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LATE S. M. ALI

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We can't let our guard down in Covid response

Death rates are on the decline, but the price of complacency will be heavy

AFTER a period of soaring infections, the past few weeks have seen a slow but steady decline in numbers related to Covid-19 in the country. The health directorate on Saturday reported a daily death toll of 152 people from the virus—the lowest death count in the last 51 days. The last week's record showed a 27 percent drop compared to the week before. Other related week-by-week figures also showed a similar trend, with the cases of infections declining by around 35 percent, while the daily positivity rate on Saturday came down to 16.71 percent, the lowest in more than two months. While we're still far from the situation deemed by WHO as "under control" (where the positivity rate remains stagnant below 5 percent for at least two weeks), the latest numbers are encouraging, and they make us hopeful.

But if our previous experience is any indication, this is also the time when we need to expedite our efforts so that the current trend holds, and because the price of complacency can be costly. By now, we know the danger of letting our guard down too quickly. We had lifted restrictions only to re-impose them after another surge in Covid-19 infections. This has been a recurring theme of our long battle against the pandemic. It's understandable that people are getting tired of taking precautions. Problems like Covid-19 burnout and pandemic fatigue can affect both individuals and the state similarly. This is precisely why the hard-earned gains of the past few weeks should be preserved and carried through at all costs.

Even though the nationwide lockdown has now been totally lifted—implausibly, one might add—the government must not rule out the possibility of zoning off regions where infections are still very high. In fact, periodic regional lockdown is a tactic we should have employed more frequently given the impracticality of a prolonged nationwide lockdown for a poor country like Bangladesh. This is also easier to enforce. The government also must try harder to ensure that individual safety precautions and vaccination attempts are given equal priority, because both are essential to curb the spread of this ever-evolving virus.

In terms of vaccine procurement, there is not much good news. Although the government has recently struck a trilateral agreement for bottling, labelling and dispensing China's Sinopharm vaccine, making it more accessible, it may take, we are told, around three months before we start getting the jabs from this deal. Progress has also been slow on the procurement front. This makes it all the more important that the government doubles down on its current vaccine efforts. Without ensuring individual safety precautions and quick vaccination of the majority of citizens, especially those more vulnerable, we cannot allow any fatigue or slackening to mar our future safety prospects.

Country's only tissue bank operating silently and seamlessly

Resources and funding as necessary as appreciation

AT a time when we are bombarded with reports about how strained our health system is due to the Covid-19 pandemic—and how exhausted both human and material resources of this sector are—the work of the Institute of Tissue Banking and Biomaterial Research (ITBRR) offers hope and reassurance. As reported in this daily, the country's lone tissue bank, situated in Savar, provides its essential services to patients at very low prices, and even for free to poorer patients who have the reference of a public hospital doctor. It has been in operation since 2009, and until last year, has reportedly provided over 1.39 lakh cubic metres of bones and 54,768 pieces of amniotic grafts to hospitals and clinics for use in various surgeries. In the process, it has helped 8,351 patients to go through tissue transplants without denting their wallets.

Such accessibility of the tissue bank's services is especially helpful for poor patients who often dread the high costs of surgeries related to bone and skin tissues. Some of the procedures can even cost 10 times less than what a patient would have to pay for them in neighbouring India, doctors claim. The tissue bank collects amputated bones, skulls, and parts of amniotic sacs (which help burn heal faster) from hospitals to aid in tissue transplant surgeries. It also controls the microbiological quality of skin grafts and stores them at proper temperatures according to the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) guidelines.

Besides this, the ITBRR also provides tissues to patients from over 100 hospitals and clinics countrywide. All that is needed is the authorisation by a doctor from one of the hospitals and verification of the doctor's identity before the patient's representative can collect the processed tissue.

Though their services are priceless, many were not even aware of the bank's existence until the government reportedly approved a Tk 173-crore project for the expansion of the institute and establishment of a full-fledged Human Tissue Bank on July 28. The work of this facility's small team (consisting of only eight scientific officers and 15 laboratory and administrative staff members) is especially valuable for patients involved in road accidents, of which, unfortunately, there are many in our country.

We hope the expansion plan for the ITBRR and the establishment of the Human Tissue Bank will reach fruition on time and with as few hiccups as possible. Work such as this needs to be rewarded not just with appreciation, but also with necessary funding and resources in order to maintain and improve the quality of the bank's services.

'Lessons' from Bangladesh today



AHRAR AHMAD

BANGLADESH offers many important insights and perspectives in these grim and uncertain times. They indicate the uniqueness that defines us as a

people, and the original contributions we are making to the world of politics and governance.

Lesson 1: There may be much international concern, research and speculation about the importance of language in our lives, but Bangladesh is proving that words do not matter. People, particularly those in power, can say anything they want. They do not have to explain, are not required to be consistent, and are not held accountable.

We have institutionalised Orwell's darkest fears expressed in 1984, when the Ministry of Truth dealt with Lies, and the Ministry of Love with Torture. In a world of "newspeak" and "double think", we can claim that "the vaccination drive has been a complete success" (even though there were pictures of physical skirmishing in some sites, 250 vaccines were sent to a venue where 5,000 people showed up, and reports of people waiting for hours, sometimes standing in rain, and not getting it); or "we have enough vaccines" (even though we had stopped registrations at one time, the second dose of some vaccines had been held up, and those registered have to wait for considerable periods of time); or people over 18 who are found "unvaccinated in the streets will be arrested" (even though less than 10 percent of the people had been vaccinated).

Similarly, we can confidently claim that our democracy is one of the strongest in the world—though free speech may face some challenges, over-eager voters may vote a bit early and sometimes often, and the opposition has self-destructed because they typically tend to be criminals and cowards; women, non-Muslims and indigenous communities are all safe and happy—except when they provoke attacks on themselves; our universities are among the best in the world—international rankings are clearly based on self-serving indicators that do not take into account *singaras* and tea; Bangladesh is a shining example of a development miracle—provided we worship at the shrine of GDP growth rates and aggregate indicators, and overlook quality of life issues including crime, corruption, hate, violence, environmental degradation, human rights violations and rising inequalities.

Steve Bannon, President Trump's media guru, had advised Republicans that they "flood the zone with s—t" so that the people are overwhelmed, lose faith in everything, including science, reason or evidence, and function in an environment of "manufactured nihilism". Other countries blather on about a post-truth world. Bangladesh is making it happen.

Lesson 2: Bangladesh is advancing an administrative model that is rather unique. Each ministry is allowed to function in complete autonomy. The need to coordinate, communicate with each other, reach agreement on decisions, are

all considered irrelevant and inefficient. Moreover, every act of coordination is tantamount to a compromise, and every compromise indicates weakness and dependence. Ministries here are empowered, not constrained.

Hence the left hand does not know what the right is doing. The ministries of Liberation War, Health, Home, Education, Finance, Transportation, Law, Foreign Affairs and others are all free to make pronouncements on pandemic related matters. Consequently, the people are subjected to a barrage of decisions, declarations and directives that may be confusing, often contradictory.

What does a "lockdown" entail, at what level will it be enforced, when will it be lifted? Who are eligible for the vaccine, are registrations and text messages required, will the special campaign last one day or one week, do we have enough vaccines for everybody, from what sources are we expecting them, at what cost? Will shops, offices, RMG factories, educational institutions, transportation systems etc.,

No one can figure out our real intentions, and the many "conspirators" constantly plotting against us remain befuddled and discouraged.

Lesson 3: We are all equal in the eyes of the law, though some, as Orwell had pointed out in *Animal Farm*, "are more equal than others". This is expressed in various ways.

First, some cases may drag on for years. For example, the murder cases of Abrar Fahad (2 years), Taslima Begum Renu (3 years), Sohagi Jahan Tonu (5 years), Tanvir Muhammad Taqi (8 years), journalists Sagar and Runi (9 years), writer Humayun Azad (15 years), activist Kalpana Chakma (25 years), as well as rapes, disappearances, extremist violence, factory disasters, and many others remain unsolved.

But some cases may be resolved quite expeditiously. For example, two brothers accused of torturing, and even shooting at, some bank executives who were resisting "requests" for false costing estimates (brothers who fled the

men i.e., the flesh-hungry thrill-seekers who used, abused and profited from these, and other such young women, were ever investigated). Similarly, a journalist who had exposed the fraud and incompetence in a government ministry was herself harangued for seven hours inside the secretariat, and then remanded in jail. When talking about the R and P, as Mel Brooks had warned in *The Fly*, "be afraid, be very afraid."

Third, in the rare instance that one of the R and P is found guilty (through sheer misfortune), then all is not lost. They can still stay in the relative comfort of a private room in a hospital and conduct official meetings on zoom platforms, or they may have access to female companionship in jail, or even those convicted of murder may receive pardons and whisked out of the country in the dead of night.

Lesson 4: Bangladeshis are some of the most psychologically delicate people in the world. While its law enforcement personnel are overworked and under-



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PHOTO: STAR

be opened (can one be closed while others are opened, e.g. RMG factories closed but transportation closed, shops closed but offices opened, shops and offices closed but transportation opened, half of one opened and half of another closed)?

The problem is not that we are not told, but that we are told too much, by too many different sources. But, while clarity and constancy may be valued elsewhere in the world, we should heed Ralph Waldo Emerson's memorable words that "a foolish consistency is the hob-goblin of little minds". Our minds are anything but little.

It is possible that, when coupled with lesson 2, all this may provide some navigational challenges for individuals. But instead of being cynical or frustrated we should appreciate the fact that we are breaking down "traditional" habits, forsaking "colonial" procedures, refusing to be Naipaul's "mimic men", as we blaze new trails. Moreover, this strategy is also helpful to our national security interests.

country immediately after); a young man who had roughed up an off-duty navy service-man and was found to possess various illicit products, weapons and listening devices in his home; or a person who was suspected of abetting a young woman's suicide where her diaries, photographs, CCTV camera footage, and even DNA traces on her body appeared to suggest some connection, were cleared of all charges with prompt dispatch. Unsurprisingly, all these people just happened to be Rich and Powerful (R and P).

Second, bringing charges against the R and P can be hazardous to one's well-being. A young woman, who had filed a case against an individual for his role in her sister's suicide, herself lost her job as a banker. An actor and model who brought various charges against some of the R and P found her own name dragged through the mud in a media circus, and accused of possessing drugs and alcohol, providing sexual services, and vandalising an upscale club. (Obviously, none of the

staffed, it will nonetheless move with ferocious diligence and authority if there are complaints of sentiments being "hurt", or sensibilities "offended", or feelings "disrespected" by anyone saying anything that someone does not like. Any cartoon, limerick, satirical piece, poem, essay, speech, Facebook post, song, slogan, movie dialogue, investigative report, criticism, or an unflattering picture, may generate a complaint, provoke a huge contingent of police personnel to apprehend the "criminal", and encourage the courts to act swiftly.

It must be understood that in Bangladesh no one ever makes a mistake, no one ever has to accept responsibility, no one ever has to apologise for anything. If something goes wrong the inevitable default option is to "change the game, and shift the blame". Such guiltless, faultless, sinless people have every right to be a bit hyper-sensitive about their feelings and emotions.

Ahrar Ahmad, Professor Emeritus, Black Hills State University, USA. Email: ahrar.ahmad@bhsu.edu

Factory owners can't do it all themselves



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

TO grow and fulfil its potential in the coming years, I believe Bangladesh's RMG industry needs to adapt when it comes to management. More pertinently,

about the issue of organisational structure (pyramid hierarchy) and not on the "flat management" style which many of our factories have adopted over the years.

In many cases, the adoption of a flat, non-hierarchical structure by factory owners has happened by accident. Industry growth has come in sharp bursts, and leadership and management structures have been unable to keep pace. Stories of company owners with dozens of employees reporting directly to them are not uncommon in our industry—not believing in team spirit and delegation.

But if one or two leaders or company directors have so many demands upon their time, how can they get on with their core job of directing strategy and steering the business?

I believe it is vital for our garment factories to strengthen middle-management in the coming years. This will require better delegation from owners and a willingness to embrace new ideas and ways of thinking.

To do this, we need to first understand why so many of our factories have flat management structures in which the owner—and perhaps one or two trusted lieutenants—oversee thousands of workers.

As mentioned above, uneven growth is one reason. Often, factories struggle to adapt to new levels of volume and the fact that orderbooks can suddenly include several well-known brands with huge

order volumes.

Another reason is the lack of training in our industry—an age-old problem. Are our colleges and technical schools turning out the right candidates in terms of management and leadership? A better question might be, do enough of our RMG factories have progressive training policies in place for the leaders of tomorrow? Do they have graduate schemes in place, (like management



trainees who can be General Managers within the next 5 years) which enable our brightest minds to be fast-tracked within an organisation over a short timeframe?

This latter issue could also be an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone—training more middle managers and encouraging female workers to progress their careers. As I have discussed just recently, our industry lacks females in positions of seniority and suffers from what is known in the West as a "glass ceiling" where career progression is concerned for women.

There are other reasons for bringing more people on board into leadership positions. Businesses which rely on the

owner and/or the owner and a couple of trusted directors to guide all strategy are at risk of being closed off to new ideas and ways of thinking. Look at the world's most successful businesses and how they have worked out ways to squeeze every ounce of talent and creativity out of their employees. If an employee shows potential and intelligence, there are avenues or roadmaps for career advancement. Mechanisms are created to ensure that the "cream rises to the top" or, at a very minimum, where talent is recognised—and utilised. Is this happening in our RMG industry or is talent going to waste? My concern is that there is too much of the latter now, but I am optimistic that this picture can be changed with the right mindset.

No company owner can do everything themselves. We all, as owners, have our blind spots and need other colleagues to bounce ideas off of or—where necessary—to tell us when we are making a mistake! None of us can claim to be perfect which is why we should all be open to bringing new leaders into the fold.

Interestingly, a few years ago, flat company structures were very popular (and still are in some circles). Who needs managers and who needs structure?—this was the thinking. Some of the world's leading blue-chip businesses have tried and experimented with flat structures, but have often been forced to return to business operations with layers of specialist middle-managers in place in a pyramid structure.

I am not talking about a middle-manager overload (a negative, and an expensive option which few of our factories can afford). Rather, I am referring to structures which allow for delegation from the owner downwards to specialist managers who can help implement new business ideas and

different ways of thinking; who can help develop a company climate where employees are allowed to thrive and blossom; structures which foster openness and a culture of continuous learning and development. The owner cannot possibly hope to do all of this on their own.

But the owners need to trust the middle management and delegate decision making responsibilities to them to carry out on their own. The managers should not face unwanted layers, more specifically accountability to keep and kith of owners who are not professionals. Unfortunately, in many cases in some of our factories, owners still employ people in key positions whose only quality is to be of their family. So, the industry needs to nurture a culture where professionalism will be given the priority and professionals taking the risks but fetching successes will be rewarded.

On a more pragmatic and practical level, without structure and managers beyond the company owner, it is much harder to "get things done," and to ensure that the right person has all the information they need. There must be organisation—businesses need structures and processes.

When a business has more than 1,000 employees, as does almost all our RMG factories, no one person knows everything that is going on within the business to make effective, detailed decisions. A lack of structure prevents employees from specialising and progressing quickly. It can hamper progress.

More concerning, a lack of hierarchy will mean that any leader or company owner will eventually be overwhelmed. This could mean the death of the business in the worse-case scenario.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).