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Covid-19: A transnational observation

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The lockdown period has been difficult for many Bangladeshis who survive on their day's earnings. Also, the lack of awareness of the consequences of community transmission of Covid-19 might have long-term detrimental effects on the health and well-being of the Bangladeshi people

Illustration: Nahid Afrose Kabir

I am a Bangladeshi-born woman and a naturalised citizen of Australia.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, I was in Bangladesh. Then I travelled to Australia on a special flight from Dhaka to Melbourne, which was arranged by the Australian government.

I have been observing the Covid-19 situation in both countries and trying to figure out how we should holistically respond to the pandemic.

I will begin with my observations on the crisis in Bangladesh – my birthplace.

Bangladesh is a developing country with a total land area of 147,570 km² and a population of about 161.4 million people (as per the last count of 2018).

It is predominantly a Muslim country. About 39 per cent of the population lives in urban areas, according to the Worldometer 2020. The average monthly income of Bangladeshi people is approximately USD 100–200, as per BIBM Lecture series, 2020.

Before the pandemic, the Bangladesh poverty rate stood at 24 per cent.

However, the World Bank has predicted that if Covid-19 is not seriously tackled, Bangladesh's growth will be reduced by almost 5 percentage points, according to a report published in Observer Research Foundation on May 4, 2020.

The Bangladeshi government has taken steps to combat the spread of novel coronavirus in the country.

One of the first steps was to put 142 Italy-returnees in quarantine in the Ashkona Hajj camp. The report was published on March 15, 2020, in The Daily Star.

The Bangladesh government also successfully evacuated citizens from China in January and quarantined and reintegrated them, according to an article published in The Observer Research Foundation on May 4, 2020.

Bangladesh reported the first death from Covid-19 on March 18, 2020, reported Reuters.

The situation in the World's largest refugee camp appears critical as two Rohingya refugees, residents of the overcrowded camp in Cox's Bazar, tested positive with the novel coronavirus.

As of June 4, the total number of cases rose to 57,563 and 781 people have died due to Covid-19 in Bangladesh.

On March 23, the Bangladesh government declared a 10-day "general holiday" from March 26 to April 4, in a bid to contain the spread of coronavirus in the country. This was later extended several times and continued till May 30.

In the highly populated Bangladesh, controlling peoples' movements have been difficult.

Traditionally, Bangladeshi Muslims have enjoyed going to shopping malls for their Eid celebrations. This year, the government opened the malls ahead of the Eid and many people including some of those infected with Covid-19, went out to the malls for Eid-ul-Fitr purchases, according to a report published in The Business Standard on May 21, 2020.

Some people in Bangladesh live in informal urban settlements and do not have running water so, they cannot maintain the necessary hygiene practices.

Many people who live hand to mouth must go out to earn their living. Reopening garment factories during the Covid-19 period has increased the risk of transmitting the virus in the community.

Some infected people have been concealing their symptoms to avoid stigma, social isolation or quarantine. Many people believe that if they get infected, their houses will be locked down and their family members will be treated negatively.

Frontline workers are at risk of Covid-19 transmission. According to a report published in the United News of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Doctors Foundation said that more than 600 doctors at both government and private hospitals got infected with coronavirus while treating patients.

There has been a lack of personal protective equipment and a shortage of hospital beds in the country reported Al Jazeera on April 24.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's leadership during the Covid-19 crisis has been commendable. The civil society, the law enforcement sectors, non-government organisations, religious leaders, academics, researchers, volunteers, and the frontline workers in Bangladesh have been doing a lot to protect their fellow citizens.

Despite all these efforts, it is very difficult to maintain hygiene, social distancing and isolation in Bangladesh and so Covid-19 cases continue to rise.

In a densely populated country like Bangladesh, enforcing strict social distance is a big challenge. Photo: Saikat Bhadra

Australia

My host country Australia is a developed country. It has a population of almost 25 million and a land area of 7.692 million square kilometres.

About 86 per cent of the population lives in urban areas, according to reports from Worldometer 2020. It is predominantly a non-Muslim country. About 52 percent of the total population is Christian, while only 2.6 percent of the total population is Muslims, according to statistics of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016.

The average monthly income of Australians is approximately USD 4,354 (ABS, 2019).

The Australian economy has been greatly affected by the coronavirus pandemic and Australia is heading towards a recession. The universities have a serious shortfall of overseas students, resulting in a huge deficit.

Almost one million Australians have lost their jobs since the social-distancing measures were introduced. The Reserve Bank expects the economy to take a 10 per cent hit, reported news.com.au on May 5, 2020.

In Australia, the growth in new coronavirus cases is slowing but experts say there is still a long way to go in containing the spread of the virus. There is still an ongoing fear of community transmission

As of June 4, the total number of positive cases of Covid-19 was 7,240, and the death toll stood at 102, according to the latest statistics of world metre.

The Australian government has eased some lockdown restrictions but Australians are still directed to stay 1.5 meters away from each other at public places; maintain good hand washing hygiene; stay home if feeling sick; get the Covid-19 test, and download the COVID Safe app (health.gov.au).

Cafes and restaurants have been permitted to open and allow maximum of 10 patrons at one time with an average density of four-square meter between every two persons (health.gov.au, 22 May 2020).

On March 27, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that "all passengers arriving in Australia will be subject to the Australian Government's mandatory quarantine period of 14 days at their first Australian destination".

Travellers are provided with accommodation to stay in during this period (Australian Border Force Message).

At that time my husband and I were in Bangladesh. Our family lives in Australia, and I was missing them. So, we decided to travel to Australia and on May 10, we arrived in Melbourne, and for the 14-day quarantine period, we were accommodated in the Crown Promenade Hotel in Southbank, Melbourne, a five-star hotel.

Our food was provided through room service. During our 14-day quarantine period, we were not allowed to leave our room. Security officials were placed on every floor of the hotel to monitor our mandatory quarantine.

Later, travellers moving to another state had to self-quarantine for another 14 days.

Perhaps the strict quarantine exercise has assisted the Australian government to control the coronavirus in a short period.

But enforcing strict quarantine would be difficult for Bangladesh, which is densely populated and lacks resources.

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Covid-19 might have long-term detrimental effects on the health and well-being of the Bangladeshi people.

Compared to the Australian situation, the condition in Bangladesh is far more complex.

Yet Covid-19 is a global crisis, and I sincerely hope that this disease can be controlled globally, and we all can get back to our normal lives.

***Nahid Afrose Kabir**, is Professor of History in BRAC University, Bangladesh; a Visiting Researcher at the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, USA; and Adjunct Professor at Edith Cowan University and The University of South Australia, both in Australia*