This incident rang alarm-bells among the locals, who thought these were the dreaded desert locusts. Later it was confirmed that while the spotted grasshoppers were

potentially harmful, they were not the menacing desert locusts.

“The hot-tropical climate of Bangladesh is not a suitable habitat for the desert locusts. The wet and green environment of Bangladesh will not be favourable for these insects, which is why the country has never had to face a desert locust attack in its history. Moreover, if we look at the direction of the wind which facilitates the flight path of desert locusts—locusts cannot fly against the

wind—it is highly unlikely that they will manage to come all the way to Bangladesh from western India or even Madhya Pradesh,” said Shykh Seraj, an award-winning development journalist, also an agricultural sector expert, while discussing the subject with this writer.

So, there we go scot-free, right?

“Nothing can be said for certain, especially with all the spillover effects of climate change that we are battling every day. While desert locusts are historically not a threat for Bangladesh, we have to monitor the situation,” added Shykh Seraj, a view shared by Kabirul

Bashar, a professor of entomology at Jahangirnagar University.

Professor Bashar suggested that we actively track the movements of the desert locusts in India. Based on this, along with assessing the geographic and topographic barriers that might affect the movement of these hungry pests, we should be able to map their potential migration path. “We cannot afford to be complacent simply because Bangladesh does not have the right climate for the habitation of desert locusts. The concerned authorities can consider forming a committee of experts who will monitor and map the movements of the desert locusts and suggest ways of preparing ourselves, just in case the locusts manage to pay us a visit after all. Mapping the movement of locusts will also help us estimate how much they might take to reach Bangladesh and prepare a prediction model, if they can manage to turn towards this direction. And we have to be ready with a concrete plan, the right insecticide and the appropriate tools needed to apply them, in a worst case scenario.”

So, amidst all the negative news we come across every day—this writer for one, keeps churning out pieces that are all about the doom and gloom, this is one good news after all: if we look at historical patterns and environmental factors, we might just be spared an invasion by desert locusts. Unlike human foreign invaders, these ravenous insects are not going to travel further South or East from Madhya Pradesh.

But as both Shykh Seraj and professor Bashar suggested, secure in the knowledge that Bangladesh does not provide the right thriving space for desert locusts, we cannot afford to become complacent. That would be our mistake. In the kind of unpredictable world we live in—and a lot of it indeed has to do with climate change—you cannot take anything for granted. After all, even a few months ago, how many of us knew that in an age in which we consider mining the moon and plan settlements in space, humans would fight tooth and nail to contain a tiny flu-like virus!

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