

Post-lockdown insanity amid homebound rush

Govt must ensure the rules are enforced

WE'VE been here before. We've seen lockdown come and go with the same arbitrariness with which most decisions on this land are taken. We've seen how lockdown rules were relaxed, nay forgotten, ahead of every Eid festival, and how the state outsourced its duty to curb the spread of coronavirus to the citizens, resulting in devastating consequences. So the chaos that has ensued after the latest round of "strict lockdown" was lifted on Thursday is not surprising. But it doesn't take away the pain of seeing a familiar cycle repeat itself and the resulting sense of impending doom.

It's not just the insane homebound rush that worries us. Malls, streets and all public spaces in the cities are also overflowing with people, trying to make up for time lost in lockdown. Heavy traffic jams were reported at major intersections. At the exit points of the capital Dhaka, the scene is equally chaotic. According to our reports, thousands of people left Dhaka on buses, trains and launches, and thousands more will do as the Eid-ul-Azha nears. All modes of public transport were supposed to carry passengers at 50 percent capacity to minimise Covid-19 transmission—a directive few appear to be following. People crossing the Padma on crowded ferries were also seen to be flouting rules of mask wearing and physical distancing. Many passengers alleged that bus operators were overcharging, while others complained about scarcity of tickets. Long tailbacks were also reported on the highways.

All this comes at a time when we are witnessing record highs in cases of Covid-19 infections and deaths. On Thursday, the country witnessed the second-highest single-day death toll of 226, with the daily positivity rate at 27.23 percent. It is consistent with the rising trend of infections seen over the previous two/three weeks. Experts have warned that relaxation of lockdown rules could lead to a starker situation than what we saw in the aftermath of Eid-ul-Fitr in mid-May, when a similar relaxation led to a spike in infections. The danger this time is the presence of the more contagious and deadlier Delta variant of the coronavirus, which is already wreaking havoc all over the country, especially in the border districts. Imagine the disaster it will spell when large numbers of people gather and freely mix, as they already are doing, in those districts without any effective checks on their movement or violation of rules. Imagine the effect it will have on our already overwhelmed health system.

Perhaps a blanket nationwide lockdown is not the ideal solution for a country with fragile economic foundations, and we understand the practical necessities that led to the temporary lifting of lockdown ahead of Eid. But there can be no excuse for failing to ensure that those in public transport follow the 50-percent-capacity rules or other injunctions. Even the health minister, not one known for admitting failure, has said that the healthcare system will "collapse" if we don't strictly follow guidelines. But expecting the public and responsible entities to abide by rules without any effective mechanism to ensure their compliance cannot be accepted. The government must do more, much more, to enforce its own rules to minimise the damage of lockdown relaxation.

Destruction of Dharmapalagarh must stop immediately

Why would an archaeological site be used for housing projects?

ALTHOUGH declared "Reserved" by the government's Department of archaeology in 1987, Dharmapalagarh, a relic from the era of Pal Dynasty situated at Nilphamari's Jaldhaka upazila, is currently on the verge of being obliterated forever. The damage to the site started in 2003, when 40 houses for the landless people were built on the historical site. Two recent government housing projects named "Ashrayan-2" monitored by the Prime Minister's Office and "Guchhagram" initiative by the government's land department, are posing dual threats to the archaeologically significant site. We understand that homes for the homeless are necessary and we laud the government for such initiatives like the two mentioned above. But, why these housing projects have to be built at the cost of our precious archaeological sites is beyond our grasp. Why would such sites be chosen for development projects in the first place, however, well-intentioned?

It seems that both the government and the local authority have forgotten the importance of preserving heritage sites. Conservation of heritage sites is very important because it provides a sense of identity and continuity in a fast changing world for future generations. Historical monuments possess immense cultural value, resulting from their beautiful architecture and their correlation with significant religious, social and political events that had originated in a specific area over a given time period. Historical monuments also attract tourists from all over the world and thus generate employment and economic benefits for the local populace.

In 2016, the archaeology department excavated a Buddhist temple along with other structures believed to be built in the 12th century—only 50 metres away from the historical wall where the housing projects are situated. This shows the possibility of finding more such valuable relics of the past in and around the original site. But a DS report published on July 15 shows that people who have received shelters through the housing projects have already started to dig the soil to grow crops. This poses serious risks of creating damage to possible historically important materials that may be buried deep under the site at this moment. We are not against the government housing projects, rather we thank the government for providing a place to live for the helpless who used to live in the streets or other open spaces. But, the government also has to pay attention in preserving historical monuments to protect the thousands of years of history and culture of Bengal. Losing cultural elements means losing one's self-identity. We urge the government to immediately stop the destruction of historical sites and shift the housing projects to other areas that do not have ancient treasures buried under them.

Maracana, Wembley, Cannes and Narayanganj



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

LAST week, all eyes were fixed on Neymar's ripped shorts, Badhon's jewelled blouse or English rogue fans' red-crosses, when something terrible happened: one slipper of a pair was thrown out of a factory building in Narayanganj to give a Tk 2 lakh message (yes that's what life is worth minus the Eid bonus) on behalf of someone who was at that time facing the fury of a fire that was coming to consume her. The message was loud and clear: the end was near, and her relatives needed to know that she was here. No further detail on the female victim who died in the fire that broke out in a food processing factory is available. But the scripted sandal speaks for all 52 individuals who died that day on July 9. Most of them were teenagers. Most of them were women. The gate was locked. The workers got trapped. The usual story all over. The site supervisor thought that the fire would soon be diffused as he took his workers to an anteroom where the volatile ACs are kept. His one mistake proved fatal allowing the fire to score high.

"The charred victims were piled in a fleet of ambulances to take them to mortuaries amid anguished shouts and tears from people watching in the streets", describes *Al Jazeera*.

How do you process such emotion in the midst of a visual feast when the golden heroes are locking horns with their sky-blue challengers, when the Romans are back to raid Londinium with resistance from the medieval barbarians notwithstanding their Red Cross garbs to prove that, by Saint George, they are otherwise civilised with God on their side? With so many spectacles that are there to cause you distract, why tarry longer on the lives that are already lost? Return to the arena where life is being celebrated: change the channel. Go to Maracana, Wembley, or Cannes; you will be fine. Write a sympathetic note on Facebook, your conscience will have its alibi.

Better focus on whether the shorts of Neymar were ripped as part of some voodoo to end the losing streak of

Argentina in the finals. If it were tennis, he could have gone off the field to change (oh, meanwhile, on another channel, Djokovic won the Wimbledon by the way), but it's not! The Brazilian striker had to wait till the half time—by that time the damage was done; some Angel had scored.

From the angelic light of de Maria you shift your focus to the *noor* of Rehana Maryam. There's something prosaic about that name. A full name for a movie title: who would have thought! A standing

football hooligans beating their rival fans as they were coming out of their gallery doors, disgusted as much as I were to see the racial slurs against the players of African origin for failing to score in a tie breaker, I was not surprised. The white robe emblazoned with red cross reminded me of the narrative of supremacy that goes in the name of religion, in the name of race, in the name of gender. These players are nothing but modern-day gladiators brought from the former colonies to

your black or brown stains and join the rank of the white saints, the fire will be there. The same fire was there when the KKK used it to purify the dark race by burning it down on crosses that held Jesus; the same fire was there when the Nazis used it in their gas chambers to burn down the Jews. The same fire is there to slit the throats of the infidel by those who claim fidelity. Some fires are incidental, some are accidental.

I would not say that the businessmen hated their workers and wanted to burn them down because deep down in the patriarchal system they did not like women to come to the fore. On the contrary, these young women were needed for the businessmen to become more *shajeeb*, more lively! I know all guns are being fired at the businessmen now. As is customary, news of irregularities is popping up. The more faults that are found, the more desperate the businessmen would become to get out of jail. And that is good news for the men who are processing their new food. Before the Eid, the timing couldn't have been any better. The price tag for the dead has already been fixed, and now, one can only assume, there will be many price tags for the owners who will seek their freedom. But how about those sleek officials who made routine visits to each factory to renew the safety certificates? Isn't there a long list of certificates including one on fire safety that needs to be maintained by each manufacturing site for the sake of compliance? Who issued those?

You see, the fault lies in the system. We see fire. We see the belching smoke. But we do not see the system. We forget the lessons that we learnt at our primary schools: a stitch in time, saves nine. When fire rips through the system, it momentarily exposes what lies beneath! We see the greedy faces of some dark devils who allowed the fire to prevail. Then again, the devil offers us distractions. We are offered with enough materials to get busy with: the shorts of Neymar, the blouse of Badhan. People will forget the 52 who died, but they will remember the skin that was exposed. Because that's where the nerves are. That's where the sensations are!

Shamsad Mortuza is Pre-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), and a professor of English at Dhaka University (on leave).



Smoke billows from the six-storey factory building of Hashem Foods as firefighters try to put out the flames on July 9.

PHOTO: STAR

ovation for a Bangladeshi film, that too at Cannes: who would have thought! Workplace sexual harassment captured in a restless handheld camera using a muted colour palette—boy, I am intrigued! A manufactured statement against patriarchy. The reviews are titillating the desire to view the movie after its French Riviera preview. And the smart cast in their dazzling dresses are adding glamour on a world stage. Yes, we use cheap labours to make sweatshirts, but we make *jamdanis* too! Stunning revelations.

Beneath the veneer of all the action that had our eyes wide open, there is a trail of tears. Of possession and dispossession. Can one be black and afford to fail in a white man's game? Can one be poor and a woman and a teenager when a factory owner is up to making money? Disgusted as much as I was to see the

perform in an arena for the pleasure and profit of the privileged. There is not much difference between the players and the workers in a factory: both groups are mere subjects to be acted upon. Both are paid players, albeit of different scales.

They are the willing participants in a system that manipulates and manufactures. They volunteered or were forced to volunteer their skills and labour for the benefits of the others: their owners, their consumers. It takes a fire, the inner or the outer, to rip through the curtain of normalcy to expose how abnormal life is! No matter how many knees you "take" before the start of the match to conjure the spirit of George Floyd who was choked to death by some white supremacists, there is a raging fire at the core of a white heart; something that cannot stand the sight of black. No matter how you try to remove

Race to the bottom must end

RIZWANUL ISLAM

THE owner of Hashem Foods factory remarked that they were not the ones who set the fire that took 52 lives, including children and adolescents. While that may be true, the fact that a large amount of combustible and flammable goods were in the same place where people work, with the exit door locked—were these done by others? As usual, a committee has been set up to investigate the causes of the fire and we are assured that the guilty will be punished. However, we have not yet heard any announcement saying that steps will be taken to stop the recurrence of such accidents in future. It may be that this will also come.

A key word that comes along with globalisation is competitiveness, be that in the international or domestic market. That means the ability to make goods

years when real wages of workers in manufacturing rose—in 2020, there has been a downward trend.

In order to maintain competitiveness, not only are wages kept under constant watch, safety standards of factories and work environments are also neglected. Measures that are needed to meet safety and health standards of factories often require some investment. That's why they are usually regarded as impediments to competitiveness. And in order to minimise costs, production is carried out without regard to safety and environment, leading to horrible accidents. Disasters like those in Tazrin Fashion and Rana Plaza are remembered because they took place in the high-profile export-oriented ready-made garments (RMG) industry. But there have been many more accidents that remain alive for some time and are forgotten at some point.



Reports in the media after the accident in Hashem Foods provide painful details of how various government agencies are trying to shift responsibilities onto others.

PHOTO: STAR

and services available to consumers at the lowest possible price. Now, prices of raw materials and other such inputs are often beyond the control of manufacturers. So, to keep costs of production low many factory owners tend to economise on wages of workers and on costs relating to the factory premises—the latter often compromising on safety and work environment. In a country like Bangladesh where there is no shortage of workers, mechanisms for monitoring the safety of workplaces are at best questionable and the ultimate impact of cost-cutting measures usually falls on workers.

Wage repression is used as a way of keeping the cost of labour to the minimum possible, a global phenomenon of the past few decades. The share of wages in value added has declined in many countries irrespective of the level of development. In Bangladesh, although there were

However, there has been a major change after the Rana Plaza disaster—some formal action was taken in order to ensure safety in RMG factories. A plan of action was prepared with the joint involvement of the government, employers, workers, buyers, and a few international organisations. In addition to a national tripartite committee, two groups of buyers—one each from the European countries and from the US—formed two teams in order to inspect factories, identify their safety issues, and to monitor the work required to remedy them. After the duration of their work was completed, the responsibility for the remaining tasks was taken over by the national committee.

As a result of the work mentioned above, there have been some structural improvement—at least in the formal sector factories, although it cannot be concluded that the problems have been solved

completely.

While the RMG industry attracted attention because of the international spotlight, that has not been so for the rest of the industrial sector. Domestic market-oriented industries are not linked directly to the international market and foreign buyers and usually remain out of the spotlight.

In principle, the government's supervisory and monitoring mechanism should apply to all industries. Reports in the media after the accident in Hashem Foods provide painful details of how various government agencies are trying to shift responsibilities onto others. It is quite clear that there is an issue of the effectiveness of the government's supervisory and monitoring mechanism and governance.

Another area of deprivation of workers is the denial of their fundamental right to form their own organisations and bargain collectively with employers. There was a time when official government announcements advertised Bangladesh as a country of cheap labour and where workers are not allowed to form trade unions in the export processing zones (EPZs). The language of such advertisements may have changed slightly. International pressure, including from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), have also compelled the government to allow some kind of workers' representation in the EPZs. And yet, full-fledged trade unions are still not allowed there. Outside those zones, workers can, in principle, join trade unions; but labour laws, in general, remain restrictive.

I am not aware of any official statistics in Bangladesh on the proportion of industrial workers who are members of trade unions. However, some idea of the situation can be formed from one example—the RMG industry. Before the Rana Plaza accident—in 2011 and 2012, applications for official recognition of trade unions in the industry numbered 10 and 12 respectively, and one application was approved each year. In 2013 and 2014, the number of applications rose to 158 and 392 respectively (with 84 and 182 respective approvals). It may be remembered that in the aftermath of the accident, in addition to factory safety, the issue of workers' rights also came under the spotlight which resulted in pressure for granting this fundamental right. However, from 2015 onwards, the number of applications started to decline, and in 2017 stood at 78 (with 57 approvals). Quite clearly, as international attention shifted away, the issue lost its urgency. So, one can easily imagine what the situation is in domestic market-oriented industries where there is not much international or national attention.

While recognising the importance of competitiveness, it needs to be understood that short-term gains made by keeping wages low and by neglecting safety and work environment do not produce

positive and sustainable results in the long run. Labour productivity is extremely important for competitiveness, and wages and work environment are important factors influencing labour productivity. Low wages, and unsafe, unhygienic work environments can have a negative effect on labour productivity. If one adopts a long-term and enlightened view of competitiveness, one would have to take these factors into consideration.

However, accidents like Tazreen Fashion, Rana Plaza and Hashem Foods show that the desired goals cannot be reached if the issues are left entirely to enterprises. Public policy has to play a much more proactive role, and the government will have to be much more careful and active. The pursuit of competitiveness cannot be allowed to degenerate into a race to the bottom. Three areas of work need to be noted in that respect.

Firstly, there can be no compromise regarding security of life which in turn is linked to safety in places of work and a healthy work environment. The accident at Hashem Foods must act as the last wake-up call—irrespective of the sector and the type of enterprise. Future action should include a tripartite mechanism—involving the government, employers and workers—in addition to the formal government mechanism of factory supervision. That, in turn, would require representation of workers and hence workers' organisations.

The second area where improvements are needed is workers' wages and allowances. On paper, there are mechanisms for fixing minimum wages in various sectors and for periodically updating them. But experience shows that the process often is not smooth. Even in the high-profile RMG industry, the Prime Minister herself had to intervene in order to bring the negotiations to a reasonable conclusion. Even after that, in order to receive the wages and allowance thus determined, workers often have to resort to street demonstrations. One can imagine the situation in other sectors or industries which are not under such a spotlight.

The third area of action is to ensure dignity of workers and their fundamental rights. This issue needs to be brought into the development discourse irrespective of the level of development and the sector of work. It is the democratic right of workers to speak and negotiate about the terms of work and the environment in which work is carried out. In order to exercise this right, the worker needs to have the opportunity to express her/his views through her representative or organisation. In the absence of that opportunity, the worker may feel compelled to use alternatives, some of which may not be desirable.

Rizwanul Islam, an economist, is former Special Adviser, Employment Sector, International Labour Office, Geneva. He is the author, most recently, of *Coronavirus Orthodoxy: O Shromobajar* (Baatighar, Dhaka, 2021).