

# What we look forward to in 2021 for Bangladesh

## Strict measures needed to fight new coronavirus strain

*Introduce three-gene tests, suspend flights with the UK*

It is worrying that the RT-PCR tests done to diagnose coronavirus infections in Bangladesh are not likely to detect the new strain identified in the UK. According to health experts, the RT-PCR tests are doing two-gene diagnosis which may not detect all the mutations of the coronavirus and there are little chances that the new strain can be detected by these tests. It will take three-gene tests to know whether the new strain is present in Bangladesh.

Although we are yet to know if the new variant is deadlier than the other strains, what we already know is that the new strain is 70 percent more contagious than the previous ones. And since its capacity to spread is higher, the risk will also be higher. What this means for a densely populated country like ours is that if the virus reaches here, it might wreak havoc across the country.

The new strain has already spread in many countries. Several new strains have also been identified in some Indian states, including Kolkata, in individuals who came from the UK. Under the circumstances, what our government can immediately do is suspend flights with the UK. At least 50 countries have suspended flight operations with the UK after the new strain was identified. Bangladesh should also take a decision regarding this as early as possible. Until such a decision is taken, we need to have a stringent screening process at airports. Mandatory quarantining of all the UK returnees should be implemented. The health minister recently informed us about quarantining the UK returnees for seven days. The question is, will a seven-day quarantine period be enough?

As for detecting the new strain, the authorities should urgently bring in the equipment needed and arrange the facilities to conduct three-gene tests. Besides, genome sequencing of at least five out of every 100 samples should be done, as experts advised. Additionally, the government must make sure everyone wears a mask and maintain social distancing since we still do not know how long it will take for the vaccines to arrive in Bangladesh and whether it will reach those who need it the most.

## A freedom fighter's forever war

*Provide proper livelihood support to him and others in similar conditions*

It shames us as a nation that a freedom fighter who fought for the independence of this country in 1971 has to scrape a living singing on the streets in his twilight years. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, Dilip Kumar Dey, 80, lives in the Bangra union of Kalihati, Tangail. Every day he leaves home to sing near schools, colleges, bus stands and marketplaces, and returns with whatever money people give him out of sympathy to supplement the meagre earnings of his sons, with whom the widower lives. Old and unable to do anything else, Dilip has been earning a living in this way for the last few decades. His story is not unlike that of many elderly beggars and homeless people living on the outermost fringes of our society, except that he is a freedom fighter, to whom we owe our very existence as a sovereign nation. Dilip fought in Sector 11 during the war, under the command of Colonel Abu Taher. For his service, he was given a house where the family now lives and receives an allowance of Tk 12,000.

This may seem enough of a repayment for a debt of gratitude. But for someone with no formal education who has had to carry the burden of supporting a big family all his life and marrying off his sister and daughters—and on whose earnings his poor, illiterate sons also depend—it is precious little. Much of Dilip's income also goes into repaying loans. He needs proper livelihood support, not mere cash handouts, to live the last days of his life with dignity. Unfortunately, many elderly people in our society are going through the same condition, each day spent worrying where the next meal will come from. They also need support and protection in equal measure.

The strength of a state is known by how well it takes care of its weakest members. In that respect, the Bangladesh government has a lot to do for the many poor older people, women and children across the country who are struggling to meet their basic needs, a reality compounded by the pandemic that has pushed countless families into extreme poverty. The elders especially need proper care and attention. And poor freedom fighters like Dilip Kumar who are living a life of mercy certainly deserve better. The government must come forward and do more for them.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Help the poor survive the cold wave

A cold wave sweeping through our country's northern part for two weeks has brought immense suffering to the people of that region. The bitter weather is forcing most people to stay indoors and is affecting their daily lives. Agricultural activities have also been hampered as workers cannot spend enough time in the fields. According to Bangladesh Meteorological Department, the temperature recently dropped to 7.6 degrees Celsius in Tentulia.

People are suffering as they lack warm clothes and blankets. Even though efforts are being made by some NGOs, district administration and concerned citizens, it seems to be falling short. We should all provide, however little we can, to help the underprivileged survive the cold wave.

Priyanka Ghosh, by email



FAHMIDA KHATUN

**MACRO MIRROR**

**A** GAINST all the odds 2021 ushers in with a lot of expectations. The Covid-19 pandemic which engulfed our economic and social lives in every possible manner in 2020 is expected to be brought under control as hopes are high with the approval of vaccinations developed by a number of companies. However, one does not quite know yet when we will be able to lead a normal life again. When will everyone get vaccines and how will vaccination react to human bodies? Whether people will be willing to take vaccine has also become an issue that has to be dealt with by governments across the world.

Amidst so much unknowns and uncertainty, we set our eyes to a new year. Leaving the sufferings behind, we would like to think of 2021 as a new beginning, to do things in a better way. Countries are mapping their way forward. They have expressed their will to build the future better by taking specific actions in economic, social and environmental areas. This, of course, will not be easy as the pandemic has devastated the world in an unprecedented way.

### 2020 was a challenging year for Bangladesh too

For Bangladesh, the outgoing year 2020 was equally challenging. In fiscal year 2020, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the Bangladesh economy was somewhat under stress due to the weak performance of a few economic indicators such as exports, imports, private

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SAEDA BILKIS BANI

I recently visited rural areas of Bangladesh amid the Covid-19 pandemic and returned to Dhaka with a new understanding of the impact that Covid-19 is having on child marriage, a harmful practice that is a global challenge. The fundamental shift that I saw was that child marriage, which has typically been encouraged by struggling parents, is now being discouraged by struggling girls. This worrisome trend underscores a new burden of the pandemic on the poor.

Marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights. Yet Unicef reported in April that the number of girls married in childhood stands at 12 million per year worldwide.

According to the United Nations Population Fund's State of the World Population 2020 report, Covid-19 threatens to make even that stunning number worse. The agency estimates that Covid-19 will disrupt efforts to end child marriage, potentially resulting in an additional 13 million child marriages taking place between 2020 and 2030 that could otherwise have been averted.

The challenge is not only the disease but the response to the disease—especially the impact of school closings, which have been in effect nationally since March. The transition from in-school to online learning can easily seem like a mechanical one, but it creates new challenges for remote and poor communities.

What I witnessed in visiting rural communities was girls totally bored and home-bound by school closings. They typically lack Internet access, television, and smartphones. Analogue phones are the only readily available means of communication, and too often the parents are not able to maintain any sort of schooling at home. The girls are home-bound because, unlike the boys, they are generally forbidden by their parents from leaving the home unnecessarily. School closings thus become confining as well as limiting.

investment, foreign direct investment, and revenue mobilisation. Besides, the banking sector was suffering from high non-performing loans (NPL).

Like all other economies, ours has experienced pressure due to the disruption in economic activities during the pandemic. Both domestic and global demand contracted. As our economy is integrated with the global economy, a downward trend was observed in case of exports, outflow of Bangladeshi migrants for work, and foreign investment. On the domestic front, depressed domestic demand has been reflected through low investment. Credit flow to the private sector and import of capital machinery had been low. Job losses by a large number of people had also reduced demand. All these had an impact on growth which was on an increasing trend during the last decade.

the Bangladesh economy has been less affected compared to other countries during the pandemic. Several international organisations including International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank have assessed the economic performance of countries during the pandemic. Bangladesh's performance stands out amongst its peers. Despite the pandemic, agricultural production has been exceptionally good—that helped ensure food security. Remittances have soared in recent months, foreign exchange reserve has reached the highest level ever, exports picked up towards the end of the year and inflation remained low.

### Looking ahead for a resilient and sustainable path

In view of this, Bangladesh looks forward to seeing brighter economic prospects in 2021. For Bangladesh, 2021 is also a



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Thus, in fiscal year 2020, the growth of gross domestic product (GDP) was 5.2 percent as opposed to 8.2 percent, which the government projected originally. Several studies have indicated that low growth and slower economic activities had a knock-on effect on poverty, unemployment, education, inequality and many social aspects.

### But Bangladesh remained much less affected than others

Bangladesh has undertaken several measures to overcome the negative effect of the pandemic. These include instructions on social distancing, wearing masks and general holiday for 66 days during March-May 2020. Parallely, the government introduced several stimulus packages to help the affected sectors and people due to the pandemic. Till November 2020, the amount of the stimulus packages was equivalent to 4.3 percent of its GDP.

Due to government efforts combined with the hard work of the people,

special year. The country will celebrate the golden jubilee of its independence. This will be the year to celebrate our achievements in the last 50 years. This will also be an occasion to reflect on the constraints and commit ourselves to expedite efforts to fulfil the unmet dreams in the next 50 years. Bangladesh must also seize every opportunity that comes in its way in the coming years.

Among a number of initiatives that are required to achieve the unfulfilled goals, a few can be reiterated. First and foremost is the need for institutional strengthening and reform. For rebuilding the economy from the fallout of the pandemic, public expenditure is the key. Therefore, more fiscal room is to be created through domestic resource mobilisation and its efficient utilisation. Fiscal discipline through prudent fiscal management will be critical for economic recovery. In this regard, governance of the financial sector will also have to be ensured. In recent times, liquidity situation in the

banking system has increased which led to low interest rates. This is due to weak investment demand and Bangladesh Bank's measure to create liquidity space in commercial banks. The volume of the NPL in 2020 may not be a reflection of the real situation since Bangladesh Bank had frozen loan classification from January 1 to December 31, 2020 in view of the pandemic. The embedded weakness of the sector emphasises the need for reforming the sector and establishing better governance in the system.

Second, the anti-corruption drive should be continued and strengthened. Corruption in public investment projects reduces fiscal space. Studies have indicated how corruption affects growth. A large part of resources is also sent out of the country illegally. By preventing corruption, resource efficiency and economic competitiveness can be enhanced.

Third, investment on human capital has been reinforced during the pandemic. The weaknesses in the healthcare system was evident during the pandemic management. Increased allocation for the health sector and appropriate utilisation of the allocated resources are essential. For human capital development, education is an important means. Improvement of human resource capacity through skills development is the need of the hour. For a sustainable recovery from the pandemic, creation of opportunity is not enough. Access to opportunity for all has to be ensured. This will also require quality education and technological skills. During the pandemic, digital technology has played a pivotal role in facilitating activities and connecting with the world. However, without affordable access to technology there may be a digital divide leading to further inequality.

Fourth, Bangladesh can also set a milestone on its 50th anniversary by initiating the universal social protection scheme for the poor. The need for a comprehensive social protection for all including those in the informal sector has been felt acutely during the ongoing pandemic.

Fifth, 2021 is also an opportune moment for discarding the unsustainable way of development which is based on destruction of natural resources and biodiversity. This pattern of development creates inequality by depriving the poor to access the natural commons. To achieve sustainable development, the government has to work towards tackling climate change at the global level and preventing environmental degradation at the domestic level.

Bangladesh can make 2021 a year full of opportunities by doing the above and much more!

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

Views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the organisation she works for.

# The impact of Covid-19 on child marriage and other gender-based violence

All too often the girls whom I saw had a glazed look in their eyes. They saw no future for themselves. Without school, they were deprived of possibilities. The daily effect was crushing. The only escape seemed to be marriage.

The shift to girls pursuing child marriage instead of their parents is a devastating one that could drive the numbers even higher. It could limit the prospects and potential of girls worldwide.



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PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

School closings also affect boys, but boys have more to do. They are freer, more mobile, outside more. In some areas, that may increase child labour, drug addiction, and gambling, but boys are not confined as girls are.

The situation is also different in urban areas, where there is greater access to the Internet, television, and smartphones. Internet access has its own liabilities, but it is available for educational purposes.

For girls and women, the response to Covid-19 has other implications, too.

Lockdowns have left many men out of work and, therefore, at home during the day, often making demands of one kind or another. The burden on women—to prepare more food, do more cleaning, maintain the home life—only increases. Financial stress creates domestic stress, and the potential for violence grows, especially as husbands demand more money from wives' families—a major cause of domestic violence.

Brac is working to prevent child

Bangladesh's Constitution and law, but not in its culture. And with 3 million cases backlogged in the court system, the law has limited effect.

Bringing about that cultural shift requires economic empowerment alongside social empowerment for girls and women. It requires life skills for negotiation, partnering in decision-making, and goal setting, among other things. It necessitates occupational skills training to enable girls and women to connect with the job market and to earn their own income. It also requires microfinance so that women can get loans, and mentoring so that women can see a future that they can impact.

Fortunately, Brac has those tools in place. Brac Microfinance has 7.1 million clients, 87 percent of whom are women. Brac's Skills Development Programme has equipped 84,581 people with training and knowledge needed for employment, and 83 percent of those learners—50 percent of whom are women—secured jobs after graduation. Together these tools create a comprehensive package that can enable girls and women to see a vibrant future and escape gender-based violence.

But the scale of the problem is greater still. According to a 2015 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and the United Nations Population Fund, more than 70 percent of married women or girls in Bangladesh have faced some form of intimate partner abuse; about half of whom say their partners have physically assaulted them. And the problem is global.

Covid-19 has revealed that girls and women need to be able to see a future of opportunity for themselves. In combating Covid-19, the world must awaken to this revelation. Covid-19 should now become the catalyst for the world to make possible a future of opportunity for girls and women—a future without gender-based violence.

Saeda Bilkis Bani is a Programme Manager in the Community Empowerment Programme at Brac. Copyright: Inter Press Service