

Lack of resources and awareness amidst Covid-19 surge

Health guidelines must be enforced strictly

WHETHER the newer strains of the coronavirus are responsible for the recent spike in the number of infections in Bangladesh is still being debated. But it is definitely time for the authorities to maximise healthcare preparations as well as resources, and for the general public to rigorously follow the government's Covid-19 directives and guidelines. Though we appreciate the government's move of raising the number of hospital beds—by means of adding hundreds of beds to three specialised hospitals and planning to construct a makeshift hospital in Mohakhali, meant to accommodate 1200 patients (and have 51 ICU beds)—there must also be attention paid to hospitals outside the capital, as well as those within it which suffer from a severe lack of resources.

It was reported in this daily yesterday that the Mugda Medical College Hospital, an establishment dedicated to treating Covid-19, had to turn away patients due to there being no vacant beds. On top of that, the hospital's emergency unit has only two oxygen cylinders, which are used intermittently between multiple patients. Could not the hospital have acquired more oxygen cylinders long before this latest outbreak? It is a basic requirement for any hospital, more so for one that has been treating Covid-19 patients for so long. The fact that there is still such a dire need for such basic resources and equipment is hardly reassuring, given how quickly and widely the virus is currently spreading across the country.

What is even more disheartening to see is the people's lack of awareness about the rising number of Covid-19 infections and related deaths. For example, last Monday saw a 7.4 percent increase in the daily rate of infections in Chattogram from what it was on March 7. Yet, crowds reportedly continue to gather in different areas of the city, many not wearing masks at all, or wearing them incorrectly. Imagine the state of affairs in other major cities including the capital.

We believe only a joint effort by the general public and the health authorities will be effective in improving the current Covid-19 situation in the country. Just as the authorities should strictly enforce the directives it has presented, each member of the public should also follow the health guidelines of their own accord, and for the good of the larger population.

Violence in Myanmar continues to escalate

The world must unite against the military regime

THE situation in Myanmar has only gone from bad to worse since the military seized power after refusing to accept the results of the country's national elections in February. On March 27, while the Myanmar military junta celebrated its Armed Forces Day, the country also saw one of the most brutal days of the ongoing crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, with 114 reported deaths. This included many children, including two 11-year-olds. In less than two months, at least 25 children have allegedly been killed in the violence in Myanmar, according to the Unicef. Reports suggest that over 500 people have lost their lives while protesting for their rights on the streets of Myanmar.

Despite these horrible killings, the Myanmar military junta's disproportionate use of force against its own people has only continued unabated. Over the past few days, the military has even launched airstrikes against the ethnic Karen population in eastern Myanmar, breaking an existing ceasefire agreement with the armed groups of that region. As a result, there is now a growing refugee crisis on Thailand's borders, with thousands of ethnic Karen fleeing the bombardments.

It is clear now that the civil conflict in Myanmar will only continue to escalate, with different ethnic armed groups coming together to unite against the coup, as reported by Reuters. It is high time for the international community to also come together and take a stand against the violent crackdown on civilians by the Myanmar military as well as their unlawful seizure of power.

It is telling that only after being faced with a refugee crisis did Thailand ask Myanmar to "reduce violence" there. So far, the silence of the ASEAN countries despite the violent actions of their neighbour has been only too conspicuous. Although the UK and the US finally decided to impose sanctions on military businesses, the response from the international community has also been painfully slow and inadequate, with the special UN rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar calling the global diplomatic response "out of step with the scale of the crisis".

Although the UN Security Council yesterday finally convened an emergency meeting on the situation in Myanmar, we are yet to get any information on the deliberations. We hope the members of the council will take the right decisions and inspire the world to unite against the military regime in Myanmar and support a return to democracy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

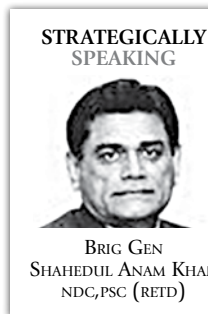
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Make e-commerce sustainable

For the last few years, the e-commerce market in Bangladesh has been enjoying rising popularity. Then came the coronavirus pandemic, creating an opportunity for online businesses to prosper further with the people leaning more towards online services. The question is: how long will this trend last? The comfort and convenience provided by e-commerce, together with the increasing access to social media, have already made customers accustomed to this mode of shopping. But making this business model sustainable is crucial. I urge the authorities to adopt policies conducive to this mode of business, which will help our country to prosper further in this digital age.

Lamisa Farhana, North South University

Two anniversary celebrations and people's participation



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

IT is a rare piece of good luck for one to witness two historic events in one's lifetime—the 50th anniversary of the nation's independence and the birth centenary of its founding father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. March 26, 2021 was one such day. While the Mujib centennial celebrations commenced last year, the celebratory events had to be cancelled because of the pandemic. However, a ten-day programme was chalked out to celebrate both occasions this year between March 17 and 26.

We have come a long way in the last 50 years. There is much to celebrate in terms of our economic achievements. We have outdone our neighbours in many socio-economic indices. We have weathered many storms, both literally and metaphorically, and emerged victorious. Bangladesh is cited as an example to emulate in poverty eradication by the media of—of all countries—the United States. Our GNP growth is an issue that the media and opposition in India use to snipe at their government.

These and many other things we can pride ourselves on and rejoice in—together, the administration and the people and all political parties. Regrettably, the "together" was nowhere to be seen during the celebrations, which were muted, understandably, because of the pandemic. In the fanfare of official programmes, the people were left out. On the grounds of VVIP security, the public in general and the political parties were prevented from holding their own programmes to celebrate the occasions.

The ten-days celebrations were attended by most of the leaders of our region. But the country wore a different picture with restrictions put on the movement of people, ostensibly because of the presence of foreign dignitaries in the capital. In fact, on March 26, the capital wore a lockdown look with most of the public and private transports off the roads. And all because people

were asked by the police to restrict their movement "unless urgent" during the 10-day state programme. The only people's activity visible were the protest gatherings organised by a religious group in several places in the country on March 26, to protest the Indian prime minister's visit, in which five people were killed when police opened fire on these protesters, who turned violent in several places in the country.

This is, of course, not the first time that

lieutenants of Bangabandhu that the government-in-exile steered the military and the political course of our Liberation War. What we often overlook, to the detriment of history and in a disservice to the succeeding generations, is the significance of the part played by these four—not only as the trusted lieutenants during the years preceding the war, but also as ones who provided the political leadership and coordinated the military operations during the nine months.

come it would have, in nine months or nine years, but not without the people's active support.

Bangabandhu belongs to Bangladesh, not to any one party. People may have differences of views with him as a political leader but nobody can afford not to accord him his rightful place, as the Father of the Nation, and his honorific—Bangabandhu—which predates December 16, 1971.

As we celebrate our victory and mourn



File photo of guests attending the inauguration of the 10-day celebrations of Mujib Borsho and golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence on March 17, 2021.

PHOTO: PID

foreign dignitaries visited Bangladesh. We have seen larger gatherings before, including a SAARC summit. But no such announcements on movement were made before, if our memory serves us right. Even the size of the police and security ancillaries was not as large as we have now. This time, political parties were warned by the DMP that organising any programme between March 17 and 26 would be considered an "anti-state" act.

Also absent in the celebrations were the four martyred national leaders: Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, Captain (Rtd.) Mansur Ali, and AHM Quamruzzaman. We should have been celebrating the life and contributions of these four heroes also. Undeniably, it is because of the political acumen and diplomatic skills of these very capable

And the one who stands out most is Tajuddin Ahmad as prime minister of the government-in-exile. All the four were so steadfast in their duty and loyalty to the nation and to Bangabandhu that they preferred death rather than compromise their principles. One has not come by any mention of these four leaders in any of the official flyers or supplements, official or those brought out by the print media.

We should not forget that the 1971 war was a people's war, the entire nine months, led by the able followers of Bangabandhu. And the entire nation was gelled together by them, except for a few who collaborated with the occupation army. And without the support from home and the acts of the guerrilla fighters operating from India, December 16, 1971 might have been long in coming, but

the martyred, we have to ask whether we have been able to fulfil the dreams of the Mukti Bahini and the martyrs. Have we been true to the four fundamental pillars on which the state is founded? Have the principles that led to the War of Liberation been honoured? Have the major pillars of a nation, democracy and democratic principles, become stronger or wilted under a type of democratic dispensation that has become the new norm in Bangladesh in the last decade? And last but not the least, what do the people feel after 50 years of independence? And these cannot be asked or answered by keeping the discussions on the War of Liberation narrowly focused.

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A plan that serves the people and a party that doesn't

US Republicans in a quandary over stimulus plan's huge popularity



ASHFAQ SWAPAN

"SOCIALISM is a scare word they have hurled at every advance the people have made in the last 20 years. Socialism is what they called public power. Socialism is what they called social security. Socialism is what they called farm price supports. Socialism is what they called bank deposit insurance. Socialism is what they called the growth of free and independent labour organisations. Socialism is their name for almost anything that helps all the people." — US President Harry S. Truman, lambasting Republicans in a speech delivered on October 10, 1952 in Syracuse, N.Y.

Over 70 years have passed since late US President Truman's trenchant observation, and Republicans are still at it. Only this time around, they aren't getting anywhere with it.

No sooner had the current US President Joe Biden and his Democratic allies in the US Senate and House steered through Congress a massive USD 1.9 trillion pandemic relief bill than the usual suspects started crying foul.

Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, the Republican minority leader, dismissed it as "a laundry list

of left-wing priorities that predate the pandemic and do not meet the needs of American families."

Well, it turns out that American families beg to differ. McCarthy is only half right. A lot of the priorities do predate the pandemic, but polls indicate American families overwhelmingly support it, including substantial chunks of Republicans.

A generous, compassionate bill to address one of the most serious health

response to the passage of Biden's bill: "We are about to have a boom. And if we do have a boom, it will have absolutely nothing to do with this USD 1.9 trillion."

This caused the *Politico* newspaper to make a wicked observation: "As a message, this amounts to 'Things Would've Been Just As Great Without It'—an even less appealing bumper sticker than Barney Frank's."

Analysts like to say that in US politics, if you are explaining, you are losing.



File photo of a man making his way past the US Capitol in Washington, United States.

PHOTO: REUTERS

and economic crises the nation has gone through in recent times strongly resonates with the people. Although McCarthy did not fail to hurl the pejorative "socialism" term to attack Biden's plan, it's not clear it cut much ice.

American voters may have a notoriously short memory, but even they can hardly have forgotten the massive tax cuts for the rich by former President Donald Trump, leaving in its wake a massive deficit.

Democrats had learned a bitter lesson during former President Barack Obama's inadequate stimulus package. Erstwhile Democratic Congressman Barney Frank of Massachusetts had wryly quipped then: "Things would have sucked even worse without us' doesn't make for a good bumper sticker for Democrats."

How the tables have turned today. Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky offered this pallid

The Biden plan is that rarity in US—it offers massive support for Americans in the bottom half of the economic ladder, where the political system is skewed towards serving plutocrats.

"Next to civil rights, voting rights and open housing in the '60s, and maybe next to the Affordable Care Act—maybe—this is the biggest thing Congress has done since the New Deal," said Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio. "People more and more realise that government can be on their side," he said, "and now it is."

The problem for Republicans is that for all the hyperpolarisation in the country, people are beginning to realise it. What's not to like about a bill that slashes poverty, gives a stimulus to the neediest, gives billions to schools and cash-strapped cities and local governments?

The old Republican playbook does not work so much anymore because one of the major lessons of the horrifying

Covid-19 pandemic is that government is not just necessary; good and efficient governance is critical in times of crisis. Countries that best addressed the pandemic were those with a solid commitment to science, a robust public health infrastructure and a willingness to provide economic support for its most needy.

As the demographics of the Republican Party has begun to skew more towards working-class whites, this is a notion that finds increasing resonance.

The other setback for the Republican Party is that four years of Trump have blunted its intellectual rigour.

"At a deeper level, Republicans may simply have lost the ability to take policy seriously," economist Paul Krugman observed in his column in *The New York Times*. "(This), I'd suggest, inhibited their ability to effectively oppose Biden's rescue plan. They couldn't do the hard thinking required to settle on a plausible line of attack."

So, as the US has passed one of the largest stimulus plans in our lifetimes, Republicans preferred to talk instead about efforts to curb the popular children's author Dr Seuss.

In fact, not for the first time, Republicans are seeking refuge in incendiary cultural and racial issues to sustain their political support. In a hyperpolarised nation, where its rightwing media allies are only too happy to fan the fires of white grievance, this remains a powerful political tool.

However, Biden is no fool. Thomas Edsall offers a succinct overview of his strategy in *The New York Times*: "The Biden administration appears to have adopted a two-pronged strategy to reduce the corrosive impact of hot-button social, cultural and racial issues: first by inundating the electorate with a flood of cash via the USD 1.9 trillion Covid relief act, and second by refusing to engage fractious issues in public, calculating that deprived of oxygen, their strength will fade."

It is too early to say whether he will ultimately prevail. But don't let his no-drama, governance-is-boring-façade fool you. This president could well end up making one of the most consequential US presidents, right up there with Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan.

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