

Bangladesh: Trailing Behind the Virus

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Bangladesh, one of the world's most densely-populated countries, officially reported its first Covid-19 case on March 8, 2020. The first death because of the pandemic occurred on March 18, 2020. The viral infection had, by March 31, 2020, infected 51 individuals and claimed 5 lives.

It is suspected that these numbers may not give the full picture of the problem in Bangladesh because of low number of tests done there. According to Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), 1,220 suspected cases had been tested till March 31, 2020 out of which 51 tested positive.

Bangladesh's disease control authority initially prioritized Covid-19 testing for those returning from abroad. However, as the stocks of testing kits increased and more diagnostic facilities began testing, the criteria for tests was expanded to further include those who had previously come in contact with positive cases; people over the age of 60 having comorbidity; symptomatic people with any pre-existing condition; having atypical pneumonia; serious hospitalized patients with corona syndromes; professionals with symptoms who came in contact with different walks of people, according to a report in Dhaka Tribune.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque has claimed that the country currently has 45,000 testing kits and was expecting to receive another consignment of 85,000 kits shortly. The tests would be conducted at 11 medical labs, but as of Sunday, Dhaka Tribune reported that only five facilities were doing the tests.

A low-cost test kit costing \$3 has also been developed indigenously and approved by the government. It is expected to go into mass production after the import of raw material which is being delayed because of disruption in cargo movement due to the global lockdown.

Bangladesh government has been criticized for casually dealing with Covid-19. The cases of the viral infection in the country started with two Bangladeshi expatriates returning from Italy, which is one of the worst hit countries in Europe. Since then thousands of Bangladeshi workers have returned home from other countries and mixed up with local population.

Health authorities in Bangladesh, moreover, at the initial stage followed the policy of building herd immunity, under which the contacts of confirmed cases were not tracked and the focus of the effort was on quarantining the seriously ill only.

However, as of March 26, 2020, the country, in view of WHO recommendation, moved towards a lockdown, closing down schools, banning passenger travel via water, rail and road. Domestic flights were stopped from March 24, whereas entry of visitors who had lived in or visited EU and Iran after March 1, 2020 had been banned until April 15, 2020. Border crossings with India were closed. Commercial flights from China, Thailand and UK were, meanwhile, initially allowed to continue. The ban on passenger flights was expanded on March 29, 2020. Cargo flights have been allowed to function normally.

Following the imposition of the lockdown, Prime Minister Hasina Wajid called out the armed forces to assist the administration in combating the pandemic in the country.

The government also launched an awareness campaign through mass media and cell phone messaging. All government and private offices were, meanwhile, ordered to remain closed initially from March 26, 2020 to April 4, 2020. The lockdown was later extended till April 25.

Questions have been raised about the ability of the domestic health infrastructure to cope with rapid spread of the viral infection in the country. Capital city Dhaka, for instance, has only 29 ICU beds for Covid-19 patients. The country reportedly has a serious shortage of fully equipped facilities with ventilators for handling critically ill, and shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health care workers.

China stepped in to meet Bangladesh's critical requirements by promising to send 10 thousand pieces of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and one thousand infrared thermometers. Bangladesh's vast garment industry quickly shifted to production of PPE gear to meet the national requirement.

A team of public health researchers from BRAC, North South, and Johns Hopkins universities have, in a study titled, 'Covid-19: Cases, hospitalization need, critical care need and mortality projections for Bangladesh' projected that as many as 507,442 people may die because of this outbreak, if the government was not to act aggressively for containing the disease.

Meanwhile, a leaked interagency United Nations (UN) memo said that Covid-19 epidemic could result in "between half a million [to] 2 million" deaths in Bangladesh, if major interventions were not immediately taken.

The pandemic has severely impacted Bangladesh's main exporting sector - the ready-made garments industry, which has reported cancellation of export orders worth US\$2.4 billion. The government later announced a stimulus package of US\$ 5.9 million to support export-oriented industries.

Bangladesh government launched a crackdown against the critics of its handling of Covid-19 epidemic under its stringent Digital Security Act. A team of officials was constituted to monitor mainstream and social media for criticism. The campaign has targeted opposition activists, academics, students, doctors, journalists, and activists. Dozens had been arrested by end of March on the allegation of "spreading rumours" about the outbreak.

The confusion in Bangladesh's strategy was evident at the time of the extension of the lockdown. It happened in the same haphazard manner as it was initially announced. This confusion caused thousands, who had gone out of Dhaka after the announcement of lockdown to return leading to a sudden spike in the number of cases as well.

Update: According to Bangladesh government the number of infected persons on April 11, 2020 was 482. Thirty six patients had died by then.