

COVID-19 infections rapidly spread across Bangladesh

By Rohantha De Silva
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COVID-19 is rapidly spreading across Bangladesh with deadly consequences for working people and rural toilers. On Thursday, the total number of official cases rose to 234,889 with nearly 2,700 new infections reported in the previous 24 hours and the number of people killed by the virus that day increasing by 48, to a total 3,083.

These figures, however, substantially underestimate the actual situation in Bangladesh where testing, as in the rest of South Asia, is very low. Up until July 23, just over 1 million tests had been conducted in a country with more than 168 million people—a testing rate of 0.65 percent. One positive case is recorded for every five tests carried out in Bangladesh.

This catastrophic situation is a direct result of the ruling Awami League-led government's contempt for the lives of the masses and the woefully unprepared Bangladesh public health system, which has been run down by meagre financial allocations by successive governments, Awami League and Bangladesh National Party alike.

Under conditions where the country's economy is heavily dependent on remittances from tens of thousands overseas Bangladeshi workers, reports emerged last month about medical facilities producing fake coronavirus test reports. These reports are sold to Bangladeshi workers attempting to return to their jobs in Europe or northeast Asia. In response, several countries have started imposing travel restrictions.

Italy recently found 65 positive cases among 1,600 Bangladeshis who reentered the country holding negative COVID-19 reports. On July 8, Italy forced 165 Bangladeshis on two Qatar Airway flights that landed in Rome to return to Bangladesh without testing them. Only 14 Bangladeshis with Italian passports and a pregnant woman were allowed into the country.

Italy, Japan, China, and South Korea, where substantial numbers of migrant Bangladeshi live, have now banned flights from Bangladesh. Currently more than 140,000 Bangladeshis live in Italy, which is one of the largest sources of remittances.

Bangladeshi migrants, who use Italy as a stepping stone into Europe and North America, are no longer allowed to visit the Schengen Area—the 26 European countries that allow people to travel freely across their borders.

In an attempt at damage control, the Awami League government arrested Mohammad Shahed, Dr. Sabrina Chowdhury and her husband for selling the fake test reports at \$US60 per document. Shahed has two unlicensed hospitals in Dhaka; Chowdhury and her husband operate a Dhaka laboratory. The government has also made it mandatory for air passengers to have negative virus test reports issued by one of 16 approved laboratories.

While the government will no doubt find other scapegoats, the fake report rackets could not have occurred without political backing from the highest echelons of the administration. According to Transparency International, Bangladesh ranks 146 in 180 countries in the global corruption index.

The increase of COVID-19 infections across Bangladesh is impacting on those seeking to legally migrate to the West on student visas and family reunions. Tasneem Siddiqi, the chair of Dhaka-based Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit, recently told the *Nikkei Asian Review* that “about 90 percent of student migrants [will] stay back” and would likely to miss the next semester.

Bangladesh has around 12.5 million migrant workers overseas and in the 2019–2020 financial year sent a record \$18.3 billion back home. Remittances and

apparel exports have underpinned the average annual growth of 7 percent, the pandemic is drastically impacting on the economy. Exports, including garments, have shrunk by more than 25 percent to \$34 billion in the 2019–2020 fiscal year.

The ruling Awami League this year has only allocated \$3.4 billion or less than 1 percent of the GDP to the health sector. According to the World Bank, an estimated 67 percent of all medical costs are borne by households “through out-of-pocket payments” making it difficult for the poor to access proper healthcare.

Like their counterparts around the world, the Bangladeshi ruling elite are safeguarding their profit interests at the expense of the working class and rural toilers. The lives of the ordinary people are just disposable material to be used for the enrichment of big business.

In April, the World Bank warned that the virus will force some 50 million into poverty in Bangladesh. While the pandemic is heavily impacting on migrant workers and apparel sector employees, the informal sector is the hardest hit. Missing one day’s work can lead to skipping meals, cutting down on medicine or being forced to sell personal assets.

Mustafizur Rahman, a spokesman for the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a Bangladeshi think tank, told the media that COVID-19 meant “the number of jobless people has increased drastically and income has fallen significantly.” A CPD report in early June warned that the overall poverty has risen by 10 percent and could return to 40 percent.

According to the World Food Program, 25 percent of Bangladeshis are already facing food insecurity and 11 million suffer from chronic hunger. On top of COVID-19, Bangladeshis have been hit with devastating floods that have affected five million people, displacing hundreds of thousands of families and killing 119 people.

The disastrous impact of the pandemic in Bangladesh typifies the situation facing millions of workers, rural toilers and the poor across South Asia.

India is currently the worse affected with over 35,000 deaths and 1,580,000 cases, followed by Pakistan 5,924 deaths and 27,700 confirmed cases.

These figures, however, underestimate the real situation, according to University of York public health expert Professor Kamran Siddiqi. He told the BBC this

week: “Many deaths are not reported within the vital registration system and the causes of deaths are incorrectly classified.”

All this is a graphic exposure of the political bankruptcy of the ruling classes in Bangladesh and across South Asia.

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