

How can we be so indifferent with so many active Covid-19 cases?

Govt must not succumb to denial and response fatigue

B ANGLADESH'S response to Covid-19 has been one of denial, delay and dereliction from the start, a trend that unfortunately continues even as the country passes one grim milestone after another. According to the latest estimates, Bangladesh is now seventh on the list of countries with the most active cases in the world, and sixteenth in terms of total cases. Among the Asian countries, in terms of total cases, India with its huge population remains well ahead of us and Pakistan is within arm's reach. In terms of active cases, only India is ahead of us. As far as statistics go, this is an extremely disconcerting development.

How should we react to this? The scientific consensus is that we should be extremely worried. Despite the inexplicably low levels of testing in the country, large numbers of people are dying or getting infected every day. But our officials continue to be in denial. Comments by several ministers signal a strategy to use recent low numbers of cases to highlight the "success" of the government, bizarre as it may seem, although a joint survey by IEDCR and icddr,b shows that the actual numbers are far greater than what we are being fed by the government.

Experts say part of this could be because of "response fatigue". The WHO has already urged countries to undertake appropriate Covid-19 response activities to reduce the risk of response fatigue through nuanced and pragmatic steps. These warnings, unfortunately, are falling on deaf ears in Bangladesh. Far from doing the needful, our policymakers are still behaving like the proverbial ostrich pretending that the threats don't exist, as if doing so will make them go away. What they fail to understand is that there are no political points to score in this battle, and you can't simply will it away or hope for herd immunity to develop while people endure unimaginable sufferings. There are no winners or losers in this battle—there are only survivors, and how well we survive depends on how sincere and pragmatic we are in our efforts to contain this virus.

We urge the government to shed its dangerous optimism about the Covid-19 situation in the country and instead focus on the tasks at hand. It must reinvigorate its moribund health departments and facilities to expand testing and ensure treatment for both Covid-19 and general patients. We are still waiting for updates on its earlier decision to impose zonal lockdowns where the situation is especially dire. We are also waiting to see proper action to uproot corruption in the health sector and establish accountability, which is vital to saving lives. These tasks are urgent and doable for a well-meaning administration. Covid-19 is a once-in-a-century health emergency and the government must not shy away from this historic responsibility to appropriately handle this crisis.

Who will rein in the police?

Blatant murder passed off as crossfire

WE are shocked at the blatant apathy to a serious malaise that has infected the police. The culture of crossfire has struck the very fibre of our society and shaken the fundamental pillar of good governance—the rule of law—and inflicted a severe blow to people's most fundamental rights. What is of concern is that the frequent use of this abhorrent and inhumane practice has been extended across the entire gamut of police activity. While initially, one came across reports of encounters with criminals and anti-state elements (whether genuine or not cannot be said with certainty though), crossfire and the threat of it has become a handy expedient for extortion by the law enforcing agencies. This is a state of affairs that no administration should feel happy with and no society can be comfortable in and, much less, endure.

We wonder whether the police in particular and the administration in general are aware of the consequences of these killings. Every other day, there are reports of such incidents, with the same explanations of the circumstances of the deaths, which invariably differ from the accounts of the families of the victims and the circumstantial evidence. In the most recent incident, an expatriate Bangladeshi in Chakaria of Cox's Bazar was disposed of by some police personnel, because, reportedly, he could not pay the Tk 50 lakh the police wanted from him, who then conveniently painted the victim as a yaba trader. Another person was killed in the same area in a similar manner; apparently, the unfortunate man could be a victim of mistaken identity—Hasan the rickshaw puller might have been picked up instead of Hasan the yaba trader, according to the local ward councillor.

We wonder why the police administration has been unable to stop their personnel from perpetrating criminal acts. These are not isolated incidents but have become normal happenings. Very few of such incidents are inquired into, if at all, and very few of the errant police personnel, overstepping the bounds of law, are punished.

The police cannot effectively gain people's trust and confidence if such killings continue. The police administration should wake up if the situation is to be salvaged, and so should the Ministry of Home Affairs.

EDITORIAL

Can Covid-19 make us stronger?



CYBERAUTIC RUMINATIONS

HABIBULLAH N KARIM

HERE is an old saying that "what does not kill you makes you stronger". It might be a bit early in the cycle of the still unfolding saga of the Covid-19 pandemic to be asking whether we have survived this scourge and, if so, how it has changed us. Nonetheless, Covid-19 has already sliced through the veneer of civility and human compassion to expose the viscera of raw emotions of fear, panic and withdrawal, to the point where children leave their elderly parent dying of Covid-19 on the streets like toxic garbage, or toss out a dead relative like a plague-infested rat. Such panic psychosis, no matter how infrequently seen, does bring out the seamy side of extreme human selfishness—the Epicurean hedonism at its most vulgar.

However, we have also seen how healthcare professionals—doctors, nurses and technicians—remained steadfast in their Hippocratic oath to serve afflicted humanity while endangering their own well-being and depriving their near and dear ones of their intimacy. We have seen how law enforcing personnel such as police on field duty and ever-vigilant social workers have carried out the onerous and hazardous task of collecting unidentified corpses and burying them with the human dignity the dead deserved, but which their own kith and kin denied them. When we juxtapose instances of panic psychosis with those of social altruism, we get all the more confused and divided as a society.

Compared to human longevity, pandemics are rare occurrences. The last global pandemic—the "Spanish Flu"—took place 102 years ago in 1918. Obviously, people with living memory of the Spanish Flu pandemic are few and far between. Aside from epidemiologists and trivia enthusiasts, I doubt if anyone knew about the last major global pandemic until the coronavirus played tag across the world, forcing people to Google "pandemic" and learn about AIDS, Avian Flu, Ebola, MERS etc. Even Avian Flu is a distant memory, although it happened less than 30 years ago. The fact that a

highly contagious disease—even with low morbidity but without any known treatment protocol—can play havoc with life and can turn the whole global economy upside down was not unknown to mankind, but the collective knowledge and wisdom of human civilisation was thrown to the wind for political expediency or the convenience of being in denial. This led to the inevitability of a global pandemic that has already cost the lives of more than three quarters of a million people and up to 200 million jobs worldwide.

On the home front, Covid-19 has already forced the government and multilateral development agencies to slash growth forecast by nearly three

Even in offices and public places, it appears there is a Covid-19 precaution fatigue. All the paraphernalia and materials for protection from coronavirus is abundantly visible everywhere we go, but the clinical seriousness is no longer seen. In the meantime, government offices have started full schedule operations but are still restricting visitors, while private offices and businesses, including banks and restaurants, have also started regular operations. Have we really gotten over the hump in transmissions or will this lead to a resurgence in the number of new cases? Nobody can tell for sure.

The overall morbidity as well as total infections in the country has been low compared to our population size and



PHOTO: COLLECTED

percent. What is more alarming is that the economic fallout of the coronavirus is pushing millions of vulnerable people into the ranks of the extreme poor, which is a real shock as most of these people have, only in the last 10 years, moved out of extreme poverty.

While Covid-19 related death rates and confirmed new cases have come down slightly from their peaks in late June, the curves are remaining virtually unchanged in recent weeks even though people's mobility has returned to almost normal, as is evident from the traffic situations in the capital and on intercity highways. While use of masks is more prevalent than before, it is not uncommon to spot someone crossing the street or waiting for a bus without a mask.

high density. This has confounded public health experts, who are still scratching their heads as to what might have contributed to our lucky escape thus far. Some half-seriously attribute this to our inherent resilience built up due to all the adulteration in foods and severe pollution in our environs, while others peg this on the climate and the monsoon season. The epidemiology department ought to study the real causes of this macro-level infection behaviour playing to our advantage, which might have some scientific basis such as our widespread inoculations against various scourges such as polio, diphtheria, smallpox etc that may not be so prevalent in advanced economies. No matter what the reason, we must find out the cause of both resilience

and susceptibility to coronavirus so that we are fully prepared when it decides to go around the world once again, as has been seen in most regional and global pandemics of the past.

Aside from that, we need to make deep introspections into the social psyche of the deep gashes left behind by the economic decimation caused by Covid-19, leading to worsening unemployment and under-employment and the concomitant rise in general poverty. In the largest and wealthiest economy of the world, unemployment has surged to almost four times compared to the pre-Covid-19 period. Our government does not track the employment situation monthly like in the USA, but the general perception is that our economy has not suffered anywhere near the levels of job loss as over there. This might be because most employers have not outright retrenched workers even though some have curtailed benefits, as opposed to their counterparts in the richer countries where in any economic downturn, the employers dump employees like discarded cogs and leave them to the mercy of the government safety nets or unemployment insurance plans. Having said that, there have been some business and factory closures leading to job losses for workers, most of whom do not have savings to fall back on during such hardships.

What lessons we can take to heart from all this would depend on how we treat this still-unfolding episode of the coronavirus pandemic. We can see this as a pandemic exported from Wuhan, China and not our burden to bear, or we can see this as an external shock that has tentacles that can propagate freely in any country, and thus make this part of our preparedness against such shocks no matter where they originate. In recent times, we have seen the government taking on exercises for long-term visions such as Bangladesh 2041 and even Bangladesh 2100 (under the Delta Plan). As a lowly minion among the denizens of the country, I can only hope those visions have adequate provisions against unforeseen external shocks. Only when we are willing to learn from dreamy visions as well as stark nightmares will we be stronger as a nation and more resilient in the next crisis.

Habibullah N Karim is the founder of Technohaven Co Ltd, a co-founder of BASIS and the coordinator of Blockchain Olympiad Bangladesh.

WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY

We owe Covid-19 fighters and all other humanitarian activists our gratitude

QUAZI SALEH MUSTANZIR

WHAT happens when a violence or disaster takes place leaving thousands of people in humanitarian crises? In case of such emergencies, we always find some humanitarian activists extending their cooperation and support with a great deal of dedication and devotion to minimise the plights of the people hit by the misfortunes. While rendering hazardous services with the intent of protecting these vulnerable people, they are more likely to embrace the risk of injury or death. The Global Humanitarian Overview 2020 report says that in 2018, 400 attacks carried out against aid workers claimed 131 lives while in the first nine months of 2019, 171 deaths were registered against 825 attacks on health workers.

To pay homage to the humanitarian activists including those who were killed or injured during their work, the UN General Assembly declared August 19 as World Humanitarian Day to be observed worldwide, in the memory of the martyrs who were killed in a bomb attack on the Canal Hotel in Baghdad on this day in 2003.

This year, the Covid-19 pandemic has thrown a big challenge to the accessibility of health and aid workers to the people in humanitarian crises. Due to lockdowns and restrictions on movements imposed by governments across the world, health and aid workers are facing hurdles in providing health treatment and food for the destitute, creating safe spaces for women and girls, delivering babies, running refugee camps etc. Therefore, this year's World Humanitarian Day is dedicated to those real life frontline heroes who are showing a great commitment to saving and protecting the people in need of humanitarian assistance, defying all odds hurled at them by the pandemic.

Globally, the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance is increasing in proportion to human-induced and natural disasters, including conflict, violence, climate change and infectious diseases. In some cases, human-induced disasters coupled with natural disasters are intensifying the crises.

Armed conflicts are ousting people from their homes, taking students out of schools, putting women and girls at risk of sexual or gender-based violence, early or forced marriage and human trafficking, and limiting the access of the humanitarian workers to the people in need of aid. They are taking a heavy toll on civilians and children, with a record casualty rate. In 2018, more than 12,000 children were killed or maimed because of armed conflicts, according to the Global Humanitarian Overview

2020 report. The people who survive the conflicts often undergo mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic disorder, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. In the conflict areas, health workers are being threatened, injured or killed and healthcare facilities like hospitals, clinics and ambulances are being vandalised. The attacks on the healthcare system as well as health and aid workers are denying millions of people the care and aid they badly need.

Due to climate change, some countries are experiencing long standing floods, extreme rainfalls, protracted droughts, unexpected cyclones etc that severely

people from their homestead and making them refugees. People with disabilities and old age infirmities are becoming the worst sufferers amidst these crises. Economic shocks and rising debts are further adding insult to their injuries. In 2019, 56 million of people who were in need of humanitarian assistance were living in countries laden with debt.

No matter what the causes of their sufferings are, we have witnessed international organisations, government agencies, NGOs and volunteer groups standing by their side when these affected people are in dire need of humanitarian responses. Very often, they have to work for the people while facing great risks.



Wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), staffers at the isolation unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital receive coronavirus patients.

affect the lives and properties of the people and put their food security at risk. In Bangladesh, we have been hit by Cyclone Amphan this year, followed by heavy seasonal floods that have affected hundreds of thousands of people across the country. In these situations, humanitarian workers from across sectors, including government and NGO, have gone out of their way to reach essential aid and healthcare to flood victims.

People in different parts of the world are also grappling with infectious and contagious diseases and malnutrition problems on top of the pandemic. Even before coronavirus arrived, armed conflicts and climate change were displacing and dislocating millions of

During the pandemic, these risks have doubled, since frontline workers are also facing the added risk of contracting coronavirus in the line of duty.

During this period of Covid-19, doctors and health workers are fighting with an unseen menace as frontline soldiers, often with inadequate protective gear and limited medical resources. As such, a significant number of healthcare professionals are getting infected by the virus; many of them have succumbed to their infection. The pandemic has not only created a medical emergency but has also negatively affected the global economy, impacting the livelihoods of the masses. Business has slowed down and many have become jobless following

the lockdowns declared by governments across the world.

This situation has also led to the requirement of humanitarian responses to the vulnerable people who are now struggling to make both ends meet. To save them from starvation, government officials, police and military forces, public representatives, politicians and volunteers have worked collaboratively to distribute relief from door to door. They also took the responsibility of ensuring the proper burial of the unfortunate people who have died of the viral infection, some of whom were abandoned by their near and dear ones out of panic. In doing so, many of these humanitarian workers came in direct

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

contact with the virus and some of them even lost their lives.

In these trying times, we see a huge number of humanitarian workers dedicating themselves to the cause of the people who are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Even the death threat of Covid-19 could not dampen their indomitable spirit and make them deviate from the path of humanitarian activities. World Humanitarian Day is the perfect occasion to pay homage to these stalwarts of humanity, who are showing us the path of altruism. It is also an opportunity to encourage people around the world to work for humanitarian causes.

Quazi Saleh Mustanzir is Additional District Magistrate in Pirojpur. Email: s.mustanzir@gmail.com