

Bangladesh government downplays COVID-19 threat as job losses mount

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The global coronavirus pandemic has begun to impact on the people of Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest countries, despite being downplayed by the Awami League government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

While the government, like its counterparts internationally, is seeking to aid industry owners, workers are bearing the brunt of the crisis.

According to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) there are five confirmed COVID-19 cases, three people have fully recovered, 10 are in isolation and four others are in institutional quarantine.

IEDCR director Meerjady Sabrina Flora told the media that another 2,314 people are under self-quarantine in their homes. These figures, however, are doubtful, given that almost 600,000 people have entered the country since January 21.

Some expatriate Bangladeshi workers living in Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Italy have been reported infected. Around 342 people who arrived from Italy between March 14 and 15 were sent to the army-controlled Ashkona Hajj Camp, near the Dhaka airport, for medical tests under the IEDCR. Following protests over the lack of food in the camp, hundreds of people were released, authorities claiming that they had tested negative.

Bangladeshi health experts told the *Daily Star* yesterday that “entire communities were at risk” over “poor monitoring” of their self-isolation.

Thousands of workers face losing their jobs, mainly in the apparel sector, which is the country's biggest export industry, with 4,000 factories and five million workers.

SS Leather Industries in the Jessore district has placed more than half its workers on leave without pay,

the *Dhaka Tribune* reported on March 7. The factory manager said exports had “dropped to one-third because of the deadly coronavirus spread in China.” The factory is 100 percent export-oriented and sends more than 60 percent of its products to China.

In the Savar garment hub just outside the capital Dhaka, three factories—Raquef Apparels Washing and Packaging Industry, Passion Jeans and Passion Apparels and Ware—were shut down in February, laying off some 3,000 workers due to continued export losses. The companies failed to even pay outstanding wages, but promised to do so by March 29.

On March 6, the Asian Development Bank released a report titled “The economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on developing Asia.” It warned that 894,930 workers would be laid off in Bangladesh if the virus spread.

Clothing companies in Bangladesh depend heavily on imports of raw materials and machinery from China. More than 50 percent of materials for garments and related goods, and about 40 percent of machinery and spare parts for this industry come from China.

The coronavirus pandemic is intensifying the industry's slump. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BGMEA), more than 70 factories closed last year and 1,200 in the past four years, sacking more than 50,000 workers.

The COVID-19 fallout has begun to affect garment exports, which were already worsening during recent months due to the global economic downturn. Garment exports dropped to \$US26.24 billion, down nearly 4.8 percent, during the July-February period compared to the corresponding months the previous year.

In February, export earnings dropped to a little over \$US3.32 billion, down by 1.8 percent compared to the

previous year, primarily due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

To safeguard corporate profits, the BGMEA has put forward a nine-point proposal, including a proposal to reschedule the bank loans of garment industry owners.

Even before the virus spread began, the government had rescheduled defaulted loans last year, amounting to 502 billion taka (\$US6 billion), the highest level for a single year. *Apparel Resources* noted: “Bangladesh’s apparel businessmen are the top loan defaulters.”

After the first reported case of coronavirus in Bangladesh on March 8, people rushed to buy hand sanitisers and face masks, leading to shortages and sending prices soaring by up to about 400 percent.

As popular anxiety rose, the government tried to generate a false sense of relief by offering various promises and advice, laced with contempt. The prime minister said the buying up of safety materials was “nothing other than madness,” adding: “It’s not that this is an imminently fatal virus.” However, she advised people to keep their “hands clean at all times.”

Health and Family Welfare Minister Zahid Maleque even claimed that the virus was not dangerous, unlike Ebola and SARS.

Maleque said 400 hospital beds had been arranged in each divisional city, 100 beds in district-level healthcare facilities and 50 beds in subdistrict-level facilities. However, the standard of these facilities is very low.

A Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) survey conducted in big cities reported this month that over 98 percent of healthcare centres have no proper water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

The government has presented a so-called National Action Plan to tackle the virus. DGHS head Professor Abul Kalam Azad outlined a four-level emergency plan, including testing, quarantining of suspected cases and locking down areas with a high number of patients.

However, the government’s boast of preparedness is a fraud. Professor Muzaherul Huq, founder of the country’s public health foundation, expressed scepticism about the “ability to implement the plan.” He told the *Daily Star* on March 6: “The first task is to prepare the people to execute the plan. Campaigns should be launched immediately. We have not seen any such initiative yet.”

Minister Maleque said authorities would install new

thermal scanners to screen passengers at all the ports of entry, including Dhaka, Chittagong Sylhet airport, Chittagong seaport and the Benapole land port.

Since there are no archway thermal scanners in any of the airports and land ports, health workers check passengers’ body temperature using hand-held infrared thermometers. This can give faulty readings. Ports also lack trained manpower, the *Daily Star* reported on March 11.

The government imposed a ban on “on-arrival visas” for China, Italy, South Korea and Iran, and urged Bangladeshis returning from six countries—China, Italy, South Korea, Singapore, Iran and Thailand—to remain in self-quarantine for 14 days.

The government also asked 10 million Bangladeshi expatriates living overseas not to return now. The DGHS decided to keep passengers arriving from 65 countries in self-quarantine for 14 days. On March 12, restrictions were placed on travel to and from India, Kuwait and Qatar.

Only around 3,000 COVID-19 testing kits were said to be available. The government has allocated just a pittance, \$6 million (500 million taka), to combat COVID-19, while the World Bank has pledged \$100 million. The annual health budget is just 0.89 percent of the gross domestic product, that is, 257.32 billion taka, while the World Health Organisation’s recommendation is 5 percent.

The population’s fear of the government’s negligence in terms of protecting people from the pandemic was heightened by last year’s dengue fever outbreak. The highest-ever number of deaths—164—were recorded, with 101,354 people infected.

A judicial probe criticised the Dhaka North City Corporation and Dhaka South City Corporation—responsible for the administration of the capital—for lack of preparedness.



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