

The Business

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Workers' Day

May Day has become the commemorative day internationally to pay homage to the Chicago martyrs of 1886, killed while demonstrating for an eight-hour working day. This incident served to strengthen the resolve of workers all over the world to fight for their basic rights. With regard to workers' rights in Pakistan, their state is pathetic. The total labour force of Pakistan comprises approximately 37.15 million people, with 47 percent in the agriculture sector, 10.50 percent in the manufacturing and mining sectors and remaining 42.50 percent in various other professions. The practice of child labour is widespread. According to estimates, eight to ten million children between the ages of five and 14 are part of the labour force clearly violating the international laws. Afghan refugees also constitute a considerable size of the country's labour force. Unaware of their rights, the majority of workers is illiterate and untrained, a waste of valuable human resource and a sheer neglect on the part of the government.

The Constitution clearly explains the duty it imposes on the government for upholding the rights of workers and labourers. Even in the presence of unambiguous definition, the workers in Pakistan live in miserable conditions. Under the Constitution, labour is regarded as a 'concurrent subject', which means that it is the responsibility of both the federal and provincial governments. However, the provincial governments never showed interest in both the legislation and implementation of the rules and regulations of the labour laws. Bonded labour is one of the classic examples in this regard. Despite its condemnation through various forums, it continues without any restriction, especially at brick kilns and in agriculture sector. The government has not been able to implement the 1992 Bonded Labour Abolition Act in letter and spirit. Bonded Labour Fund, established in 2001, as part of the National Policy and Plan of Action remains unutilised.

Long and arduous working environment, insufficient wages and poor or no medical and security arrangements are the bane of the labourers life. We are members of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and basic labour rights are enshrined in our Constitution too. Article 37(e) of the Constitution makes provision for securing just and humane conditions of work, ensuring that children and women are not employed in vocations unsuited to their age or sex. Under the Factories Act, 1934, no adult employee who is above 18 can be required or permitted to work in any establishment in excess of nine hours a day and 48 hours a week. However, mockery of labour laws still contin-

Shortages in hospitals

Those who underestimate the danger of the coronavirus epidemic ignore the disastrous impact that the spread of the virus can have on the healthcare system of a country. Widespread transmission of the virus leads to an overburdening of the healthcare system, something which the already weak medical infrastructure of developing countries cannot afford.

This outcome is precisely what we are seeing now. As the government struggles to enforce a lockdown, the surge in coronavirus cases across the country is already leading to shortages in hospitals. According to Dr Qaisar Sajjad, the Secretary-General of the Pakistan Medical Association, there is 75 to 80 percent occupancy of ICU beds, while private hospitals have stopped taking COVID-19 patients on ventilators. There is a very real fear that if the number of coronavirus cases reaches 25,000, as predicted, public hospitals will not have ventilators for seriously ill patients. In government hospitals, even where there are enough ICUs,

there is a lack of specialists who can manage ICU patients.

COVID-19 has caused enormous impediments for healthcare systems across the world. We have seen strong, well-functioning healthcare systems, as in Italy, crumble and reduced to a situation where doctors had to deem which patients were worthy of intensive care due to the extreme shortage of resources. Having seen the struggle of these countries, Pakistan needs to start capacity-building now in order to prevent our hospitals from having to take this sort of distributive justice approach. Late arrival of patients to hospitals, less testing and non-availability of intensive care specialists are some of the top causes for the surge in COVID-19 fatalities - this means the government has to double down on tracing coronavirus cases early to prevent further spread.

This is a make-or-break time for Pakistan and we cannot afford to take it lightly. The signs are already there - KP became the first province to exceed 100 COVID-19 deaths.

Need to tailor lockdown

MUHAMMAD USMAN

The Coronavirus continues to rage globally undiminished with its deadly threat to humanity from health disaster to hunger. The world at large, is in quandary about which path it should take to coup with twin threats in tandem. Even developed countries are finding it difficult to grapple with puzzle albeit their immediate worry is not hunger but incomprehensible extreme downturns in their economy. Main reason is uncertainty which this novel virus is unleashing multiply and abundantly. Its trajectory still remains unknowable. This may cause humanity to land in unprecedented and uncharted territory. Earlier humanity has seen epidemics, now it is faced with a pandemic. Probably this is first time, it is experiencing a pandemic. Consequently, a number of new realities have cropped up which ought to be taken into cognizance by nations to update their response to escape its dreadful consequences.

Whatever, world is doing against Coronavirus, it is primarily aimed at saving their healthcare system, being overwhelmed by a multitude of patients. The aim is not its elimination but slowing down its spread to manageable levels until a vaccine/treatment is found. The probability of having a vaccine/treatment "anytime in the next calendar year is incredibly small" said, England's Chief Medical Officer. During intervening period, world has to live with it.



It has to improvise socially/functionally to keep itself afloat. After having fought first bout with Coronavirus, some developed countries are also cautiously considering to reopen their economies while keeping social distancing in place. It is a sober admission of the fact that threat would continue to hang just around the corner. This may make another round with even more vengeance if they lower their guards. It is true that Coronavirus attacks rich and poor alike but commonality ends when it comes to its impacts; economy/hunger. "COVID-19 is potentially catastrophic for millions who are already hanging by a thread," said a Chief Economist at World Food Program. Factually, national lockdowns and social distancing measures are drying up livelihoods which in return could open floodgates of hunger/starvation in countries where a large portion of their population is living below poverty line.

Unfortunately, Pakistan falls in this category whose about 34% population was already living below poverty line. Indefinite lockdown would only accentuate the problem by stunning proportions. Besides, this human cost, there is also another cost of people dying because of non-availability of treatment for other afflictions. So far impoverished section of our society has survived only on charity and financial assistance provided by the government. Both have limitations of their own. In Pakistan, advocates of lockdown plead its continuation at least for three more weeks to

flatten the curve as have been done by a number of countries in the world. Due to our limited capacity of testing, trace and treat, we may not be able to achieve this proposition for long time. In process, one thing is certain. It is economy which may bust beyond redemption while inviting hunger to our alleys and streets. In its wake, possibility of violent crimes/rioting, cannot be easily ruled out. It may be borne that model which is being pleaded is of developed countries whose main concern is not hunger but slowdown of economy along with fear of deaths by Coronavirus. We need to tailor our response according to our environments, not as of affluent nations. We need to take calculated risk to ward off threat of hunger also. Admittedly, we have not tested enough to determine extent of Coronavirus amongst us but one aspect is heartening that our tally of deaths, caused by Coronavirus not alarming. Conversely, we should have known this by now. This needs to be factored appropriately into our calculations.

Our situation is becoming precarious with each passing day but our media screens continue to remain buzz with debate on lockdown or partial/smart lockdown. There is no realization that time is money and we are poor. Contrarily, urgency of situation called for a unified response, much earlier. Assessed in cold logic, our salvation lies in selective lockdown and precautionary measures. Now it has approval of popular opinion as well as conventional wisdom. In a gallop survey,

80% respondents have supported actions of federal government to handle the situation. Its stance is of partial lockdown coupled with social distancing/other precautions. There is no time to build consensus. It is better to leave dissenting voices aside. In phases, government should reopen industries/businesses. The priority should go to those which are essential to meet demands internally because externally, uncertainty may rule indefinitely. Importance of agriculture sector cannot be overemphasized in such difficult times. Under no event, government should get lulled into complacency about precautionary measures. Notably, all unnecessary social gatherings/interactions be prohibited. The wearing of masks be made compulsory for people when outside their homes. Non-observance of these be made punishable offences. The charity has helped greatly to save impoverished people from hunger, it could do it far more if better managed. Under Ehsas Programme, government has data of deserving indigent people/their families. These families could be assigned to a willing affluent family depending upon its extent of charity. It would help avoid duplication. By this measure, we may enliven culture of brotherhood, introduced by our Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) between Migrants of Makkah and Ansars of Medina. By this measure, we may be able to invoke Allah's blessing which is most sought in such an ordeal.

— The writer, a retired Lt Col, is freelance columnist based in Islamabad.



The invisible frontline

DR AYESHA RAZZAQUE

Administrations across the world are facing the mammoth challenge of the Covid-19 outbreak. In Pakistan, where the number of infected people just crossed 11,000, the story is no different. All concerned departments - doctors, health officials, line departments, police, the army, etc - are trying their utmost to curtail the spread of the coronavirus.

The last few weeks have also reframed our understanding of who exactly does (or does not) constitute an essential worker. While the membership of medical and law enforcement professionals in this club was always understood, prolonged lockdowns have expanded it to include sanitary workers, everyone enabling goods supply chains (postal/delivery workers, truck drivers, farm, factory, warehouse, retail workers), telecom professionals, journalists and media professionals, etc. Together, these are a lot of people that remain vulnerable for as long as this pandemic does not die down, who require personal protection equipment (PPE) of some kind. While the (initial) lack of PPE for medical professionals received wide coverage and is being addressed, many of the other essential workers serving alongside them are still without.

Specifically, the role of the police during a public health crisis like this one is vaguely defined. It is tasked to perform arduous tasks without consideration of its capacity and human resources. The general public was caught generally uninformed about what precautionary measures to take, while the police were equally unprepared and lacked standard operating procedures to follow during such an outbreak. Patients testing positive for Covid escaped

from isolation facilities, and many international travellers either flaunted rules or went into hiding. Naturally, the job of tracking such people down and taking them back to isolation wards fell to the police. However, sometimes this job required the police, who are untrained for this situation, to go beyond the call of duty and establish quarantine areas and start Covid awareness drives. During the course of doing their jobs, many police officers contracted the coronavirus while convincing people who were not ready to follow the instructions regarding lockdown. An example of this would be the recent cases of SP Operations Mardan and an SHO at Mangah. So far, about 16 policemen in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have tested positive, while another 15 policemen were reported infected in Sindh. The police force was caught unprepared, without PPE, masks, or gloves, to deal with a situation that is without precedent in most people's lifetimes. Like some medical professionals, they had to improvise and cobble together makeshift PPE. Nevertheless, with no other option, the police force remained at its job. The government promised resources for the purchase of PPE, but nothing has reached the police on duty to assuage their fears, yet. After weeks and weeks, some members of the police force I talked to shared that there is no doubt that most officials working to curb the spread are wearing out, physically and mentally. Their greatest fear is that they might take this virus home and infect their families, due to lack of protection and unsafe working environment. This fear is captured in one particular video that went viral of an SHO on duty at Mangah, in which he is seen pleading with people to stay at home by highlighting his own plight. He had not gone

home to his family for days for fear of infecting his children. On the flip side, we also saw a number of videos circulate during the early days of the lockdown in which law enforcement was seen meting out corporal punishment to members of the public for violating lockdown orders. The senior police command took notice of the issue and took quick and strict action against violators in their own ranks and issued SOPs for dealing with lockdown violations. Thereafter, many images of the police helping the destitute came to fore on the television and social media.

Meanwhile, contradictory statements coming from health officials, the prime minister, the chief ministers and the civil administration are further complicating the situation. It is sometimes days before these inconsistencies are resolved and frontline workers understand what their orders are. When doctors in Quetta protested for their legitimate demand for PPE, the police contained them, without wearing as much as a facemask. When traders in Karachi broke the lockdown and attempted to reopen their businesses, it was the police that had to confront them, again. When mosque congregations, egged on by the religious establishment, broke lockdown rules it was up to the police to stop them, again.

In each instance, the evening talk-show debates centered around the demands of doctors/traders/religious clerics, etc, but notably talked about the police men and women that stand on the other side. When I tried to learn more about how law enforcement is coping with the situation, I could find very little reporting. The men and women of the police are fighting alongside medical professionals on the frontlines and doing their bit to push, pull and bend the infection curve downward.

The undocumented

FATIMA RAZZAQ

Pakistan's undocumented economy has always been a major reason behind its many problems, ranging from fiscal and current account deficits to inflation and poverty to high unemployment rates to being placed on the grey list by the FATF.

Now, as the global economy is hit hard by a pandemic, new implications of this informal economy are unraveling. An unregulated donation distribution system, in the wake of the current virus outbreak, is hindering the government and civil society's agenda of saving the poor from virus and hunger at the same time. The government has allocated Rs144 billion as a corona relief fund. People have also distributed ration generously on their own. Lack of coordination among people in a region and between the civil society and the government has led to a scenario where many are confessing that they got groceries far beyond their needs. Meanwhile, it can't be denied that there will be many white-collared who have nothing in their pockets as well as in their kitchens. At first a very simple solution comes to mind: people submit their donations into a government-created pool and the government can then distribute it evenly. But long-standing mistrust for government authorities and, in fact, the government's inability to respond expeditiously and efficiently to crisis situations will keep the majority from being part of government-led efforts. This trust deficit cannot be bridged overnight nor can the government become efficient immediately.

Consequently, there is a need for creating an individual-led, government-managed system for relief activities. Such a system will ensure that individuals hand over their donations to the needy themselves but the government keeps a track of who has received donations. The system and data required for the purpose is already in place to some extent in the form of the NADRA database, BISP, Ehsas Programme and biometric SIM card verification. This data can be used in various

ways for uniform charity distribution and identification of more vulnerable families and zones all across the country. For example, the receiver could provide his/her phone number to the donor and the donor would send a code (as per amount of charity) and the receiver's phone number to some stipulated number. After data check against the receiver's number, the receiver will receive a code from the system that would be sent by the donor to that government designated number to finish the process. A little effort by the government to develop such a system and by donors to use this system could be a way forward to tackle this situation much effectively. Such joint ventures by the public and the government will help boost confidence and so people will act as agents of change rather than silent receivers or spectators. Such endeavors have a tinge of neo-liberal economics where nationals have a more active role to play for their respective nations and governments keep a track of resource flow to act as regulators. Anyhow, in this case Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of the neo-liberal economic model transcends into Individual Social Responsibility. Such a system, once in place, will also help the Pakistani government take swift and calculated relief measures for flood-hit victims every year. This digital system can also be modified to incorporate the Zakat distribution system. A well-regulated charity distribution system will discourage professional beggars and alleviate poverty as envisaged for a welfare state. Previously, manual handling of large data pertaining to the population must have been a hurdle in the way of documenting the economy, taking appropriate policy measures and coordinating relief activities. In this age of technology, smart tech use can solve many problems at the micro as well as macro level, but ignoring this handy tool will be a folly. The IMF has already declared, the global economy is set to experience a severe downturn. So only organized and synchronized relief measures can cushion the impact of this crisis.

Letters to the Editor

It's on the state

This refers to the news report 'Ulema to ensure implementation of guidelines for mosques: PM Imran Khan.' The report quotes Imran Khan as saying "The procedure for the mosques was worked out in consultation with religious scholars and they took responsibility for ensuring its implementation". He is also reported to have said that it was the common responsibility of every individual in society to ensure social distancing to prevent the spread of virus, which is true. However, PM Imran Khan does not stand absolved of his responsibility by passing on the responsibility for violations of social-distancing and other requirements in mosques simply because it is the govern-

ment's duty to protect human lives and to stop and punish those who put these at risk. And this is what necessitates the creation of institutions like the police and courts. And there is no way Imran Khan can pass on this responsibility to the ulema who, at best, can act in an advisory capacity, and do not have the policing powers to enforce compliance. Also, not all prayer leaders follow the advice of the group of ulema who made the agreement with the government. Imran Khan has to show some courage and do the needful.

S R H Hashmi
KARACHI

Reopen parliament?

As the lockdown continues in a limited

capacity, questions are being raised over the role of parliament and how business must resume in the days ahead. Parliamentarians from across party lines have been seen working to provide relief in their constituencies but, as many observers have rightly pointed out, all other essential organs of the state continue to function while the assemblies stay shut. There is no doubt that parliament must also start functioning in some shape or form.

The practical considerations are not altogether insurmountable, given all representatives would have to come to Islamabad for an in-person session anyway. They do not have to physically attend the session in the assemblies - video links for homes and offices in Is-

lamabad would overcome this issue. This can only happen after hurdles such as implementing safe practices and finding a way around quorum numbers have been surmounted.

Even so, no amount of safety standards will completely eliminate and given that calls for a re-opening are gaining traction, the significance of holding a parliament session is only dictated by the value the representatives derive from these meetings. There are associated risks with going back to work in the midst of this pandemic. If the parliamentarians insist that it is important to do so, let us hope they make it worth their while.

Qazi Jamshed Alam Siddiqui
LAHORE