Over 1,170 COVID-19 deaths as pandemic surges in Bangladesh

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The Bangladeshi government's lifting of its COVID-19 lockdown in late May has seen a rapid spread of the deadly virus and record numbers of deaths recorded each day.

According to the latest official figures, there are 87,520 confirmed cases and 1,171 deaths and a desperate crisis in the healthcare system, which only has 1,000 intensive care beds for the country's 162 million people.

Since May the number of burials of COVID-19 victims in the capital Dhaka has increased by a third and twofold in nearby Narayanganj district compared to the previous four months.

The Awami League government lifted its nationwide two-month lockdown on May 31 and, apart from educational institutes, gave the go-ahead for almost all business and government offices, public transport, as well as the garment and other manufacturing industries, to reopen.

However, according to the *New Age*, the back-to-work has led to serious increases in the infection rate. The newspaper reported that the infection rate between May 31 and June 8 rose by nearly 21 percent, compared to 15 percent up until May 30. It also reported that new cases between May 31 and June 8, stood at 23,896, compared to a total of 44,608 in the previous three months (between March 8 and May 30). For the same periods, the death toll was 320 compared to 610.

These figures, however, do not reflect the actual situation in Bangladesh, which has one of the lowest testing rates in the world. According to the Worldometer, the country's testing rate is 2,683 tests per million population and well behind rates in India, Pakistan and Brazil, which are 3,670, 3,419 and 4,707 respectively.

The Awami League administration, which is totally committed to big business and international retailers, ignored warnings by medical experts who publicly opposed any lifting of the lockdown. "It was a big mistake to go for reopening before the infection rate went into decline," said virologist Nazrul Islam, a former vice-chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University. He warned that the country would suffer the consequences.

The World Health Organisation has warned that any relaxation in lockdown measures was only possible if "the positivity rate [percentage of positive cases out of those tested] stays below 5 percent for 14 days in a row." The *New Age* has reported, however, that the "positivity rate was still about 20 percent" when the lockdown was lifted. It also revealed that under a government revised official health protocol "only those with severe [COVID-19] symptoms" were being given hospital treatment.

The failure of garment industry employers to establish adequate coronavirus protective measures has seen rising numbers of workers infected with the deadly virus. Some 264 have tested positive according to a June 5 *Daily Star* article. Garments account for 84 percent of Bangladesh's $US40 billion annual export earnings.

In addition to domestic victims, over 840 Bangladeshi migrant workers, mainly in Saudi Arabia, the UK and the USA, have died of coronavirus. About 10 million Bangladeshi workers are employed in the Middle East and other regions with their remittances constituting over 5 percent of the country's GDP. Over 13,700 workers are infected in Saudi Arabia out of about 2.2 million Bangladeshi workers in that country and about 5,000 are infected in Singapore out of 150,000 working there.

COVID-19 victim Md Rihan described the unsafe

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workers face: “We live in a row of bunk beds in a room with 18 people. We sleep just a metre apart from each other. There are four rooms on our floor where we share toilets, showers, etc.”

Last Monday, three Rohingya refugees were reported to have died of COVID-19, with the number of cases rising to 35. About one million Rohingya are being accommodated in grossly overcrowded refugee camps without proper medical facilities. At Cox’s Bazar, where the camps are located, nearly 100 local people have been infected.

The pandemic has resulted in a rapid rise in unemployment among formal and informal sector workers. About 17,579 workers from 67 garment factories lost their jobs between April and May. According to the Bangladesh Economic Association, around 36 million workers lost their jobs during the lockdown, with the highest losses in the service, agriculture and manufacturing industry sectors.

Garment worker Sampa Akter told the US-based National Public Radio on June 5 that she previously worked as a sewing machine operator in Dhaka for 12 hours a day for $95 a month and also had to look after her disabled brother, her sister and their parents.

“My factory was shut for six weeks. I fell behind on rent. I couldn’t pay my brother's medical bills,” she said. She was only paid 60 percent of her salary during the shutdown and her employer was contemplating a total closure of the plant.

Fearful of an explosion of workers’ strikes and protests, the government’s Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments issued a circular on June 7, urging garment factory owners “not to terminate workers.”

The pandemic has worsened poverty in Bangladesh. The national poverty rate has climbed by nearly 11 percent—from 24.3 percent of the population in 2016 to 35 percent in 2020—according to the Centre for Policy Dialogue, a local think tank.

Lack of adequate healthcare facilities and other medical logistics has severely impacted health care workers as well as army and police personnel who are supposedly enforcing “social distancing.”

Last week the Bangladesh Medical Association revealed that at least three nurses and 33 doctors have died from COVID-19 and almost 3,170 medical personnel have tested positive. At least 6,826 police personnel have also been infected and 21 deaths recorded.

Like its counterparts around the world, the ruling elites in Bangladesh have used the pandemic to enrich themselves. In Bangladesh the government announced a massive $8.56 billion bailout package, or nearly 2.5 percent of Gross Domestic Product, for the garment industry. Only $595 million of this was spent on workers’ wages.

The government also plans to announce an $11.8 billion COVID-19 stimulus package in its budget for the next financial year which will be tabled on Wednesday. GDP growth, however, is expected to drop to between 2.0 and 3.0 percent from a previously projected 8.2 percent. The World Bank has decided to provide a $250 million loan which will see even more ruthless social attacks on the masses by the Awami League administration.

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