Bangladesh pandemic cases surpass half a million, with over 7,810 deaths

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Officially, COVID-19 pandemic cases in Bangladesh stand at over 524,000 and deaths at more than 7,810, as medical experts criticise the callous disregard of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government over its handling of the health emergency.

Nine months have already passed since the first COVID-19 related cases and deaths were reported: three cases on March 8 last year and on March 18, the first death.

The government's under-estimation of the extent of the crisis was exposed after its figures were compared with those in other countries, which adopted the criminal "herd immunity" policy allowing the virus to run unchecked.

When India surpassed 500,000 cases, and recorded over 15,000 deaths, it had conducted 0.14 tests per thousand people; when the US, the worst hit country in the world, was about to surpass 500,000 cases, recording over 18,000 deaths, it had conducted 0.50 tests per thousand people. Yet, Bangladesh has performed only 0.09 tests per thousand people—one of the lowest in the world, according to data on December 2, the day the number of cases reached the half million mark.

The Bangladesh Peace Observatory, under the Centre for Genocide Studies at Dhaka University, reports that it counted a total of 2,205 deaths of those with virus symptoms between March 22 and November 28, in addition to other figures from state authorities. It prepared the reports based on information from 25 media outlets.

As of January 8, a total of 3.33 million tests have been carried out in Bangladesh. Last week, the country's health ministry reported just over 13,600 tests, which was a decline from the maximum of 19,000 on December 15. The decrease in the number of tests has taken place as medical experts insist that at least 50,000 tests should be carried out daily.

On January 6, Hasina addressed the nation on the second anniversary of her Awami League government. She pompously declared, "The infection rate and death toll in Bangladesh are still quite low. We are trying our best to keep the pandemic under control and have promised to bring the vaccines to Bangladesh swiftly."

She prayed for those who have lost their lives during the pandemic and thanked the frontline workers, including the doctors, health workers, the armed forces and field-level workers for battling the pandemic courageously.

However, contrary to the advice provided by medical experts at the beginning of the outbreak of the virus, the government tacitly approved the policy of herd immunity. Hasina has downplayed the pandemic, previously commenting that it was "not that deadly."

Medical and infectious disease specialist Professor Ridwanur Rahman commented that "the government's strategy against COVID-19 has been suicidal" from the beginning. "From screening at the ports, and quarantine, to testing and contact tracing—all were being carried out in name only," he said.

Serious shortages of personal protective equipment and the provision of substandard equipment have seen hundreds of healthcare workers, including 112 doctors, die as of December 28.

In June, Bangladesh imposed a fee for all COVID-19 tests and treatment, declaring that it wanted to discourage unnecessary tests. According to the official announcement, people have to pay 200 takas (about $US2.35) if they provided their samples at collection booths. Payment of 500 takas is required if samples are collected from homes.

The government has imposed this burden on ordinary

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working people, as the vast majority has no access to even the limited state-run healthcare facilities.

In October, the *Business Standard*, published December 14, cited research carried out by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) based in Dhaka. Interviews were conducted with 1,200 households, consisting of those urban poor on benefits provided by the state health card system, and offered to poor families.

According to its report, only 9 percent of households had health cards, while 32 percent said that they were completely unaware of the health-card system.

An article last week in *Daily Star* on social inequality in Bangladesh reported that six out of the top 10 poorest districts of Bangladesh had no pandemic testing centre.

Shahidul Mondol, a 40-year-old rickshaw-puller living in Dhaka with his family, had to send his family members back to his farming village in Bogura, about 190 km from Dhaka, because of lost earnings due to the pandemic.

He told the *Business Standard*, "Whenever someone in my family falls sick, I go to a local pharmacy to obtain medicine. If you visit doctors, you have to unnecessarily pay for the tests. I do not have the money for that."

In her January 6 speech, Hasina also boasted about providing 1.2 trillion takas, or 4.3 percent of gross domestic product, as a stimulus package. She claimed that the package was to benefit the poor. However, it actually benefits big business while poverty deepens around the country.

Even before the pandemic, the year 2019 saw the urban and rural poor experience "food insecurity." A survey, conducted during December last year by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, found that "around 12 percent of poor urban households had no food in their home and over 21 percent of households could not access the food that they wanted," *New Age* reported.

The education of children in poor families has been disrupted, while well-off families have the advantage of accessing available online resources, along with government educational programs.

Educational institutions were closed in March with the lockdown. The media reported that various studies and researchers found that "ad hoc government measures to facilitate the education of students at home, through TV and radio broadcasts and online classes, were unable to reach an estimated 9 million students.

This underscores the hypocrisy of Hasina, who once said, "We want to free the country from poverty. It is impossible to make a country poverty-free without education."

Tens of thousands of garment and informal sector workers have lost their jobs, while other workers have been employed under "new normal" conditions without any facilities for adequate protection.

Attempting to capitalise on the situation to implement pay cuts, the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters' Association—a major body of garment owners—has requested that the labour ministry suspends the legal provision for a 5 percent annual increment for garment workers.

According to a recent Transparency International Bangladesh report, about 1.4 million workers out of the 4 million in the garment and other export-oriented industries, have not received any share of the stimulus package, despite the government's pledge. Between 65,000 and 100,000 workers became jobless, or retrenched without benefits.

This is despite the fact that the government has already provided the garment sector with $7.4 billion in financial support.

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