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OP-ED: Everyone has a right to health

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Their lives are just as valuable REUTERS

The principal priority should be to save as many lives as possible

We all are having a difficult time due to the outbreak of Covid-19. It has created a huge global health crisis that has had a deep impact on the way we perceive our world and our everyday lives

in a thousand different ways. Especially when most of the governments across the world had to enforce lockdowns to suppress the spread of Covid-19, there will be a potential economic crisis worldwide. The case of Bangladesh is not quite different from this. Undoubtedly, there will be a negative impact on Bangladesh's economy due to Covid-19; however, the extent of that negative impact depends on the duration of the crisis.

The story of Bangladesh has changed over the last eleven years in a super positive manner, ie, the growth rate has been very high. The poverty rates have also been drastically reduced. The reduced poverty level from 31.5% to 22% in the last decade is a good example of how Bangladesh has progressed on the economic front. The success of Bangladesh in poverty alleviation was possible due to the pragmatic programs and policies adopted by the Bangladesh Awami League led government under the great leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Despite having successful economic progress, Bangladesh, being one of the most densely populated countries in the world even before the Covid-19 crisis, had a health care system that was already struggling with the increasing burden of disease, the low quality of health care coverage, and an inadequate national budget for health.

The overall health care system in Bangladesh is facing many obdurate challenges, and unfortunately it appears that it is receiving very little priority in terms of national resource allocation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), only about 2.4%-2.8% of GDP is spent on health services. And the expenditure of the government on health care is less than 1% of GDP.

Although the country has a growing private sector primarily providing tertiary level health care services, Bangladesh still does not have a comprehensive health policy to strengthen the entire health system and this puts Bangladesh in a very critical situation to fight Covid-19.

Under such circumstances, on March 7, Bangladesh announced its first confirmed cases of Covid-19 and since then the number of infections in the country has grown significantly. This has put Bangladesh in a critical situation. The government is facing difficulties in ensuring basic public health care for Covid-19 cases as well as in controlling negative economic impacts. As soon as the initial cases started popping up, Bangladesh opted for a contained shutdown.

First, the educational institutions were decisively shut down. There is no question that the economy of Bangladesh is taking a hit in different sectors from the Covid-19 forced shutdown. It has been forecasted by ILO that up to 2 million jobs may be lost in the RMG sector of Bangladesh as global brands are cancelling their orders.

Under such circumstances, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government announced multiple stimulus packages to help the economy recover and minimize medium-term and long-term impacts. In the meantime, millions are receiving emergency cash and food support under various schemes of the government. Non-government organizations, volunteer organizations, and philanthropic individuals are also trying their best to reach out to those most in need. Moreover, the agricultural sector is receiving specific focus to ensure food security.

The government imposed shutdowns on March 26 in a bid to contain the spread of the virus in the country and it has been extended multiple times. However, the lockdown was maintained in a very loose-fashioned way. Furthermore, the government relaxed the lockdown prior to Eid in late May and therefore, despite the shutdowns, thousands, if not millions of people left the capital for their hometowns ahead of Eid.

The markets and shopping malls were allowed to open along with restaurants and mosques. Thereafter, the government decided to reopen almost everything except educational institutions from May 31. Since then, the infections have been breaking records every day.

The main purpose of lockdown is to contain the virus by quickly identifying the contaminated people to protect the population so they can be in quarantine until they recover or need medical assistance without any discrimination. On the other hand, the goal for herd immunity is to delay the outbreak and flatten the curve by progressively getting up to 60% of the population contaminated to prevent the collapse of the economy and health care system.

That requires gradual setting of restrictive measures to protect the elderly and the people at risk, including closing schools, followed by a ban on large gatherings, no transportation interruption, screening tests only for people who have symptoms, almost no border control, freeing up as much space as possible in hospitals, and prioritizing younger healthy patients over older patients.

To reach herd immunity, about 70-80% of the population of Bangladesh may need to get ill and become immune. That means at least around 126 million people will need to catch the virus. That suggests approximately 100 million or 80% would have mild symptoms and may have long-term health implications; around 14 million could have severe or critical cases and need treatment in hospitals. Finally, if we consider a 2% death rate, that means approximately 2.5 million people might lose their lives.

This no doubt is a risky choice -- and given herd immunity is only expected to last 3 to 6 months, does it make sense to embrace herd immunity?

Health care is a basic human right and human rights laws are based on human dignity. Therefore, it demands that all is done to preserve the lives of those who wouldn't otherwise die if they were

not exposed to Covid-19. To accept multiple deaths simply for some greater majoritarian good undermines the dignity of all. Under the right to dignity, preventing exposure to the virus has to be the government's principal priority. Every life matters.

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