

Corona Pandemic: Time Is Running Out Fast

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I want to draw everyone's attention to *time*. It is running out fast.

With every passing moment, we are losing the opportunity we still have.

If we can comprehend the severity of the massive Corona war, we had better prepare ourselves appropriately. As our everyday life goes on today, it is very clear that we have not been able to present the picture of what is about to happen to the entire nation almost overnight. If we could enable people to comprehend the reality, we could motivate them to prepare for it right now. If they knew that their lives are in mortal danger, they would get ready to give out everything to fight for their lives. No sacrifice would seem to be too big. We must get everyone ready to fight for every single life. Together we can win. There is no scope for surrender. Surrender would mean enormous suffering and a huge number of deaths. That would be totally unacceptable. We must get ready to protect every single person. We must get ready with the best organizational and management preparations that we have, in every corner of this country.

It is stunning to see the victory march of the pandemic from one corner of the world to the entire world at lightning speed. China reported an unknown disease to the Beijing office of the World Health Organization on December 31, 2019. Today is March 22, 2020. This reporting was done only 82 days ago. In these 82 days, the virus has ravaged the whole world. Already in many countries army and para-military have been called in to cope with the unexpected situation. It has paralyzed country after country before in what seems like a blink of an eye. It forced people in city after city to take shelter in their homes, isolating themselves from their work, from their near and dear ones, for an unknown number of days.

Many governments who could afford it, sanctioned trillions of dollars to cope with the unexpected human disaster. Heads of all levels of governments are constantly on television and all other media outlets explaining to aggrieved citizens each step they are taking, and seeking their support in this dire emergency. All political parties in the parliaments are unanimously passing laws to combat the situation, making sure that the people have trust in them and remain calm, disciplined, and law-abiding. More than one country and many regional governments, city governments declared state of emergency to allow governments to apply all possible powers to fight the enemy. All around the world people are watching the Coronavirus' scoreboard with utmost anxiety to see what is happening to whom. They are shocked by the soaring number of deaths every day. They feel relieved to see that in some countries the number of new cases has remained zero over some days.

It all happened in 82 days. It turned a 'normal' everyday world into a world which makes all of us feel like we are in a Hollywood horror movie. Nobody is excused.

We Are Lucky

We are lucky that we are not in the list of countries which have gone through this experience already. At least not yet. But we see the ominous signs of it quietly emerging in our country. We must thank our stars that we got 82 days to monitor all these countries where Corona devastation played out step by step, and how each country is struggling with their ingenuity, science, management skill, and determination to fight it out. We got 82 days to learn and prepare. That is our biggest advantage in this war against this deadly disease.

Now we cannot say we did not know it was coming, we did not know how to handle it; or that we did not know what works. If we have not learnt from the experiences of others we can blame only our disinterest. If we have kept our heads buried in the sand all these 82 days, then nobody can help us.

Corona Has no Mercy

Everyone wants to know how many people are infected by Coronavirus once it gets into a country or region. I give here two estimates on the high side, given by two leaders. One is Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany. She was very candid and bold. Before the German people had a chance to get used to the horror of Coronavirus, she went ahead to address the nation, to tell them what is coming. She told them that 60 to 70 percent of the population of Germany would be infected.

A very recent estimate that I want to present comes from the Governor of California in his speech on March 20, 2020. He informed the people of his state that the number of infected persons in California could reach 25 million in the next couple of months. That is, 56 percent of population in his state, in 2 months. The first person with infection in California was identified on January 22, 2020 exactly two months ago. That means, in just four months the number of infected persons would jump from a single person to 25 million. What a lightning speed! Corona has no mercy.

Southeast Asian Experience

A few countries have been able to combat Corona most successfully, among all countries around the world. These are all from Southeast Asia. China, where it all began, has emerged from this pandemic with great success. Reports on new cases have stopped coming for many days now. They accomplished it in 82 days!

Other countries which contained Corona successfully are: South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. All these successful countries followed one common strategy uncompromisingly. This uncompromising strategy was: identify the infected. Completely isolate him or her. Spare others from being infected. The virus will not spread if the infection stops. If we allow one person to infect others, then the number of infected will increase very quickly. Statistically speaking, if one person infects 2.5 people every 5 days, then he alone will infect 406 people in 7 days.

All these successful countries mobilized all their might to identify the infected, and kept them away from others. As a result, the bulk of the people in their countries were not affected. Today Coronavirus affliction has stopped in these countries. What great success stories.

The countries which failed to adopt this strategy are suffering endlessly. They are: Italy, US, UK, Spain, and Switzerland. Their situation is now out of their control. Total number of deaths in Italy has already surpassed the total number of deaths in China, a country with several times more population than Italy.

Which Way Will Bangladesh Go?

Which Way Will Bangladesh-Go? The decision is ours to make. We have already missed great opportunities. But better late than never. We have to mobilize all the capacities of the nation to identify and isolate those who are infected. Even if we cannot be perfect, we can still save many lives. While each life is important, in Bangladesh many lives mean truly a great many lives. We have to devote fully to contain this infection. We do not have to wait to have perfect estimate of the percentage of population that will be infected, because all of us know any percentage of Bangladesh population is an unacceptably large number. Go ahead, try it out in your mind.

Is the Corona Flood Coming to Bangladesh?

Yes, it is almost at our doorstep. There is no example in the world where there were only a few infected persons one day, and somehow we never heard of more people getting infected in the following days. The global experience is it starts as a few drops, then if you let it proceed, it becomes a tsunami in weeks.

How do we hold back the Tsunami? Successful countries showed the way. Their formula is test, test, test. Isolate, isolate, isolate. Identify, isolate. Identify, isolate. Identify, isolate. Never stop doing it. WHO has been repeating the same formula globally umpteen times every day.

This formula reminds us of the old folklore of how the shoe was invented. In order to keep his feet free from dust, a king ordered his subjects to sweep the whole country. A tired subject frustratingly suggested to the King why does he not just cover his feet and keep it free from dust. The King liked the idea and got it done. The concept of the shoe was born.

Why not run after every person who is infected. Why don't we go to the source of the infection. Keep them away from the masses of people. In the beginning, infected people are only a few. The task becomes very simple. They are the ones who will infect millions if they are not identified and isolated. We missed that chance at our airports when infected people started arriving from infected countries. Now they are scattered everywhere and remain untested. The demon of Corona is out of the bottle. Putting it back into bottle is our task. It is a big task now.

Obviously we are already late. But that does not mean we should give up. Giving up means committing mass suicide. We can still do our best to slow down the infection rate and slow down the death rate. We must commit everything we have as a nation to make that happen.

Unfortunately we do not have enough kits to identify the infected. We can start with what we have. Identifying even one person is important. If we can keep him in isolation we protect thousands in coming weeks. Let us not ignore one individual. We must use the kits now. Tomorrow its contribution to the fight will decrease sharply. Let us mobilize the international community to get

more kits. People will be eager to know how many people are identified each day. People need to be informed to get them engaged.

Everybody knows how to prevent Corona, thanks to the communication technology. But we are not showing sufficient urgency. We know what it is, but we are not applying our knowledge. We are saying that physical distance is the only way to save oneself and to save others from this virus. But we do not mind holding a conference to announce these instructions, killing the very essence of the announcement. There is no consistency between what we are saying and what we are doing. Coronavirus is still just a subject of conversation, of news articles, and of TV talk shows. We are watching these, and reading these as if we watch and read news from distant countries. We do not feel It is happening in my family, in my house. I still cannot feel the shock of knowing that very soon, within weeks, I may be the cause of death of my family members. Or that one of them may be the cause of my death. The realization still does not come to us that protecting them from the virus ultimately protects me.

A lot of advice is being given out every day as a matter of routine work. People do not feel any sense of concerns behind those words. Even the people who give the advice not only publicly violate those advice but also publicize them without any feeling of guilt. Time of advising is long over. Now we are at the stage when we should be fighting the enemy the hardest. It is the time to build the resolve of the nation to stand up with all its might to confront possibly the greatest danger in the history of the world.

At this moment of the greatest crisis of the nation we do not see any round-the-clock work without any sleep, and without any food, to build the dam to protect everything we possess from the global Tsunami which we all see coming. One sees only a total lack of urgency and concern everywhere.

I am absolutely intrigued by one question: Are we really so unconcerned about saving our family members, relatives, our friends, and even ourselves, that we show no interest in stopping it? Or we are just in a dreamworld where we think this nightmare cannot be true, or do we think it is a part of fake news campaign.

The Students and The Youth

Always my hope is in the youth of this country. This is the time for them to stand up and save our families, and our country. I appeal to the youth to come forward on their own and build their initiatives as they feel appropriate. Today's youth are super human beings. You are equipped with such technologies that the world has not seen before. Each one of you has unlimited convening power. You can bring the whole world together. Mobilize the youth of Bangladesh, mobilize the youth of the whole world. Save the world. Save Bangladesh. Save the humanity. Build the world the way you want. Be conscious about the unlimited power you possess. This is the time to use it. If you don't use it NOW, it will never be used. Organize yourselves to save your *para (neighbourhood)*, your village, your upojela, your district. And in the process, save the whole country. You already know what to do. Go ahead and do it. These are your families you will be saving. Your parents. Your friends, Your relatives. You will never get a better chance to show your worth than now. In the process you find out how creative you are. How smart you are. Collectively build your own organizations, make your own plans, assign responsibilities among yourselves. In every home you already have your representatives, the youth and students of all ages, in the family, create a series

of networks with them to fight this Tsunami. Make sure you keep your family inside home. Do not let them be exposed to outside contact. Find food for them. Share food with the neighbors who do not have access to food. Entertain them so that they are not bored sitting home day after day. Make them have fun too during these gloomy days. If you put your mind into it, you'll be amazed how much you can do. You have so many volunteers in each home, from 5 year olds to 80 year olds. Your capacity is limitless.

If you live in the city, make a network in your street, in your block, in your neighborhood. Connect with each other.

Social Distancing With Strong Social Mobilization

Youth always came forward to save people in all disasters of Bangladesh. You know the history of youth in this country. You take this history to its peak, by defeating the world's most dangerous and invisible enemy, Corona. This is your day. Grab it. You provide leadership to the youth of the whole world, who are also struggling with the same enemy. You will be a unique force in this fight. Do not pass it up.

This applies to all youth, whether at home or abroad. Everybody can join a local initiative at village level or street level. Those who are located in other countries can organize themselves to provide ideas, supplies, and support. Publicize who is engaged with whom. Involve your Bangladeshi and foreign friends, businesses, institutions to join the fight for your village. This will bring you close to the people you always wanted to be helpful to.

So far we have been talking non-stop about social distancing, and how important it is for fighting Corona virus. We are fully behind it. But we want to put equal emphasis on social mobilization. It is our fellow-feeling which will make us survive. There is no strategy for survival of an individual without survival of the all. The key is social distancing on strong foundation of social mobilization. We must make sure that daily-income-earners do not have to leave home to earn a living. Social mobilization must find ways how 'surplus' families can take care of 'deficit' families. If anybody has to go out for living, it would not be safe for people who live inside home.

Students

The educational institutions have been closed. It was a decision well taken. Students will get the chance to mobilize their families, friends, and neighbourhoods. Junior students can join hands with senior students and other youth to carry out their surveillance and actions to save their own families first, then families next door, ultimately the whole neighborhood. The focus will be to ensure that the virus cannot sneak in. There must be special attention to the old, sick, pregnant mothers, physically and mentally disabled people and the poor.

Through social media, students may share all the information, problems they are facing, and their experiences. This is happening already. They will exchange advice and encouragement among themselves within the country and beyond.

For this purpose, the students with the youth, NGOs, social and business institutions may be able to come forward together or as individual entities. Already BUET students have been applauded by the nation for their contribution to make hand washing popular and easy.

Set Up Free Zones and Keep Them Free

From all considerations there is no doubt that we are about face a national calamity. It will be at the scale which will have the potential of destroying the basic fabric of most of our lives. Even if Coronavirus does not turn out to be the greatest of disasters, we still have to prepare for the worst. We cannot afford the luxury of remaining unprepared. We have to get prepared. While preparing, we must prepare for the worst.

During an invasion by a foreign power it is usual for the resistance forces to set up “liberated areas” or “Free Zones” which are not controlled by the invading army. This gives the population tremendous moral boost. During the invasion of Corona we can set up similar Free Zones, like corona free-villages, upojelas, or cities. We commit all our strength to keep them free. We apply the same technique that countries apply – not allow our enemy to enter our free zones. We strictly practice the formula — test, test, and test, and keep us safe, while continue to work on freeing the occupied territories. Local people have to do it. That is why the social mobilization becomes the most important strategy. The fighters who could keep an area free throughout the invasion period will be remembered in history.

Microcredit Borrowers Are a Disciplined Community

NGOs have microcredit programs in every village of the country.

The microcredit borrowers are a well-trained and disciplined community. They have rich experience of fighting disasters as a community. Without their disaster fighting skill microcredit programs could not have survived through major floods and other local disasters. They may be immediately mobilized to get ready to fight the biggest disaster ever. NGOs can come up with new disaster manuals and protocols for them to prepare them about the do's and don'ts, how to withstand this disaster with discipline and courage. How they can act together even without weekly meetings. How to join forces with others to protect the families and the village. Luckily their financial and organizational strength will be tremendously helpful. They can be the examples in the village to encourage others to stay home continuously and be social leaders to take care of the old and the vulnerable of the entire village.

There are many government, private and social institutions in the country. They have many field staff in the villages and cities. All organizations can mobilize their employees to fight this disaster. Every organization, public or private, must quickly prepare their calamity fighting strategy and train their employees to take responsibility of the assigned villages, or own village, or city or neighborhood. They must know what is their responsibility, who do they report to. Who do they get the help from.

Unanswered Questions Must Have Answers Soon

Along the way we must find answers to many questions:

What will happen to those who live hand to mouth during the disaster?

How will the common people of the country survive?

After the disaster what kind of life will be waiting for the people after going through this experience. Where will they start?

Economic structure of the world may collapse. How does it start functioning again?

How long would it take to get the economy of the world and Bangladesh back in gear?

What would the post Corona world be like? Most likely that the world will have a new birth. The new-born world may not look like the world that we know now. It is strange to think that we will be facing an unfamiliar world within about a year — global framework will change, people will change, institutions will change, most importantly, the thinking of the world will be changed.

The demon of Corona is out of the bottle. Will this monster eat up the whole world? Can the world put the monster completely back in the bottle again? What kind of world will it leave for us?

What kind of Bangladesh will it leave behind for us?

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