

Saving the ultra-poor during lockdown is vital

Govt must learn from past mistakes, ensure aid benefits reach the poor

AS economic pain from the coronavirus fall-out continues to bite the country, it's the poor and ultra-poor who stand to suffer the most. This was true during the first nationwide lockdown (or "general holiday") last year as it is on the eve of the second, discounting the recent force of a lockdown imposed on April 5. What will happen to the poor and marginalised when the "all-out" lockdown goes into effect and they are forced to stay indoors and wait out the second wave—provided that's still the goal? The one-week lockdown, starting tomorrow, will likely be extended, and the havoc it will wreak on the poor is not hard to predict. Unfortunately, we haven't yet seen any policy initiative or announcement in this regard. If our experience of the first lockdown is any indication, the consequence of delayed or inadequate action will be disastrous.

It's worth recalling the government's performance during the first lockdown. Last year, the government had allocated Tk 1,258 crore under a stimulus package aimed to provide the poor with Tk 2,500 each. Although it initially planned to provide cash incentives to 50 lakh families under this package, only 35 lakh families reportedly received the incentives. And the initiative had to be stopped midway following allegations of anomalies over the list of beneficiaries. Also, an OMS rice programme, undertaken to allow the poor in urban areas to buy rice at Tk 10 per kg, was abandoned because it was not viable without a list of beneficiaries. The result of such failures and inefficiencies—according to a survey by the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) in November and December—is that 42 percent of 5,577 households surveyed went below the poverty line. Three words can sum up the government's response: casual, uncoordinated and unaccountable.

We can't keep repeating the mistakes of our past. Experts, therefore, have urged the government to come up with a comprehensive action plan this time that pays equal attention to virus containment and softening of its economic blow. For the poor under lockdown, and facing threats of income loss and starvation, it means having food on their table as well as enough cash support to meet other basic necessities. On Sunday, during a pre-budget virtual meeting with the finance minister, economists have made various suggestions including opening a lockdown-time hotline service through which ultra-poor people and marginalised groups facing food crisis can communicate their sufferings, so the authorities can take prompt steps to get food to them. Other steps include sending them cash incentives digitally. Economists have also stressed that more allocations should be made for the health sector, especially in the tertiary- and mid-levels, in the upcoming budget, with the overarching aim to save lives and livelihoods.

This is not a big ask, nor is it unimplementable for a well-meaning and well-prepared administration. In light of the reality we face now, we expect to see a quick, efficient and judicious response from the government based on the lessons of its past mistakes and in consultation with public health experts and economists. The government must ensure that the benefits of any financial or food aid programme it undertakes reach their intended beneficiaries, and are not robbed by corrupt officials and public representatives.

Covid-19 testing must be ramped up immediately

Coordinated efforts from the govt are required

ACCORDING to a report published by *The Daily Star* yesterday, Bangladesh ranks lowest among the South Asian countries in terms of Covid-19 testing, with only 30 tests per 1,000 people. Yesterday, there were 7,201 confirmed cases against 34,968 tests, which takes the current positivity rate to 20.59 percent.

According to the WHO, a positive test rate between three to 12 percent is indicative of sufficient testing. The aforementioned DS report highlights health experts suggesting doubling of the current number of daily tests, until the positivity rate comes down to six or seven percent. It is widely known that testing and containment of a virus are closely linked. While adequate testing gives a true picture of infections and facilitates subsequent measures that are of great importance to fight an epidemic, insufficient levels of testing makes it difficult to identify infected individuals and their locations, trace their close contacts, contain the infection by quarantining infected individuals and provide medical support if required, and isolate others who may have come in contact with infected individuals. Thus, we urge the authorities to listen to the experts and act immediately to increase the rate of Covid-19 testing in Bangladesh.

There are some underlying reasons behind the low number of Covid-19 tests, the most obvious being the high costs of testing in most private facilities and the shortage of testing kits and long queues in the public ones. Another report published in *The Daily Star* on December 19, 2020 showed that while there are a total of 137 Covid-19 testing facilities across the country, the testing capacity had decreased due to low turnout. The report pointed towards the unwillingness of people in getting tested and insufficient awareness-raising campaigns conducted by the government.

The government has to reinstate its awareness-building campaigns to influence people in getting tested. The number of testing facilities has to be increased and an adequate amount of testing kits has to be ensured. Most importantly, as the ongoing coronavirus crisis has had severe economic repercussions, especially for the most marginalised, the government must ensure that Covid-19 tests are made available at highly subsidised rates so that economic hardships do not hold people back from getting tested. Without the true picture of how widespread the current transmission of Covid-19 is, it will be extremely difficult for the authorities to get the second wave of the pandemic under control.

Dhaka city's unbridled expansion

Which direction is it going to grow in the future?



NAWSHAD AHMED

DHAKA has been going through an unprecedented level of urban growth during the last five decades. As the capital of newly independent Bangladesh in 1971, Dhaka had a population of only 1.5 million, whereas it currently has an estimated population of 21.7 million. Along with its population, the city has also grown spatially in all directions. However, the total built-up area of the city has not kept pace with its population growth. Natural population growth and higher levels of in-migration, fuelled by improved economic status of the people on the one hand and rural poverty on the other, are behind an average four percent annual growth of Dhaka's

role, since human habitation usually follows transportation networks. The roads and bridges built on the Buriganga and Dhaleswari rivers have resulted in massive development of residential and commercial establishments in both sides of the rivers. The waterways built in Jinjira and Keraniganj have helped in small-scale industrialisation and urban expansion as well. The export-oriented industrial establishments in Narayanganj, Kanchpur and Siddhirganj have extended development in the south-eastern part of Dhaka as goods are transported through the highway to Chattogram port. The low lying areas are being filled up and built on to enable establishment of residential buildings, various industrial enterprises and service facilities. But most of these are happening in an unplanned manner.

The concentration of industries starting from Mirpur, Ashulia and continuing through to Tongi, Joydevpur, Gazipur and Konabari, is influencing growth of

and infrastructure, assuming lower density expansion compared to the already built-up areas, which have been spoiled by high population density, traffic congestion, lack of essential services and environmental degradation. Our sad experience with the unplanned parts of the city—with narrow lanes, high rise residential buildings, and a mixture of educational, health, commercial and residential uses of land—affect the environment of the whole city.

If the authorities seriously want, the eastern part of the city can still be saved from such a situation. The spontaneous development of east Dhaka will create the same problem if proper infrastructure and facilities are not built in a planned manner in the next few years. If residential and commercial building plans are approved by municipalities and union parishads before RAJUK prepares zonal plans, then the same type of housing construction around narrow streets might emerge and it will be extremely difficult

protection systems along with adequate infrastructure have the potential to develop east Dhaka in a healthy manner.

We have to recognise that there is an essential difference between the physical growth of rural and urban areas. The physical growth of rural areas usually does not pose much threat to human and environmental conditions and therefore, does not require strict land use control and restrictions. But urban growth should be properly managed, since haphazard growth can lead to serious risks to millions of people and the environment, which can never be properly fixed. Like in any part of the world, urban development should always be guided and planned, land use strictly controlled, and density of population pre-established, to fit the volume of infrastructure, energy and services that are provided for the area. These are done by the use of legal instruments, master planning, land acquisition and land use restrictions. The urban authorities, service agencies, local government bodies, law enforcement systems, and above all, millions of city dwellers, should earnestly cooperate to establish a liveable, healthy and green city.

It has to be remembered that only the market mechanism should not be allowed to determine the growth of urban areas. First and foremost, urban areas, especially in a megacity like Dhaka, should be built on the consideration of easy movement of people through efficient transportation networks, healthy living, adequate number of schools, hospitals, parks and playgrounds, designated shopping areas, peaceful low-height residential areas, well-connected commercial centres, etc. Factories, industries and airports should be established far away from the city. There are certain standards that should be maintained in urban planning and development.

The unbridled opportunity of land speculation increases the land price and leads to high costs of doing business in urban areas. The land price in Dhaka has been increasing very fast, which is not a good thing for the economy. Urbanisation is a civic process and it should facilitate fair and competitive marketing of products on the one hand, and affordable living of the common people, on the other. All urban planning methods and techniques like public-private cooperation, land pulling, cost-sharing and efficient resource management should be employed, with the objective of achieving better living conditions for the citizens. Urban development strategies should not be reactive, but should be proactive. Collaboration of all urban actors like RAJUK, City Corporation, Roads and Highways Department, utility service providers, and chambers of commerce and businesses, are necessary to breathe life into the city. It will be a monumental task, no doubt, but the challenge should be met with strong determination. Streamlining Dhaka to me is like fixing half of the country's woes. There should be no excuse to put Dhaka city's causes on the back burner, since it pumps the economy's blood throughout the whole country.

Dr Nawshad Ahmed is an economist and urban planner.



PHOTO: STAR

population over the last three decades. The city contributes about a quarter of the country's income.

Dhaka city's expansion is caused by a mixture of planned and unplanned development. The Structure Plan, formulated by RAJUK (capital development authority for Dhaka), foresees expansion of the city in all directions, by consuming sub-urban and agricultural land to meet the demand of future populations. However, on a closer look at the current trend of horizontal development of the city, one cannot deny the imminent danger of expansions encroaching into the flood zones, natural wetlands and canals in the near future.

By taking into consideration the present and planned road networks, employment opportunities, services and facilities, and natural barriers like lowland, rivers and canals, we can predict the physical expansion of the city in the next three decades. Of these, road networks play a very important

role in the northern part of Dhaka city. In the north-western part, industries are growing rapidly in Aminbazar, Savar, Nabinagar and Manikganj areas. A new trend is the establishment of private universities in Gazipur, Savar, Ashulia and Bashundhara areas, intensifying urban growth further.

Dhaka's rapid growth is a concern that nobody denies. All the city authorities that are responsible for planning and providing services to the people are putting in efforts to catch up with the speed with which Dhaka is growing by building roads, drainage systems, flyovers, rapid mass transport, electricity and water supplies, and health and educational institutions—most of which are concentrated in the currently built up part of the city. Rapid population growth in the eastern part of the city calls for urgent attention by the planners and policymakers. RAJUK should carry out land use surveys and earmark areas for roads, residential, commercial and industrial zones, and all types of services

to demolish them and widen the roads in future. Similarly, unchecked growth may also encroach upon the canals, rivers and lowlands, which are essential to maintain the quick flow of rain and flood water. The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority has been demolishing illegal structures from the river banks and Dhaka South City Corporation has been removing unauthorised structures built on canals from time to time, but this is a painful thing to do. Time is running out fast—we need to do our best to check the unplanned growth of eastern Dhaka.

Three important east-west transport networks—which are, 300 feet road through Purbachal passing through Sylhet-Chattogram divisions, two segments of mass rapid transit lines and one bus rapid transport line—will make east Dhaka's nearly 100 square kilometre area more accessible. Also, Dhaka circular rail is planned to pass through Purbachal, which will facilitate easy travel from the eastern side. Proper flood

Expediting convalescent plasma availability in Bangladesh

MOHAMMAD ASHRAFUL HAQUE and RUHUL AMIN

DU E to rising Covid-19 infections, the demand for convalescent plasma is rising as well, since many countries permit plasma treatment for Covid-19. Convalescent plasma collected from a recovered donor may neutralise the Covid-19 virus on an infected patient, as the plasma may contain antibodies to the severe acute respiratory syndrome. Plasma is the yellowish liquid part of the blood which carries cells, proteins, electrolytes, carbon dioxide, and oxygen. There have been ongoing trials of using plasma to cure Covid-19 patients in many countries.

Recently, Covid-19 patients have been surging worldwide due to the rapid spread of coronavirus variants. Bangladesh is no exception. On April 8, 2021, a report in *The Daily Star* published data from Iccdr showing that the recent increase in Covid-19 transmission in Dhaka was due to the South African variant of SARS-CoV-2. Worryingly, researchers have also reported that the AstraZeneca vaccine was found to be not as effective against the South African variant (*New York Times*, February 7, 2021). Thus, the current findings of Iccdr came as a shock to public health professionals in Bangladesh. We need to improvise if we are to tackle this challenge.

In the past week, the number of infections have gone as high as 7,600 in 24 hours, and yesterday, 83 people died from the virus. It has been reported that almost all ICU beds are at capacity. The devastating news of a Covid patient's death on the road while searching for an ICU bed also made headlines in several newspapers.

In many hospitals, doctors are recommending plasma therapy to their

moderate or severely infected ICU patients. Although we do not know the success rate, this initiative is encouraging. We have been observing a lot of such plasma requests in social media groups since April 2020. The example groups are Plasma Bank Of Covid-19 Survivor's, COVID-19 Plasma Helpline BD, Plasma Hunter Chattogram, Desperately Looking Plasma, Plasma Bank of Bangladesh (Covid-19), Plasma Bank Bangladesh (Covid-19), Plasma Bank, and Coronavirus Emergency Response Bangladesh. These people deserve special thanks for arranging these connections between the donors and patients. They have been putting a lot of effort into managing plasma on such platforms. The Police Hospital and many others must also be commended for managing plasma-related activities.

To improve the mechanism for requesting and collecting plasma donors, we propose a plasma collection framework. We can increase the number of donors simply by asking an additional question during the Covid test procedure. A patient needs at least two tests. The first time, when s/he has symptoms. The second test confirms whether the patient has recovered. If a positive patient transitions to negative, s/he becomes the potential donor. When communicating the second test result, we can ask for their blood groups and determine whether they are interested in donating plasma and want to be contacted. We store the contact information, test result and plasma donation consent in a centralised database. This practice can be introduced in the test centres. In this way, such an approach can increase the number of potential donors. Based on this database, we can develop an SMS-based system for the plasma receiving people. A person



PHOTO: COLLECTED

with a phone will send a message to a specific number looking for plasma by specifying the blood group and location (for example, O+, Dhanmondi). The mobile network operators then make queries to the central database. A query result contains a set of contact numbers of possible plasma donors in the specified region. The operator will send an SMS to the donors, and the interested donors will contact the patient or hospital.

The frontliners are working shoulder to shoulder to win this fight against Covid-19, but this fight can be won only if we all come forward. Since we have many recovered Covid-19 patients, we can expect a lot of possible plasma donors. We have been studying communications on social media platforms for 11 months, and have observed that there

is a significant lack of donors against hundreds of requests. Since these groups are public, all the involved parties' privacy is in jeopardy, often leading to harassment. These platforms also lack sufficient resources to manage a verified donor list. Thus, we believe that the proposed plasma collection framework will reduce the vulnerability of both the patients and donors by managing a central database of personal information and saving lives by connecting plasma donors to patients in need. We request the policymakers to look into this matter with utmost seriousness to reduce the current fatality rate caused by Covid-19.

Dr Mohammad Ashraful Haque is Postdoctoral Fellow at University of Helsinki, Finland. Dr Ruhul Amin is Assistant Professor (Data Science) at Fordham University, NY, USA.