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Give fresh relief to the poor

Surge in Covid cases and commodity prices is too much for them to bear

IT has been a year since the Covid-19 pandemic began and instead of letting up, the situation has been getting worse recently. While the number of people infected daily hits record new heights, prices of essential commodities in the country's kitchen markets have simultaneously been rising, causing all kinds of suffering for the already beleaguered poor.

Due to all the special steps that had been taken over the past year to counter this extraordinary global threat, economies around the world, including ours, have suffered badly. According to some estimates that came out last year, the pandemic has created somewhere between 17.5 and 20 million new poor in the country—that figure is likely higher now. And, according to a UNDP study, the poverty rate in the urban areas of Bangladesh increased three-fold during the crisis period, mainly due to a massive number of people in cities and towns losing their jobs or experiencing a reduction in their salaries.

Given that this was the reality even before the most recent wave of Covid-19 jolted the nation, one can only guess how much the poor are suffering now. Add to that the rising prices of soybean oil, onions, rice, lentil, sugar, garlic, potato, chicken and many other commodities, and you have a situation where people are having to go without certain food items like meat for months, while others are struggling to simply feed themselves at all.

In this dire time, the government urgently needs to come up with special targeted measures to help the poor. By now, all the aid given to the poor through the government's previous stimulus package must have been spent by them in order to just survive the last few months. Now that things are looking down again, the government must urgently respond to the situation and provide fresh relief to the poor at the earliest possible date.

Partial lockdown can't be the only solution to Covid-19 surge

Govt must initiate holistic policies to contain the virus

ACCORDING to a report in this daily on Thursday, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 has recommended "partial or modified" lockdown of "high-risk" areas in Bangladesh. The NTAC chief informed the media that this would involve identifying and isolating Covid-19 patients and ensuring that the patients and their whole families remain in quarantine while they receive treatment. So far, Dhaka, Narayanganj and Chattogram have been classified as high-risk zones and the four districts of Rangamati, Rajshahi, Rajbari and Narsingdi have been classified as medium-risk zones.

Last year, we saw the detrimental impacts of a nationwide lockdown in the wake of Covid-19, especially on low-income, subsistence workers and workers who are dependent on daily wages. As such, the idea of a partial lockdown in high-risk zones sounds like a good one, at least on the surface. However, there are a number of issues with this plan, the most obvious being that many Covid-19 patients are asymptomatic, at least in the first few days of infection, and could easily transmit the virus before they even realise that they are infected. While the isolation and quarantine of Covid-19 patients should, of course, be practiced, there are a number of other steps that the government needs to take to stop the transmission of the virus in these high-risk zones, including proper implementation of the recent 18-point directives to ensure that large gatherings are no longer allowed and that all health and safety protocols are being maintained.

The number of Covid-19 cases in Bangladesh has surged over the last three weeks, but the decisions taken by the authorities have so far seemed unplanned and haphazard. The hasty decision to half the passenger capacity of public transport and hike bus fares by 60 percent, without enforcing clear directives on the operating capacities of offices and other workplaces, almost all of which are operating at fully capacity, is an example of this. The end result is that during these difficult times, the sufferings of ordinary people have only been exacerbated.

We agree that urgent actions need to be taken in the Covid-19 hotspots in Bangladesh. However, we urge the authorities to ensure that these actions are taken swiftly but not hastily—there must be a coordinated and systemic plan with regard to these partial lockdowns and they must be enforced properly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rehabilitate the intellectually disabled

People with intellectual disabilities are often found to be living in dire straits in almost all parts of the country. Often, they consume food found in dustbins or such unhygienic conditions. In many cases, women with intellectual disabilities are taken advantage of by criminals. Although these helpless people receive limited support from some voluntary organisations, without bold initiatives taken by the government, their living conditions will not change much. I urge the authorities to initiate rehabilitation programmes to bring back these marginalised people into the mainstream of Bangladeshi society.

Abu Faruk, Bandarban



BLOWING IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

COVID-19 is back and it is back with a vengeance, as if to puncture the false confidence we were assuming about the antidotes. The rate of being cured made some of us think of the disease as nothing more than a regular flu, some kind of media sensationalism and corporate conspiracy. We forgot the way bodies were dumped in the streets, family members were abandoned, and ventilators were not to be found last year, this time around. We started herding in parties and in public places as if our proximity would ensure immunity and consequent indemnity. Our zestful celebrations will dethrone the crown-shaped virus. We did not hesitate to display our collective irresponsibilities on social media.

Maybe one of these days, we will have enough "netlore"—stories, memes, jokes and urban legends circulated over the internet—to laugh away the disease with its unbearable lightness of being, just like stories of the First World War superseded the Spanish Flu. People hardly talk about the 1918 pandemic that killed 50 million people worldwide against the 8.5 million people who died in the Great War. There are so many war stories to tell us about human courage, resilience, betrayal, love and hate. The sickness during the war, in contrast, appears to be a footnote in the grand scheme of history, and a reference point for our ongoing havoc.

We have lost more than a year to this invisible enemy. Soon enough, we would like to forget this experience like a cricketing tour to Kiwi land where we saw black caps all over us. Surely, there are benefits in forgetting too. Neuroscientists believe that forgetting is an essential memory management system that sets aside unused memories to store new memories. This is called the active model of forgetting; the passive model is suggestive of biological decay of neurons that happen naturally.

But the way we are forgetting what we are preaching during this pandemic is tantamount to passive aggression. The routine circulars that inundate the media show that there is no coordination among different branches of administration. The tally of deaths is on the rise, the infection rate is on the rise. The curve is showing no sign of flatness as it swings back to climb new heights. The human miseries behind the pitiless data, however, remain unforgettable.

The forgetfulness-remembrance binary is best evident in our administrative

paradoxes. How can one ministry say there will be no exams, while there is another ministry taking MBBS admission tests? How can one ministry say there will be no public gathering, while there is another one arranging national events? What kind of message does this forgetfulness suggest: a damage in the ageing brain or a memory management to keep the system running? On the glorious golden jubilee of the nation, all our focus has been on remembering.

and survey questionnaires. Yet there has been a ban on exams till May 23. Our job is to take the horses to the riverbank, but not to let them drink water. How will we bring the semester system to a fruition if there is no exam? Your guess is as good as mine.

The rest of the world has successfully designed and devised various online protocols for assessments. If one can adopt to the virtual teaching and learning model, then why can't one do the same

forewarning and contingency plan.

We forgot to address the social inequalities that allowed the disease to spread fast. The privileged group that cursed the protesters occupying the streets or demanding basic transportation services or livelihoods, forgot the others who endanger their lives to be exposed to the wrath of the disease while being on the streets. There are structural discriminations that lie deep within the system that needed



Families are once again rushing across the city, desperately searching for oxygen cylinders and hospital beds for their affected loved ones.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Ironically, it seems forgetfulness is creeping into the system. What lessons have we learnt in the last one year? What algorithm did we use to predict the rate of infection?

The lack of sincerity has made many of the good efforts that controlled the disease in its early phase become futile and meaningless. Imagine all your health service frontline workers being forced to be in a crowded examination hall for proctorial duties, knowing that the contamination rate has shot over 22 percent. Who will treat you if these service providers are affected?

In the last one year, many of the educational institutions have learned to adapt to the online system. Schools, colleges and universities are trying to deliver lessons. I do not know of any initiative to monitor the process—at least in the institution I am affiliated with—from the government level, apart from sending occasional lip service

with assessment? In the private system, the entirety of assessment/evaluation is done by individual teachers. We have relied on their professionalism, regardless of the examination modalities. So why stop now? Because students will cheat. How about the government decision to pass everyone without any exam whatsoever? It is interesting the way we selectively remember and forget.

We remembered to increase the fare of buses, forgetting that the coronavirus safety protocol was never lifted in the first place. We forgot to come up with safety gadgets or protective gear for ride sharing services during this entire year. And suddenly we remembered that strangers should not ride in such close proximity. Then, the bike riders and passengers blocked the city roads to remind us that it was inhumane to stop services or clamp extra charges without any

to be addressed to make our celebrations meaningful.

We also need to remember the ones who chalked the disease up to be media sensationalism, downplaying the intensity of the disease. The callousness, forgetfulness and negligence are hurting us all.

Last week, I received an email from a designer who was supposed to deliver a web product for me: all five of his team members are affected, with two losing their family members. I am trying to forget the harsh email that I sent earlier to remind him of his professional lapses. The sooner we can forget this pandemic, the better. But let us not forget the ones who we have lost during this battle. And let us not forget: it ain't over 'til it's over.

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The role of exports in fuelling continued growth in Bangladesh

SYED M AHSAN and S QUAMRUL AHSAN

A recent report in the *Wall Street Journal* observes that Bangladesh's economic growth, while stellar of late, lags behind that of much faster growing economies like Cambodia and Vietnam. It highlights the overt reliance of Bangladesh on ready-made garments (RMG) in fuelling its export growth and the palpable absence of exposure to regional trading blocks such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the like. We aim to shed further light on the primacy of exports in fuelling continued growth of output per capita and the policy framework compatible with this goal.

One concern that growth economists have been grappling with recently relates to the spectre of premature de-industrialisation, focused on, among others, by economist Dani Rodrik in several writings. The export slump in India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka over the past decade may be presumed, at least in part, to be early signs of this phenomenon. The point that these economists make is that sustained high growth in per capita output may not be feasible by relying on a growing "service" sector and bypassing manufacturing. Awkwardly, many lower-middle income (LMI) countries appear to be headed that way, with industrialisation peaking at a relatively small share of GDP, say around 20 percent—and worse, at a relatively low level of per capita income than experienced by early industrialisers like South Korea.

Just by looking at South Asia, it appears that so far, Bangladesh, the lone outlier in its company, has bucked the apparent de-industrialisation trend over the past decade. Indeed, when measured by the widely used "share of value-added in manufacturing" standard, Bangladesh has steadily advanced since around 1996.

What about Cambodia and Vietnam? Unlike the latter two, Bangladesh's manufacturing value-added share in GDP appears to have evaded any significant decline in the aftermath of the contagion fuelled by the US "sub-prime" financial crisis of 2007-8. Both Cambodia and Vietnam succeeded in steering themselves out of the impasse in short order, although still lagging behind Bangladesh on this front. Vietnam's debacle was sharper owing largely to its greater integration with its export destination countries. These three thus appear to offer a glimpse of the possibility that industrialisation may

continue to grow, providing the necessary impetus to sustained stronger economic growth down the line.

While the above narrative holds out promise of further industrialisation and exports, and hence continued growth in per capita income, the issue of Bangladesh's narrow export basket has drawn a lot of attention. How can Bangladesh exploit its vast human resources to forge ahead in faster industrialisation in sectors where it can achieve strong comparative advantage vis-a-vis other LMI countries that are similarly endowed? Here, the contrast with Vietnam is stark indeed; "clothing" amounts to 84 percent of Bangladeshi exports, while for Vietnam, it is a mere 11.7 percent. Moreover, under the WTO rubric of "machinery and transport equipment" (MAMT: encompassing

(namely RMG, jute/jute manufactures, tea, fish/seafood and leather), only in RMG has this pattern strengthened over time. Competitiveness in the remainder has stagnated or stayed stable. While these are important findings, it is cold comfort that Bangladesh may not see a major decline in its quantum of clothing exports over the immediate future.

What is the way forward? How can competitiveness be innovated upon, say in "technology" sectors? Growth economists generally agree (although not necessarily on the order of precedence) on the role of technology, human capital, domestic institutions and logistics. While comparable high quality data is not available along some of these dimensions, a few remarks are in order. On the human capital front, the World Bank Human Capital Index

enhancing technological innovations are hard to come by. Access to trading blocks (regional or even bilateral), we believe, will open up major scope to facilitate technology transfer via foreign direct investment and joint ventures. Sadly, progress on the ground has not been much to go by. While Bangladesh is a founding member of the South Asian Free Trade Association (SAFTA), political tension within the bloc has rendered it dysfunctional, although Bangladesh and India have engaged in some bilateral initiatives of late. SAFTA intra-regional trade stands, according to World Bank sources, at a meagre five percent of its total trade, compared to 25 percent for ASEAN. Free trade within the entire South Asian region would have allowed these countries, largely exporting the same broader basket, to further entrench their own comparative advantage, perhaps along more disaggregated categories within the exportables, and compete more effectively on the world stage. However, the overall gain would still be modest due to the small magnitude of internal trade, its limited diversity, and therefore the limited potential.

On institutions and logistics, a no-brainer, South Asians lag behind other, more dynamic regions. Improvements in domestic infrastructure, IT connectivity, rule of law and export procedures can all be important, some of which are captured—for example, by the World Bank's "ease of doing business" (EODB) measure—but have been painstakingly slow. While Vietnam's rank went up from about 100 to 70 over the past decade, Bangladesh still languishes in the bottom quartile of the 190 countries in the dataset (ranked 168 in 2019).

Turning to the financing of trade, much more needs to be done to develop the capital market so that small and medium-sized firms have access to adequate credit, allowing firms to freely enter and exit the competitive domestic economy, which would provide an impetus to innovations. Firm heterogeneity within an industry would signal dynamism in the sector, yielding product diversity and quality by engaging in both process and product innovations.

In brief, short of major innovations along the lines delineated above, sustained growth of output per person cannot be predicated upon a bland routine of augmenting the physical capital stock and the labour force.

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RMG is the main export category where Bangladesh's international competitiveness has strengthened over time.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

telecom equipment, integrated circuits and electronic equipment), or what can loosely be referenced as "technology goods", Bangladesh's share is less than one percent throughout the past several decades. In contrast, for Vietnam, MAMT has emerged as the mainstay of its export growth for many years now, reaching 43 percent of total merchandise exports in 2019. Even Cambodia, small as it is vis-a-vis Bangladesh, has seen its MAMT share rise to between 7-8 percent in 2020, even though it started from scratch in 2000. There are strong reasons to believe that most of these technology exports out of Cambodia and Vietnam are labour-intensive in nature.

A recent study by Rakhal Sarker, published in *Bangladesh Development Studies*, finds that while Bangladesh continues to enjoy international competitiveness in all five of its principal export categories

(HCI) for 2020 shows Bangladesh slipping a little since 2017. The overall index fell from 0.48 in 2017 to 0.46 in 2020, the only country to fare this way among the South Asian countries referenced above. While the Cambodian experience was stable at 0.49, Vietnam, already placed much higher, had advanced steadily from 0.67 to 0.69 over the period. This is not an encouraging sign and calls for well thought out new investments in human capital. It would appear that Bangladesh's schooling effort over the past several decades has targeted "enrolment" and then "completion", but not what is learnt in the classroom. It does not participate in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) targeted at 15-year-olds. Why not? India has just signed on.

In the absence of significant research and development spending, productivity