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Exemplary initiative by Gonoshasthaya Kendra

Other hospitals should come up with more such initiatives

IF our year-long struggle against Covid-19 has taught us anything, it is that a unique health crisis of this nature requires a unique response, unencumbered by the limitations of a past-bound mentality. Although Bangladesh's official response has not quite matched the crisis yet—despite over 757,000 cases and over 11,400 deaths—it is heartening to see that certain responsible sections of society are stepping up. We are talking about a recent initiative launched by Gonoshasthaya Kendra which, in the words of its visionary founder Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, will bring hospital at the doorsteps of patients. It comes at a time when a surge in Covid-19 cases has meant that hospitals are overwhelmed, life-saving services are often expensive, inaccessible or unavailable, and ordinary people have little recourse because of movement restrictions imposed by the authorities.

Considering the situation, Gonoshasthaya Kendra has decided to treat coronavirus patients at their own homes by dispatching mobile medical teams in four areas of the capital: Dhanmondi, Kalabagan, Old Dhaka, and Mirpur. Two types of services will be provided through these home visits. Firstly, they will collect samples and carry out other necessary tests. And secondly, in case of Covid-19 patients, they will provide treatment. Covid-19 patients can be divided into four categories according to their symptoms: mild, tolerable, tolerable with comorbidities (diabetes, heart or kidney disease, stroke, asthma, etc.), and severe. The first three types of patients can be treated at home. Organisers behind the initiative say their ambulance visiting a Covid-19 patient's house will have an X-ray, ECG machine, a ventilator and other necessary equipment. The visiting team will charge no fees for their services, and will only charge about half the cost of other tests, including the Covid-19 test. In addition, the patient and their relatives will be trained by a nurse in the use of oxygen cylinders and pulse oximeters, so they can be better-prepared to take care of themselves.

This initiative, inspired by the principles of universal healthcare, offers a radical new direction in our fight against Covid-19. The fact that these services will be provided at reduced prices suggest the noble intention of the organisers. We hope other hospitals and health facilities—both public and private—will also come forward with similar initiatives to mitigate the sufferings of ordinary patients at this crucial juncture in our nation's history. The government can certainly replicate this model of treatment throughout the country, and it will help strengthen its response against this deadly virus.

Selfless endeavours during pandemic

Their work needs to be recognised and encouraged

IT is truly humbling and inspiring to see the efforts of voluntary organisations such as "Mehman" in coming forward for those in need during this pandemic. They have been providing free dinner and *iftar* to excess patients and family members of patients at Chapainawabganj Sadar Hospital during this Ramadan. Given the hospital's 250-patient capacity for providing meals and the lack of a canteen, this initiative from Mehman has proven to be a blessing for extra patients and family members/attendants of patients.

Mehman cooks healthy meals using fresh ingredients five days a week, and can feed around 150 people on a given day, free of cost. The organisation first started operating in 2019 when they began selling meals at Tk 5 each to patients and attendants of the hospital. Now, 50 humanitarians are working for Mehman's cause.

During dire times such as these, when our fellow citizens are being afflicted by Covid-19 and many are dying each day, initiatives such as these must be recognised, encouraged, and rewarded with appreciation. When patients and their families at the Chapainawabganj hospital are already distressed due to the virus' uncertain nature and a lack of medical resources, Mehman's efforts (and those of other similar voluntary organisations) save them not only money but also restore their peace of mind to a great extent. We would urge the government to not only acknowledge the work of such organisations, but to also do its part to help them in their mission of helping those in need. Even though these humanitarians do not provide their services to earn recognition and applause, we still believe they deserve it. We hope their work will be an example to others and inspire more such efforts from private citizens and organisations to come forward to help those in need of various kinds of support.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We must responsibly protect ourselves

The number of daily Covid infection has thankfully started to go down again. But this does not mean we should become complacent. I have seen people moving around more frequently recently. And a lot of them were not following the proper health guidelines, which is concerning.

We cannot stop following the health guidelines simply because the rate of infection has gone down. We have seen what can happen from people acting irresponsibly both in our country and abroad. To defeat the virus, we must continue to protect ourselves and others. Therefore, we must all act responsibly.

Md Rasel Sheikh, Ghoraghat, Dinajpur



BLOWN IN THE WIND
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

draw our attention to the tears and sweat of a largely overlooked mass whose discomfort ensures the comfort of the rest. Certain political parties will brandish their hammers and scythes to bring out a routine rally here and there, chanting slogans about breaking the chains of oppression to unite the local labourers with their comrades elsewhere. Editorials in their sophisticated articulation will remind the readers of the place where it all began: the Haymarket Affair of 1886 in which workers in Chicago demanded for an eight-hour workday and how their peaceful rally turned into a riot killing scores of workers and police officials, and how their sacrifice paved the way for some labour rights that did not exist before. We will be told how three years later, in 1889, the socialists and the communists of the Second International decided to commemorate the day as the International Workers' Day, and how many countries around the world decided to observe it as a public holiday.

For many, it is a day to take a break in honour of those whose lives know nothing of any break. These labourers know that the moment they stop working, that very moment food will stop appearing on their plates. Working for them is as inherent as breathing. The moment you stop, you drop. Hence even during the pandemic-induced lockdown you see them in the streets looking for jobs, crying for food. One recent symbol that captures the plight of the downtrodden adequately involves an uptuned rickshaw next to a tear-soaked man holding a Tk 1,000 fine ticket issued by the police who, however, are fine with letting the airconditioned private cars go by without any hassle. The image talks of an asymmetrical power arrangement. The demand for fair treatment, fair wage, fair working condition remains unattained as we approach yet another May Day.

The land where it all started, in the US, the day is recognised as Labour Day Holiday. For Donna T Haverty-Stacke,

Whose May Day?

the author of *America's Forgotten Holiday*, the day has deviated from its history when the workers secured a working condition to show the beauty of American nationalism where voices mattered, opinions mattered for the social health of a country. But in course of time, the day has morphed into a national holiday for the consumerist culture where newspapers simply tell you what to shop or which movies to watch. The day has lost its purpose as it keeps on ignoring

soft loans. These owners know that they have the genie bottled in their factory—the angry mob consisting of the half-fed and fed-up workers. If the government does not comply, they can release this genie to create unrest, to waylay public roads and highways. Besides, they have the powerful lobbyists abroad to vouch for them to remind the government of the consequence of not listening to their local partners, the factory owners. Even a casual cancellation of shipment can

He paid off his workers with his savings, downsized his lifestyle by moving to a small apartment in the suburb. His wife in a veil now cooks burgers in the streets and he sells. My brother has asked the couple to use our facilities for resting or freshening up. The factory owner here too is a victim of a pitiless system. The pandemic has stripped him of his dignity, which he is trying to regain by joining the workforce, of which he was a master. It's a cruel world.

This owner is not lucky enough to receive the pay packages and government incentives. He worked outside the radar of the bargaining agency of factory owners. The system is full of manipulations and exploits. Remember the fracas over sending garment workers home then ordering them to return to their duties so that the owners could claim government benefits; that is a classic example of a system of abuse that persists. At least, these workers are documented and working within a formal system that maintains a semblance of compliance. For most of the working-class people, there is no such protection.

These are the day workers outside the formal structure. They work in a highly precarious employment arrangement. They are hired on an as-needed basis with no guarantee of continuing employment from one day to the next, or even from one hour to the next. I was listening to the news interview of one loading staff at Aminbazar engaged in carrying coals. He was saying how his daily salary has been slashed by the contractors. They used to make Tk 800-1000 a day, and now the loaders are being paid Tk 200-400 for a full day job. "End of the day, we have to eat! Pay rents," he said.

The exploitative nature of the day labour economy is hardly talked about. It is reduced to a once-a-year May Day photoshoot. Yet these workers experience high rates of wage non-payment and exposure to hazardous working conditions with no coverage for on-the-job injuries. With no skill sets, these people are forced to accept whatever jobs are available and to agree to work on employers' terms.

Unless we can reduce the social gap, May Day will remain an unholy day in which we have failed to give our fellow human beings the right respect.

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A garment worker sits dejectedly on the DIT Road in Dhaka waiting to buy subsidised food from a truck run by the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

PHOTO: STAR

the informal sectors where thousands of migrant workers, undocumented workers are routinely exploited and abused. The discrepancy between the have and the have-not is expanding exponentially. Frustrated by the lack of required attention, since 1990s, the day has become an annual rallying point for anarchists, socialists, and communists around the world. For instance, the yellow-vest protest in 2019 caused Paris to burn to highlight the burning question of inequity and injustice that pervade the labour landscape.

Meanwhile, here in Bangladesh we watch the TV scrolls announcing that the High Court has asked all factory owners to clear the dues and bonuses of their workers by the 15th. I wonder why the factory owners and corporate houses delay the payment of staff salaries! They sit on the deferred fund to hatch bank interest while they continue to arm-twist the government to pay for incentives or

trigger financial chaos, and the stock market will cry, "Mayday! Mayday!". Indeed, there are many mighty actors who have the mechanism to both voice out and silence stories of the force that work. The photos that we see on the May 1 edition of our newspapers is just a story that has been curated to tell a sanitised version of the labour story. Then again, these stories act like sample case stories. They ache like a bad tooth that is connected to our entire nerve-system. When one tooth hurts, the whole-body feels it. Sadly, during this pandemic, the whole body is hurt.

I look out of my window. Even the sidewalks of our private alley are flooded with jobless people who have nowhere to go. They solicit charity at the expense of their dignity. Near the gate of my mother's place in Uttara, a burger joint run by an elderly couple has recently opened. The man used to own a knitting factory. The pandemic forced him to close it down.

What are the priorities of the BTRC during the pandemic?



MAN AND MACHINE
MOYNUL ZABER

THE Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented havoc around the world. However, a crisis of this extent also creates opportunities to test and resolve issues that seem unsolvable at other times. We are losing lives, but the world is not at a total stand-still. Thanks to technology we are still working, communicating, and generating money. Without a pivotal role played by the regulatory organisations and communications market players around the world, this would not have been possible! Our telecom market also played its role. But without proper coordination, lack of vision and limited understanding of techno-economic needs, these efforts probably did not meet the desired goal. Covid-19 is not going away soon, and the telecom sector will have to play a stronger role to protect our economy and lives.

DE-CIX in Frankfurt, one of the world's busiest Internet Interconnection hubs, reported that last year in March 2020 the Covid-19 lockdown increased peak traffic by 800 Gigabits per second. Microsoft reported that online collaboration software usage rose by 40 percent in a week at the same time. The number of mobile internet subscribers rose from around 92 million in January 2020 to 104 million in September 2020. In response, the regulators of the UK, US, EU countries, Australia, and many others have taken measures for flexible IMT spectrum use. Countries like Vietnam, Brazil, Portugal opted for network management. From free Wi-Fi (Philippines) to free data access (India, Brazil, Bahrain, Spain) the telecom marketplace brought in many innovations to aid the residents.

In May 2020, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) published a document reflecting the key initiatives and innovations in response to Covid-19. They have emphasised the coordination among governmental departments, the need for regulation and legislation to improve ICT capacity for a pandemic, enhancement of ICT management skills, increasing bandwidth, managing congestions and strengthening resilience and security of the network. Broadly speaking the emphasis was on robust infrastructure. Innovation has no bounds but for a resource-constrained country, it is important to plan and prioritise.

Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Council (BTRC) and the

telecom companies have also taken a number of initiatives. First and foremost was making a large chunk of spectrum available for the operators. Among other initiatives worth mentioning are, increasing data use without raising the price, extending the validity of prepaid service, flexible payment options, making contents affordable or special packages for health and education, etc. All these efforts seem piecemeal, uncoordinated and hasty. The authorities should understand that all these can be possible if a precise goal is set. That goal should be to build an environment where users can get the best data experience at the lowest price obtainable. Only then network effect will keep the market competitive and help it grow.

Unfortunately, our network infrastructure is ill-managed. According to GSMA, last year during the second quarter, Bangladesh saw a surge in the per-customer data consumption that rose from 16-29 percent while voice calls decreased by 6.5-7 percent. The report also tells us that overall revenue declined and data revenue increase was insignificant. Moreover, there was a 2.4 percent decrease in active subscribers and a 0.3 percent decrease in mobile internet subscribers.

What could be the reason? Well, primarily it is affordability and secondly, it is quality. According to the world's leading internet testing company OOKLA, even though the global average download speed during the pandemic rose at a steady pace, Bangladeshi users did not see the increase in broadband speed. The OOKLA global index ranks Bangladesh at 136th position among 140 countries from where they collect download speed data. Behind us in the list are Palestine, Venezuela, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. With the surge in bandwidth, we should have experienced a high quality of service and more revenue for the operators. But what went wrong?

Many can argue about the tax imposed on voice and data having a negative impact on affordability, reduced revenue that bars the operators to enhance technical capability. However, blaming the tax regime undermines the systematic infrastructural incapability of the data service sector of the country. Data service delivery in Bangladesh has a number of tiers from data wholesales (like IIGs, IGWs, and submarine cable companies) to data retailers (such as mobile network operators). Unfortunately, most of the tiers are filled with inexperienced companies with not much regulatory oversight ensuring the quality of service. If we want to ensure affordable and quality data service, all the tiers in the pipeline

should be technologically equipped and properly monitored. The regulators need to keep the market vibrant, competitive and growth prone at all these tiers. We have three suggestions to ponder upon.

First of all, BTRC needs to find a way to forecast data bandwidth requirements. Customers complain relentlessly about the poor data performance of the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and mobile operators. Competing operators try to find ways to entice customers with convoluted information and pricing mechanisms based on flawed, misleading data and claims such as "fastest," "best coverage" and "most improved" service! BTRC may argue that they have sold enough spectrum to the mobile operators. However, the ISPs and the mobile operators are retailers, it is up to the data wholesalers to make sure that

on the overall mobile market—it is the regulator's job to push them to expand, communicate, and ensure their quality-of-service (QoS) level. Similar reasoning goes for the tower-owning companies—regulators need to find a way to compel them to expand their own towers—4G needs new towers if we want the users to experience better quality data at a low cost.

Finally, BTRC needs to make sure that the companies at all the tiers of data service delivery sit on active coordination meetings at least four times a year. This will happen if there is active guidance from BTRC. We have introduced too many tiers in the data service system and BTRC neither has the capacity nor the ability to monitor their needs—oftentimes many of the issues could be resolved if effective coordination meetings are held with an



sufficient bandwidth is available. Without the ability of proper forecasting, it is not possible to assess the need.

Secondly, BTRC should ensure a robust fibre infrastructure. The mobile cell-phone towers are connected with each other via fibre or microwave. Optical fibres can ensure the highest bandwidth with the best operational performance at present. Operators claim that almost 90 percent of their mobile towers are 4G enabled. However, only 15 percent of these towers have fibre connectivity. This means that even though there is enough spectrum the operators will never be able to give a 4G experience to the customers. The operators largely depend on the capabilities of fibre companies. So many companies of different public and private ownerships play in this tier without much capability to ascertain their impact

aim to resolve the issues.

BTRC succeeded to bring forth a fortune to the public exchequer via the 4G spectrum auction. However, they need to lobby the government to make sure that they have the allocation for modernisation. Regulatory challenges during Covid-19 are of various forms and only a knowledgeable, future-looking, competent staff can help the country during this time. An efficient healthcare system can help us survive while an adept telecom market can ensure that our economy thrives. BTRC needs to be able to take up the challenge. The question is are they willing to do so?

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