

Should firing be the first resort for the police?

Police action unjustifiable

SHOULD people have to die for demanding their rights and their dues? It makes sad reading that five workers of the under-construction coal-fired power plant in Banskhalhi were killed and at least 21 others injured during a clash with police on Saturday. They were demanding their pay which are in arrears for several months. The power plant has been in the news before. On April 4, 2016, four villagers were killed during a clash over land acquisition for the power plant project, being jointly built with a Chinese firm.

Predictably, the versions of the witnesses and the police do not tally. While the police say that they fired after being attacked by brickbats thrown by the workers, according to one eye witness, a driver employed by power plant project, the police opened fire suddenly when the workers were assembling outside the plant gate to voice their demands.

Even if we grant the police its version, we want to ask whether opening of fire was taken as a last resort? What other measure were taken to disperse the assembly? Are live bullets the appropriate riposte to a crowd pelting stones? It doesn't require an expert to conclude that the police resorted to excessive use of force that resulted in the death of five workers and injuries to more than 20 others.

Given the record of police actions we are constrained to say that our police have become trigger happy. We cannot believe that a well-trained force should resort to firing as the very first option of crowd control. We wonder whether any other means were used to disperse the crowd. We agree that the police were responsible for protecting the plant, but couldn't tear gas and batons disperse the brick-pelting workers, or rubber bullets? Fire arms in the hands of police are more common these days than batons or truncheons. And the police are regrettably becoming too ready to shoot in these situations.

There are two aspects of the matter that should be gone into. We suggest a judicial inquiry on the firing be instituted to determine, among other things, the justifiability of opening fire. There is a need to re-evaluate the training of police also. Crowd control is a serious undertaking, and firing is not the only option or means of handling a situation like the one in Banskhalhi.

Secondly, we believe, from the reports, that the workers' rights are being violated. Work hours include periodic breaks such as time off for meals. It is unthinkable that a human being can work for 10 hours without a break. Should their pay be cut for taking a break for iftar and Sehri or regular meal? This should be addressed immediately.

The new poor must get targeted assistance

Why are they still waiting for relief?

IT is concerning to know that more than three percent of the labour force have lost jobs and around 16.38 million people have become newly poor during the ongoing pandemic. This is according to a study titled "Recovery of The Labour Market during Covid-19: Role of Trade Union" published recently by the Center for Policy Dialogue. The Small and Medium Enterprises and the informal sector experienced most of the job cuts, and women-led enterprises have been left more vulnerable as 50 percent of them had to lay off 76-100 percent of their workforce due to financial losses.

The study mentions manufacturing, construction, transport, wholesale and retail businesses, food, accommodation services and personal services as sectors facing the highest economic risks while sectors like finance, domestic service, real estate and education as the ones facing medium risks. Around 69 percent of the employed population in urban areas have become victims of the financial downturn caused by the Covid-19 crisis, most are either labourers or self-employed. More shocking is the fact that regular wages of the workers have declined by 42 percent in Dhaka and 33 percent in Chattogram region, respectively. How will these workers feed themselves and their families?

As we know, even though the government rolled out a stimulus package worth Tk 20,000 crore, mainly targeting the SMEs soon after the pandemic started, a large portion of this remained unutilised as majority of these business entities did not have access to formal banking channels. Later, the government issued another stimulus package amounting to Tk 1,258 crore with a view to provide emergency monetary assistance to 50 lakh destitute families. But, disbursement of the fund stopped midway facing allegations of anomalies; the government had to remove a staggering 14.32 lakh families from its list of possible beneficiaries. A *Prothom Alo* report published on April 11, 2021 shows that the European Union and the German government had jointly donated Tk 1,135 crore to provide financial assistance to the workers who had lost their jobs during the lockdown period. The government also contributed a significant sum to this fund and created another package worth Tk 1,500 crore. Although the process of disbursing the money started in October last year, in the last six months, only Tk 5 crore have been provided to the affected workers. It is unacceptable that although the government has given the funds for this emergency situation, they are not reaching those who need it most. We are baffled that this problem has not been solved as yet and urge the government to immediately remove the bottlenecks and ensure that the poorest beneficiaries receive the financial assistance first.

Last year's obstacles in proper distribution included corruption and mismanagement during the implementation periods. This has to be stopped at all costs through efficient monitoring and accountability of those involved in reaching the financial assistance to the beneficiaries. With more numbers being added to the new poor category, the government must not lose any more time and along with emergency cash relief devise long-lasting income-generating opportunities for these people who have suddenly become jobless.

Whole-of-government response needed to tackle the pandemic



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE struggle to save lives from the killer coronavirus seems endless. The death procession looks unstoppable. Each day comes with more shocking news. The ray of hope that was coming through with the rollout of the vaccine is diminishing fast with the rising number of deaths.

In such circumstances, the government announced a week-long lockdown on April 5. With a gap of two days in between, the government imposed another week-long lockdown from April 14. It is likely that the government may extend the lockdown for another week. According to doctors and health experts, to have an impactful outcome in terms of reduction in the number of infection cases and deaths, two to three weeks of lockdown is needed. If that is the case, there is no option but to enforce such closure. But like last year's general holiday for 66 days, the lockdown has again given rise to a lot of commotion on logical grounds. How will this lockdown be made effective? What will happen to the workers in the informal sector? Could we not think about any other option? Will the government provide support to the poor and the daily wage earners? Is the health ministry taking adequate preparation to handle the increasing number of patients alongside the lockdown? Unfortunately, we do not have convincing answers to these questions.

Hence the old issues come back when we talk about how to deal with the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many countries have experienced second, even third waves of the pandemic. Some managed well, most could not and are still grappling with the crisis. Those that have succeeded to flatten the infection curve, were not successful because of the lockdown, but a combination of multiple measures. They did massive testing, tracing, followed strict health protocols, quarantine, travel bans, vaccination, etc. Additionally, they provided treatment.

What kind of lockdown have we had?

Time and again, it has been pointed out that no matter how strict the lockdown is intended to be, it turns out to be relaxed in the end. Certain offices and activities are allowed to function, and people find excuses to go out. And lockdown affects the poor much more than others. Just take a tour around the city. The big restaurants are selling iftar in full scale. The line of cars in front of those establishments will give some idea. But the roadside food sellers

have to close their business. Coffee shops are offering takeaways. But roadside tea stalls are closed. Grocery shops are open for a limited time. But the vegetable vendors are not allowed to stand on the road.

So please support the poor and the people in the informal sector

While imposing the lockdown, a well-thought-plan must be in place. The poor and the affected small income groups in the informal economy should be provided

all social strata. Awareness for wearing masks, cleaning hands and avoiding social gathering is still very low across all socio-economic categories. "No mask, no service" type of initiatives should be introduced and implemented strictly. For the poor, free masks and sanitisers should be available in visible public places.

Vaccination drive and engagement of more companies

Parallely, vaccination must be

No time to waste for improving health infrastructure

The above initiatives, however, does not undermine the need for improving the healthcare facilities to treat Covid patients. In 2020, when the pandemic broke out in Bangladesh, we excused ourselves by saying that we were not prepared to deal with such a massive health catastrophe. Much has been discussed throughout the period on improving the health infrastructure and higher resource allocation to tackle the emergency. Alas, after more than a year, we are still not prepared. There are not enough intensive care units (ICU) and oxygen in the hospitals. Suggestions for setting up field hospitals and isolation centres were not taken up seriously. So, patients even from the privileged section of the society, are being denied hospital treatment due to a lack of capacity.

Engage the non-state actors

The number of doctors, nurses and health workers is also insufficient, which is putting tremendous pressure on the existing health professionals. Sadly, the need for involving the community in managing this overwhelming health disaster was not felt by the policymakers. Bangladesh has been applauded for managing its natural disasters despite its limited financial resources. This has been possible due to the partnership of the government, the non-government organisations, and the private sector. Of course, the role of the government becomes much more prominent during such crises, as it has to allocate resources and take bold decisions. However, implementation of the humongous tasks to tackle the pandemic requires involvement of all non-state actors too.

Restore trust with the people through whole-of-government response

Clearly, people are in despair now. The government has to move fast to attend to the health requirement of Covid patients. The health ministry has to put its head, heart and hand together in addressing the ongoing health crisis. But it is not only the responsibility of one ministry alone. It is an urgent issue for all ministries and departments as the health problem has created multi-dimensional problems. So, the ministries such as disaster management and relief, finance, planning, agriculture, industry, commerce, education, women and children, rural development, local government, science and technology, and many others will have to work together in a coordinated manner. We need a whole-of-government response at this critical juncture.

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with direct cash and food support. In 2020, an amount of Tk 1,250 crore was allocated for direct cash transfer. Under this, a total of 50 lakh households were to be provided Tk 2,500 as cash support. This was inadequate. Moreover, the full amount is yet to be disbursed. Recently, a fiscal support of Tk 1,200 crore has been announced for the poor. This will be implemented in fiscal year 2021-22. While this is a welcome move, the amount that is required is much greater, given the number of people living in poverty and the number of new poor. Even if the official extreme poverty rate, which is about 11 percent of the total population, is considered, the coverage should be approximately 16.5 million people. However, the pandemic has added new poor to the group who also need support.

Simple measures bring good results

Health experts view that in order to contain the spread of the coronavirus, there is no need for countrywide lockdown. Only the hotspots where infection rate is high can have movement restrictions during certain periods. Besides, inter-district public transport should be closed during the lockdown and mobility within the city should be limited too. Most important is instilling the habit of maintaining health protocols among the people from

continued. Till now, vaccination has been concentrated among the urban educated people. There is less enthusiasm among a large number of people. The poor and the rural people feel they are immune to the pandemic. Many of them also do not have confidence in the vaccine. However, there are many people who want to be vaccinated but do not know how to get that done.

The current supply is inadequate even for those who are willing to take the vaccine. Already, inequality in vaccination is visible. Such inequality prevails between male and female, rural and urban, and the rich and poor. Health experts recommended for covering at least 80 percent of the population under vaccination. Several countries have resorted to vaccine nationalism to keep doses for their own nationals first. Though Bangladesh will receive vaccines from COVAX, that will not be enough. Therefore, the government should explore the availability of other vaccine options from other countries. Also, more private companies should be allowed to import vaccines. Those which have the capacity, should also be given permission to manufacture the major Covid medicines so that prices come down to an affordable level for the larger population.

The global apparel sector: Winners and losers of the pandemic



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

RMG NOTES

THE coronavirus pandemic has hit virtually all businesses—but some have been hit harder than others. Indeed, some have barely been hit at all and a lucky few have thrived during the pandemic.

A result of this is that the nature of apparel brands and their supply chains have changed—maybe even forever—during the past 12 months. But who have been the winners and who have been the losers? I started thinking about this issue when I saw recently that a major online retailer had posted record profits for 2020. Just imagine—the world undergoes the worst financial crisis for almost a century and your business comes up smelling like roses.

Where clothing retailers are concerned, the line between winners and losers is clear. Put simply, many of the world's leading pure online "e-tailers" have flourished as millions of people have been forced to shop over the Internet due to lockdowns. One only must look at the profits made by the likes of Amazon—now a major retailer of clothing—Asos and Boohoo to see that some businesses have prospered during the pandemic. This was inevitable, given they were not dependent on high street stores for their income and their businesses were able to respond rapidly to the new trading environment. While their competitors had to spend time and money boosting their online presence and logistics back-end during the pandemic, these businesses were ready to go straight away.

Online only retailers have thrived selling low value loungewear and sleepwear where fit is not an issue. The question we can't answer yet is whether high streets will boom again once lockdown ends and pent-up demand is unleashed; or whether the shift to online is here to stay.

In fact, already we are seeing a changing of the retail landscape in the countries of many of the major customers of Bangladesh garment manufacturers. High street stores are being closed and brands are reducing their physical store presence. Even

traditional department stores are moving online. For instance, a major customer of Bangladesh—UK retailer Debenhams—went bust last year. The Debenhams brand was purchased by Boohoo but is now online only. This story has been replicated several times over with other brands.

There are implications in this for RMG manufacturers. These modern online brands want speed and agility from their suppliers. They are replacing fast fashion with ultra-fast fashion, demanding rapid

competitors, in many cases, have lived a "hand-to-mouth" existence—moving from one decent sized order to the next. Numerous breaks in orders as we have seen from March 2020 through to the current date have meant smaller players have, in many cases, simply run out of cash.

Manufacturers of all sizes have been able to access various forms of finance to stay afloat but, unless a business has some money of its own in the bank, there is only so long it can survive on government loans



Sooner or later, any business needs orders, and empty order books have been an ongoing issue for all since last March.

PHOTO: STAR

turnaround times and shorter-runs, placing huge pressure on suppliers. Will suppliers in Bangladesh be able to step up to the plate for this new breed of retailers?

This is an appropriate point to consider the winners and losers among apparel manufacturers. I do not see many factory owners celebrating this past 12-months and it's hard to imagine if many—or any—have seen an uptick in production.

And yet, the coronavirus pandemic has undoubtedly ushered in a consolidation of the supplier base which is ongoing. This has seen larger players mopping up market share at the expense of their smaller counterparts. The big players have in general been able to ride out the pandemic better than small and medium sized enterprises. The reasons for this are numerous. On the one hand, larger players generally have been able to fall back on stronger balance sheets while their smaller

and handouts. Sooner or later, any business needs orders, and empty order books have been an ongoing issue for all since last March.

There are other factors at play. Although there are no official studies to back this up, anecdotal evidence suggests to me that we are seeing a "flight to safety" from brands and retailers. By "safety" I mean huge suppliers, often with vertical integration facilities, which can offer one-stop-shops for brands.

As well as being able to respond swiftly and flexibly to the new online trading environment, these suppliers offer other benefits. They are comfortable extending credit to brands due to their stronger balance sheets. They are modern, highly efficient and are signed up to numerous internationally recognised certification and standard schemes. And they have the size, scale and financial clout to be able to

negotiate fairer, more equitable purchasing practices with brands.

The only way I see smaller players remaining competitive is by coupling great marketing with innovation, creativity, prompt service and high quality, first time sampling.

Even so, I see a potential increase in mergers and acquisitions as larger players look to "bolt-on" specialist, smaller operations to their business. By adding smaller parts with niche products and services they can create larger, one-stop shops to offer an enticing proposition for customers.

When it comes to winners and losers in supply chains, I see the process of haves and have nots becoming more pronounced as time moves forward. We live in an increasingly regulated world—one where, more than ever, brands and retailers are thinking very carefully about the suppliers they do business with. They want safety, security and continuity—and will pay a premium for it if they need to.

Choosing the wrong supplier could potentially lead to huge reputational damage. Brands are waking up to the fact that it is simply not worth cutting corners on this issue and that they need to be working with best-in-class suppliers. In many cases, this means the larger players which are comfortable with the new, heavily regulated global business landscape. But don't include out smaller operators which have invested in modern, sustainable production methods and who can offer a safe pair of hands for brands.

There is a lesson in all of this for Bangladesh's RMG industry. Things will be tough moving forwards and I see a rationalisation of the industry—there will be more casualties. To grab a growing market share of the global apparel pie, manufacturers need to make themselves indispensable to brands by becoming leaner, more modern and reinventing themselves for the new, regulated trading environment where the adherence to recognised standards is everything.

Some might not be ready to do this yet, but those that are willing, innovative, ambitious and flexible, will surely reap major rewards moving forwards.

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