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Poor people ravaged by pandemic fallout

Govt must prioritise marginalised groups in recovery plans

THERE has never been any doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic would reinforce economic inequalities in the country as the poor, marginalised groups would be disproportionately affected. Now a new study, released on Thursday, shows that not only has that been the case, but also government aid packages, meant to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, didn't reach most of their intended beneficiaries either. The study corroborates the findings of earlier case studies in this regard. Importantly, it offers disaggregated data on different indicators of financial hardship based on the surveys of 10 marginalised groups—including people from chars, haors, coastal and slum areas; Dalits; indigenous people; people with disabilities; micro, small, and medium entrepreneurs; and returned migrant workers. The results show how these people had to endure income loss, reduce food consumption, reach for their savings and take out loans to cope with the pandemic fallout, despite the government's promise of help.

For example, the study says, only 37 percent of the surveyed marginalised households received government support. It also says that about 79 percent of the households experienced financial hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic. Of them, only 21.5 percent—or a little over one in five households—managed to recover, taking an average of five months to do so; the remaining 78.5 percent are expected to take an average of 13 months to recover. Four out of five households cut down expenses on food, while 64.5 percent of households cut down non-food expenses. The study further said that 20.8 percent of households had to use their savings and 47.9 percent had to take out loans, mostly between April and May last year. Also, at least one member of 70 percent of the households lost their jobs or had to shut down businesses.

These figures are quite alarming, if not shocking, given the government's persistently poor response to this pandemic since its beginning. The poor and marginalised have not only suffered massive financial hardship and saw what little savings they had used up, they are also staring down the barrel of what can be a very painful and protracted debt trap. The ill-planned lockdown imposed recently will only add to their woes. The situation calls for a critical rethinking of the government's strategy for the poor during the pandemic. The government must roll out new financial incentives and food aid programmes for the marginalised groups, ensuring they reach their beneficiaries this time. With the budget season nearing, it should also chalk out specific and expanded allocations under the Social Safety Net programmes. Experts have also suggested forming a mid-term national plan connecting local administrations and NGOs to remedy the situation. What the authorities need to understand is that their business-as-usual approach didn't help before. Neither will it help this time around.

Frontline health workers should be paid urgently

Govt must keep its promise

RIGHT after the coronavirus pandemic started, many healthcare professionals, mostly from public hospitals, started to live at different hotels to protect their families from possible Covid-19 infections. Later, the government turned some of its training centres into accommodation facilities for Covid-19 healthcare providers and also, declared that those who will not be able to avail these facilities will start receiving daily allowances to cover their additional living costs from July 1, 2020. Unfortunately, a report published by The Daily Star on April 8, 2021 shows that the majority of the public healthcare workers, who have been battling the deadly virus from the frontlines, are yet to receive their due incentives.

According to the Covid-19 guidelines, healthcare providers will have to treat their patients for 15 days a month and then remain in quarantine for the next 15 days. Keeping this in mind, the government issued a circular stating that doctors, nurses and other healthcare staff in the capital's public hospitals will receive Tk 2,000, Tk 1,200 and Tk 800, respectively, as daily allowances for the period during which they will stay in quarantine, while the doctors, nurses and other healthcare staff working outside of Dhaka will receive Tk 1,800, Tk 1,000 and Tk 650, respectively. While the total number of healthcare professionals providing Covid-19 treatment at public hospitals across the country is at 23,285 (according to a DS report on November 29, 2020), the aforementioned report mentions that only 1,800 of them from 14 hospitals are receiving the monetary assistance at this moment.

We urge the government to uphold its promise to the frontline medical practitioners in the battle against Covid-19 and to make sure that the incentives reach all of them as soon as possible. With the ongoing surge in both infection and death rates, keeping up the morale of the healthcare professionals is essential, and these incentives will definitely help in doing that.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We must contain the virus

The negligence being displayed by people when it comes to maintaining social distancing in public places is disappointing. Despite the new wave of the virus hitting the country hard, most people seem not to be taking it seriously.

We must contain the spread of the virus as soon as possible, before things take a turn for the worse. In that regard, the authorities must strictly enforce the health guidelines and people must be made aware of the dangers of not complying with them.

Shanto Islam, Rupnagar, Mirpur

The Colours of Life

BLOWN' IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THE cargo vessel involved in a hit and run incident in Narayanganj on Sunday, leading to the capsizing of a passenger launch that killed at least 34 people, was seized at a dock in Gazaria, Munshiganj. Three days after the incident, the Coast Guard there found the vessel anchored near its station and handed it over to the River Police. The vessel, however, by that time had changed its colour—MV SKL-3 was no longer wearing the colour in which it appeared in the video footage ploughing through a small launch. It received a fresh coat of paint as if to hide the stains of killing 34 people earlier. The harrowing tales of the survivors and the horrid sight of dead bodies will evoke our sympathies and haunt our memories for some time. Our newspapers will cry havoc, pointing fingers at the lack of rules and safety, supervision and surveillance, or moral and judicial responsibilities. Then again, when there will be a similar incident in the future (not unlikely during this stormy season), the media will belch in satisfaction, crying another round of havoc, "told ya"! The mundane routine of such tragedy stops me from being sentimental. What intrigues me in this tragedy is neither the villainous vessel nor the hapless mass, but the grand scheme of changing colours.

The errant cargo vessel showed up in a new colour and anchored itself by the dock of a law enforcing agency. It tried to camouflage itself by hiding in plain sight like in a pirate movie. Given the owner's political colour, such positioning is not only daring, but outright stupid and irresponsible. Maybe the vessel thought it would be able to shift the light from itself with the passing of time and the changing of colour will give it some necessary breathing space. In the animal kingdom, chameleons are reputed for such changing of colour as they try to blend into their surroundings. These reptiles are known for releasing and retracting pigments in their skin cells to express their emotions. Recent studies, however, show that underneath the superficial layer of chameleon skin, there are some cells with guanine crystals. Chameleons have the ability to vary the space between these crystals. The crystals can both create and reduce space. The change of colours in a chameleon happens when different wavelengths of light reflect off these moving crystals.

In other words, this change of colour is but an optical illusion. We humans too can play with the way we allow the external lights to play with us. But there are moments, when the illusion, rather the make-up, wears off and our true colours are revealed and exposed.

For instance, the vessel belonging to a people's representative in the national parliament did not bother to act responsibly after the accident. Had the cargo not tried to flee the spot in a

whiff of the secret meeting is anybody's guess; neither he nor his partner were prepared for the whirlwind that followed. By his own admission, the woman he accompanied was his second wife whom he had married after his friend had divorced her. The devil is in the details—the more they try to paint the truth, the shadier the facts appear! The maulana muscled through the mob by conjuring his stick-wielding supporters and rescued himself from immediate humiliation.

colourless life in lockdown. Some of us responded, yelling, "it's a honey trap"; many others muttered, chuckling, "honey, you're trapped!" Our actions and reactions during any extraordinary time show our true colours.

The other incident that coloured our imagination last week involved a man who reportedly killed his wife in his Gulshan residence and tried to hide the murder as a car accident. He rammed his car into the walls in the Hatirjhil area,



Sabit Al Hasan, the launch which sank in the Shitalakkhya in Narayanganj.

PHOTO: SANAD SAHA

hurry, most of the lives could have been saved! They could have helped rescue the accident victims. Of course, the owner was not navigating the vessel. The ones doing so perhaps acted impulsively, but the instruction to change the colour of the vessel is a post facto decision that must have had top level administrative instruction. The painted ship anchored idly by the coast guard shows that life isn't a digital palette of colours that can be changed with an airbrush, particularly when there is a surveillance system in place.

The other incident involving human colours is that of primal lust. A religio-political leader was caught red-handed by some local moral policemen when he went on a tryst. How the mob got a

But his reputation was smeared as his personal life got portrayed in full colour.

The Internet became viral with leaked phone conversations involving the man and the woman. The crystals under the skins started shifting places. Different wavelengths of light are being thrown over the incident as the bioscope turns into a kaleidoscope. Fifty shades of fact and fiction appear and disappear and the superficial veil is removed. The "second" wife disappears and appears as a mother defending her outing to her angry sons. The man with a "second" wife keeps his composure and poses as a defiant husband instructing his "first" wife on how to handle the nosy newsmen. The story gets painted over and over again, adding colour to our Covid-19 induced

claiming that his sick wife who was in the backseat died from the impact. Police now knows, thanks to CCTV footage, that he actually put the body of his dead wife in his blue car before heading off. The colour of the car matches the pain that it ensued. We don't know the colour of the domestic violence that led to the killing of a mother of an eighteen-month child. We don't know at what heated moment the man tried to act on his impulses to paint his murder as an accident. All we know is that the colour of the car is blue, and that it has witnessed the colours of life in all its shades. How dare we paint it in black and white!

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Air quality in Bangladesh: A matter of great concern



ABDUL MATIN

HOPEFULLY, we learned many lessons from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. One of them is the importance of oxygen for our survival. Normally it is available free of cost. As a matter of fact, we take the supply of oxygen for granted. Recently, however, we heard stories of Covid-19 patients with breathing difficulties moving from one hospital to another in search of oxygen. At one stage, oxygen became so scarce that many patients had to pay tens of thousands of taka as hospital bills only for the supply of oxygen. Yet we are alarmed to find how we have been polluting the air that is our main source of oxygen supply.

Air quality in Bangladesh was the worst in the world, while its capital Dhaka, was the second most polluted city in 2020, in terms of air pollution, said a global report (DS, March 18, 2021). "South Asia remained the most polluted region of the world with Bangladesh, India and Pakistan sharing 42 of the 50 most polluted cities worldwide," according to IQAir's global air quality data platform in its World Air Quality Report 2020. The three countries just mentioned, are also at the top of the list of countries with the worst air quality.

The report published recently said that the average annual PM 2.5 concentrations in Bangladesh was 77.1 microgrammes per cubic metre (mcg/m³) of air, which is seven times above WHO's exposure recommendation. PM refers to particulate matter in air. It consists of a mixture of solid and liquid particles suspended in the air. While particles with a diameter of 10 microns (micrometres) or less, denoted as PM 10, can penetrate and lodge deep inside the lungs, the smaller particles with a diameter of 2.5 microns or less, denoted as PM 2.5, are the more damaging to health as they can penetrate the lung barrier and enter the blood system.

Researchers from IQAir, a global air quality information and Swiss-based tech company, analysed pollution data from 106 countries, specifically measuring PM 2.5 that can cause serious health risks. "An estimated 13-22 percent of deaths in this region are linked to the health effects of air pollution exposure, with associated estimated costs equating to 7.4 percent of the region's GDP," the report said. Obviously, the cost due to air pollution is huge.

Chronic exposure to particulate matter (PM 10 and PM 2.5) can cause cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, as well as lung cancer. There is a close correlation between exposure to high concentrations of small particulates (PM 10 and PM 2.5) and increased mortality or morbidity. Conversely, when concentrations of small and fine particulates are reduced, related mortality will also go down. This correlation helps policymakers to plan the population's health improvements if air pollution is reduced.

Small particulate pollution has health impacts even at very low concentrations.



A child walks along a dusty road in Dhaka.

PHOTO: AFP

Therefore, the WHO 2005 guideline limits aim to achieve the lowest achievable concentrations of PM. The air quality guideline values for PM 2.5 are 10 mcg/m³ for annual mean and 25 mcg/m³ for 24-hour mean. The corresponding values for PM 10 are 20 mcg/m³ and 50 mcg/m³.

According to the report, only 24 out of 106 monitored countries met the WHO's annual guidelines for PM 2.5 in 2020, even though air quality improved globally due to the Covid-19 pandemic. "The year 2020 brought an unexpected dip in air pollution. In 2021, we will likely see an increase in air pollution due to human activity again," said Frank Hammes, CEO of IQAir. Here we find a correlation between air quality and the Covid-19 pandemic. Human activities were curtailed significantly in many countries due to the lockdowns. This means that there were less discharge of exhaust from automobiles and fossil fuel based power plants, fewer pollutants from

industries and less construction works. Obviously, these are the major sources of air pollution in most countries. Taking lessons from the pandemic, we can plan to reduce the air pollution in Bangladesh, if we take the following steps:

i) Introduce mass transport facilities in the major cities as early as possible. This will reduce the number of automobiles on the streets, ease traffic jam, increase the average speed of vehicles and thus reduce emission of exhaust gases. ii) Ensure that all automobiles which run on petrol or diesel use catalytic converters to reduce pollutants from the exhaust gases. iii) Drastically reduce import duties on electric

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bricks in construction of buildings and use concrete hollow blocks instead in order to reduce burning of bricks around localities. Concrete hollow blocks provide better insulation against heat or cold than burned solid bricks. x) For all outdoor activities, encourage people to wear masks for protection against PM 10 and PM 2.5.

It may be noted that air quality of major cities around the world is constantly monitored by IQAir and the information is available online around the clock. It is worth noting that the air quality of Dhaka improved significantly on March 26, 2021. Dhaka moved from being the second most polluted city to 12th position on that day because it was a national holiday in Bangladesh. Even with reduced air pollution, it was classified as "unhealthy". On the following day, it again jumped to the second position, next only to Beijing, and was classified as "very unhealthy". This means we have to go a long way to clean our air.

It should be remembered that when the outside air is polluted, the indoor air is also almost equally as polluted. To reduce indoor pollution, commercial air purifiers are available in the market. Air purifiers provide good relief to patients suffering from respiratory ailments. Uses of air purifiers should be made compulsory in closed environments like shopping malls, community centres, cinema and theatre halls and other closed places where large gatherings of people take place.

These steps, if undertaken seriously, will hopefully reduce air pollution significantly and help to decrease both mortality and morbidity rates due to respiratory diseases. Lastly, we must remember that the air quality of Bangladesh has reached a stage that it will be suicidal for us not to take the necessary steps seriously and urgently, to reduce air pollution to an acceptable level, as recommended by WHO.

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