

Testing for the virus

KHURRAM HUSAIN

Look at the number of tests for the coronavirus that have been performed around the country and the number of positive cases and you will notice something. Take the number of positive cases as a percentage of total tests done in each province and you will discover that there is wide variation in this percentage among the provinces. More specifically, Punjab scores the lowest percentage whereas KP, Sindh and Balochistan are more or less the same. This is meaningful because the testing capacity of the country is limited whereas the demand for tests is rising as more and more people come to be infected, and especially if we are talking of pivoting towards 'smart lockdowns' because those are underpinned by a massive and rigorous testing regime. Without smart testing, you cannot have a smart lockdown.

Here is the percentages breakdown between the provinces, based on May 25 data from the World Health Organisation Situation Report for Pakistan. Punjab scores 9.9 per cent, meaning this is the percentage of people who have tested positive from among the entire population of those who have been tested. Sindh scores 14.4pc, KP comes in at 15.3pc and Balochistan at 16pc. Islamabad reports its data separately and scores 4.9pc. For the country as a whole, the percentage is 11.75pc.

What this percentage tells you is how well the provinces are using the limited testing capacity available to them. A higher percentage means the criteria to determine who gets tested

and who doesn't are rigorous and being applied properly. A lower percentage means the criteria are either too loose, or not being applied correctly.

If we are to move towards 'smart lockdowns', two things will be necessary. First, the number of tests being performed on a daily basis will need to rise sharply. Currently, as per the same WHO report, Pakistan's current testing rate is 2,227 per million, and it has 262 reported cases per million. This is slightly better than Mexico, Egypt and Indonesia, to take three examples, but considerably below Brazil and Argentina, where tests per million are 3,461 and 2,956 respectively.

Second, after raising the number of tests per million sharply, it will be necessary to apply rigorous criteria as to who gets tested and who does not. Notice, for example, how Islamabad scores 4.9pc — which is far below the national average — for its testing regime. The capital city is quite literally burning through testing kits with little to no thought to how to apply this capacity smartly. Punjab scores very low as well, because it is one province that began offering private testing against payment, meaning no criterion was being applied at all. This is the reason why there was a discrepancy in the provincial and federal data regarding Punjab in the early days, and when the National Institute of Health (which at the time was responsible for data reporting on Covid-19) began to report the full numbers



of tests from Punjab, they reported private and publicly performed tests separately.

What worries me is that the old reflex of this country to carve out islands of respite for the elites from all pressing public health problems is starting to kick in.

It is this reflex, for example, that is at work when the elites buy their way out of bad water quality, or poor public education. They simply buy their water from private companies, and send their children to private schools. One after another matter of pressing public urgency is thus brushed away.

If the same reflex kicks in when dealing with the Covid-19 emergency, it will mean the elites will retreat further behind their walls, hoard the testing capacity for themselves and those who work for them, and will get priority treatment in private hospitals while the masses are told to report back to work in crowded buses.

One indicator that will be revealing if and when this begins to happen is positive cases taken as a percentage of the total population of those tested. The purpose of any testing regime should be to try and raise this percentage by applying rigorous criteria. A higher percentage will mean the country's health system is doing a superior job of hunting down the virus. A lower percentage will mean most tests are missing their mark even as the virus spreads. Asad Umar has been quoted as saying that in his opinion 30,000 tests per day should be

enough to control the spread of the virus, and in the same report he promised that this number would be reached towards the end of May or in the early days of June. At the moment, the highest number of tests conducted in the country was on May 21 — 16,387 according to the government's Covid-19 dashboard. Eid has seen a significant dip in the number of tests carried out, but this is expected to pick up now that the holidays are over.

If they are serious about 'smart lockdowns', a lot of numbers need to change very fast. Better targeting of the testing regime is critical, as is significantly ramping up the number of daily tests being performed. Another problem, as highlighted by Haris Gazdar in an article in this newspaper published on Wednesday, is the "weak private benefits and high perceived costs" that come with targeted lockdown efforts, and suppress demand for testing. What the state calls 'smart' measures will appear to those targeted by these measures as punitive, thereby reducing the incentive of those who show mild symptoms to get tested. If we don't see an improvement in the testing regime then we can be reasonably sure that what the government has in mind is to basically slink out of its obligation to safeguard public health, and that they are using fancy words to justify their actions.

The whole idea behind lockdowns was to buy the time necessary to put in place all the elements with which the state would safeguard public health. Now comes the time to re-deem that sacrifice.

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Chief Editor

Irfan Athar Qazi

E-mail: editorthebusiness@yahoo.com

thebusinesslhr@gmail.com

Tijarat House, 14-Davis Road, Lahore
0423-6312280, 6312480, 6312429, 6312462
Cell # 0321-4598258

1st Floor Ahmed Plaza near Zong Office
Susan Road, Faisalabad, Ph: 041-8555582

ISLAMABAD / RAWALPINDI

N-125 Circular Road, Ph: 051-5551654,
5532761, Cell # 0300-8567331

KARACHI

3rd Floor Kehkashan Mall 172-I Block II PECHS
Opp Rehmania Masjid Main Tariq Road
Ph: 021-34524550, Cell # 0300-8251534

Govt's tax vision

Advisor to Prime Minister on Finance and Revenue Affairs Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh has reminded the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) that its tax proposals for next year's finance bill 'do not represent the vision of the government and need to be simplified'. Still his words, even if FBR representatives found them a little stern, would have been welcomed by the ordinary Pakistanis who should be forgiven for believing that taxation measures were effectively IMF domain with the Finance Ministry reduced to simply relaying and justifying whatever was decided. The ministry is clearly trying to portray the government as favouring, and indeed pushing, measures that ensure ease of doing business and reduce compliance costs, especially as the economy struggles to cope with the slowdown caused by the coronavirus. Surely the government, which sees the latest numbers before anybody else, also understands best just how fragile the present economic environment is. And any undue pressure on businesses at this point, especially in the form of excessive taxation and non-sensical bureaucratic red tape, will deliver a quick kiss of death to any plans of reviving output and employment.

That is why Hafeez Shaikh's heart is definitely in the right place. The tax regime indeed needs to be simplified and there is really no justification for "...keeping so many taxes in the list which actually yield very little or nothing and yet add a lot of hassle to the taxpayer," especially when we can have "four or five (taxes) with high yield and get rid of the others." That would no doubt, as Dr Shaikh himself put it, "make the budget a simple document rather than a horrible story." But perhaps the finance bill would already have made for pleasant reading for taxpayers had the Bureau received such bold advice earlier; maybe when the finance ministry and FBR were tasked with increasing tax revenue and spent much of the year imposing the kind of taxes that now seem unduly burdensome. There was no way of foreseeing or preparing for the kind of battering that the coronavirus and the lockdown are delivering to economies all across the world. And now that the onset of a global recession has been well and truly established, countries like Pakistan will have a harder time than most navigating the next fiscal year or two because their economies do not have much spare capacity to speak of. Now the government will have to walk a tightrope to balance the interests of taxpayers and businesses while also raising enough revenue to keep from defaulting, that too in the middle of the recession caused by the coronavirus. But its thinking is now correct, at least, and hopefully it will move the tax collection machinery in the right direction.

BY KAMAL SIDDIQI

Media most foul

The way the Pakistani media covered the crash of PK8303 leaves a lot to be desired. This is the time for us to start a discussion on how news channels need to operate in such disaster situations and why the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) needs to step in when they don't. To better understand the problem, let us identify where the media went wrong. To begin with, let us question the fixation of news channels with breaking news. Given that we have a disproportionately high number of news channels because the cross-media ownership laws were amended at the behest of then information minister Shaikh Rasheed Ahmad, there is an unhealthy competition amongst channels to "break" news.

Consider this: In a country like the United Kingdom, there are four major news channels. In Pakistan there are 40. They must stand out to be noticed and this is where the problem begins. Breaking news means more eyeballs and the management of TV channels

usually end up putting pressure on news directors to come up with something new or unique. That is why in the past we have seen a reporter lying down in the grave of the late Abdus Sattar Edhi only so that his dispatch would be noticed. This is only one example. There are numerous more.

The pressure is intense as ratings and advertising depend upon eyeballs. The directors in turn push their reporters to come up with something that other channels do not have. This leads to a rush for any news — verified or unverified — which is then played on air, irrespective of the consequences. Much of the unverified news then simply disappears when it is discovered that it is incorrect. There are no apologies made, nor any clarifications. The channel moves on to the next story. Part of the problem is that most of our news persons do not have formal training in journalism. There is an acute lack of awareness of ethics and that is why even where there is no pressure from above, many news directors go ahead

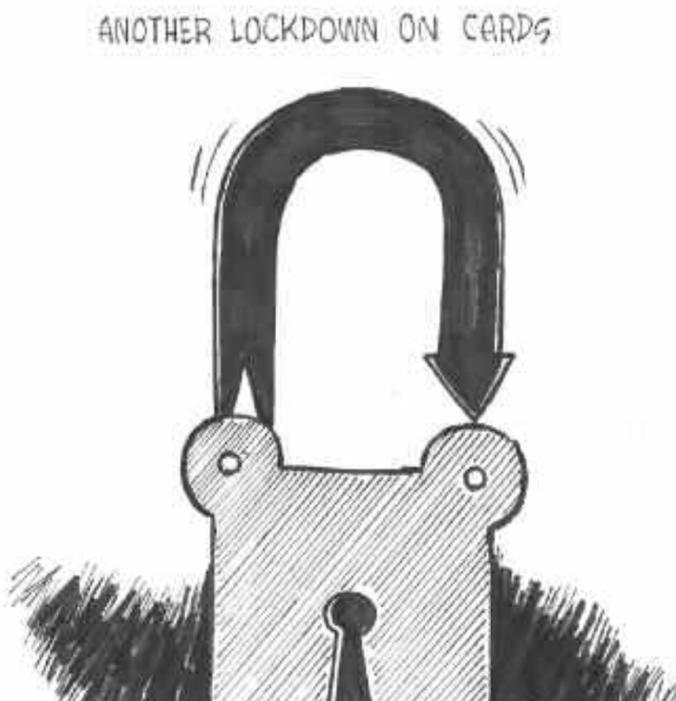
with the most damaging of stories.

Some examples from Friday's coverage: The airing of the passenger list well before the PIA management had informed the families concerned. This was then followed by the airing of pictures of the victims, taken probably without permission, from their social media accounts. Some channels also repeatedly aired the conversation between the pilot and the control tower. This conversation should have been kept confidential.

To broadcast names or show faces of victims prior to their family members being formally informed is not just insensitive but also criminal. It suggests that the media will stop at nothing to get the story. Then there is the physical obstruction. The physical movement of TV crews at the site of the disaster or at the hospital where victims were being brought. We could see how TV crews were coming in the way of rescue operations. That a number of dignitaries also decided to hold impromptu press conferences at the site of the disaster

added to the chaos. Finally, the speculation. Before even the press conference of the PIA chief, to put on air all sorts of experts who blamed everything — from the pilot, to birds, to the construction of a high-rise building in a restricted zone — is idiotic. We saw some channels once again airing their nauseating graphics to show how the plane crashed. Why can't we wait for a more objective report?

The question for us now is — what does one do? To begin with, we need to start talking. It is time to highlight the incompetence of some quarters in the media. Complaints need to be lodged with Pemra. Campaigns should start. Let us not rest there. Let us name and shame repeat offenders. At the same time there should be pressure on the industry to try and self-regulate. The code of conduct that was agreed by news directors a decade back is now outdated and has to be amended to take into account present day practices. Finally, more trainings and education for journalism staff are imperative. The ignorance levels may be high, but one can gauge a willingness to learn. Let us start to bring a change.



Fifteen shades of fall

DR AYESHA RAZZAQUE

June is upon us, and somehow universities and the HEC managed to bring the Spring semester, which was unexpectedly interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, to a close.

But there is no time to rest. The state has buckled under pressure from multiple quarters and reopened the economy, while voluntary precautionary measures are largely being flouted. At this point, a second wave of Covid-19 should be expected and planned for, not just for the education sector, but all sectors. We still have three months until the start of the next academic year.

In the spring, universities and the HEC had very little time to react. However, one positive thing that came out of the work done by the HEC was a report that classified universities into three levels, according to their technical level of readiness to switch to all-online classes. In many cases, university administrators who make decisions, who have little connection to the situation on the ground in classrooms, simply signaled to the HEC their readiness to switch to online classes and decreed the same to faculty who had to implement the decision. This happened without any internal readiness assessment. The reaction was a strong push-back from students and faculty. Characterizing this decision-making process by many universities as seat-of-the-pants is charitable. Those decisions were taken in the midst of a crisis, and may be excused to some extent. However, there will be no valid excuses if the coming Fall semester will be equally chaotic. If you think it is premature, consider that Cambridge University just announced it is going to all-online classes until summer 2021. So, what are our options? Universities across the world have been working on this question, and several candidate approaches have evolved.

Last month Edward J Maloney and Joshua Kim wrote an article, '15 Fall Scenarios', in 'Insider Higher Ed' that lists 15 options universities across the US are contemplating. On one end of the spectrum of options are on-campus classes, as was routine in pre-Covid days. The other end is occupied by fully online classes and closed campuses, as happened during the Spring semester (Cambridge University, Harvard University, Manchester University). The other 13 scenarios represent different shades of grey on the spectrum between these two extremes. The other 13 scenarios are different ways to reduce the density of students and staff on campus. This means having fewer students on campus at all times, smaller classes, possibly broken into multiple, smaller sections, allowing more physical space between students. Some approaches suggest identifying and prioritizing subsets of students that should take classes on-campus, while others continue to study online. Possible groups that have been suggested include first year students/freshmen (prioritizing new students starting university studies), graduate students (California Institute of Technology, Vanderbilt University), or

students in select programmes that require access to labs or other resources only available on-campus. Since the need for on-campus resources varies from one course to the next (and courses overlap between programmes), another possibility is to conduct a fraction of courses on-campus, while conducting the rest online. However, such an approach may confine students of some programmes, who may not require any lab or other campus facilities, to all online classes.

Another set of approaches reduces student density on campus by having fewer students for more intense face-to-face engagement on campus, for example, 12 weeks online classes, four weeks on-campus for course activities requiring on-campus presence. A variation of this is where courses are compressed into few week-long modules — for example, students taking four courses in the 16-week long semester finish each course in a four-week timeslot.

Some students may wish not to risk infection and may prefer online classes. The split-curriculum option accomplished that, where students get to choose whether they take a course on campus or all-online (University of Pennsylvania, Rice University). Several students who have gotten the hang of online classes and do not face internet access issues from home may actually prefer it. Many US universities gave students the option to simply sit out the fall semester, in the hope that: a) this will flatten the curve of a second wave; and b) a vaccine or treatment can be developed in the meantime. In this scenario, the fall semester will be taught in spring 2021, and the spring semester will be pushed back to summer 2021.

Another (more traditional) option is the modified tutorial model, which is similar to the flipped classroom being used in select courses in some of Pakistan's better universities. Here, students watch the traditional lecture online and complete their assigned readings ahead of class, in their own time. Face-to-face time happens in the form of tutorial sessions with teaching assistants and faculty in groups small enough to permit social distancing, where they cover Q&A and problem solving. Many more universities are still watching the pandemic develop and are mulling their options, and will announce their plans in June. The lesson to learn here is that each university is making plans according to its assessment of its own situation. Several of these approaches can also be used together, for example taking measures to reduce student density on campuses, while also giving them the option to take a gap year. These scenarios entail numerous details, to be evaluated by each university based on its resources, constraints and situation.

A more sensible approach is to create a separate qualification checklist of requirements to implement each approach. Those requirements should include what is required from students (parents?), faculty and university administrations. Let each university figure out what approaches it qualifies for.

Letters to the Editor

Blaming the 'mafia'

Private schools have become the favourite whipping boys of all and sundry. They are called the 'mafia' by parents, politicians and the judiciary. Interestingly, come admission time and one sees long queues of parents outside these 'mafia' schools anxious to get their kids entrusted to the very "mafia". Is the hypocrisy not jarring? Education is a fundamental right of every child. In all countries of the world, governments work to provide education through government schools. Not so in Pakistan. Here provincial governments abuse education budgets for corruption to line their pockets. Hence, we sadly hear of 'ghost schools'. The government and the worthy Supreme Court believe that it is the responsibility of the private sector to fulfill the global requirement of education for all. Not only should the private sector assume this responsibility, it should do so on terms to be dictated by the education ministers and the judiciary. One is constrained to ask why private schools are being destroyed when the government is incapable of providing

basic education of reasonable quality? Do parents realize their targeting of schools is like cutting the tree branch on which they are themselves sitting.

Maaz Abbasi
KARACHI

Different view

This refers to the article, 'The Corona fallout' by Saleem Safi. The writer has criticized the government for not taking the coronavirus seriously but that is not justified. It is incorrect to suggest that hatred was developing against the government due to failed economic policies whereas in actual fact, in spite of the opposition's negative role and propaganda, internationally Pakistan's image improved tremendously and foreign policy has been appreciated the world over. While criticizing the government on its handling of Kashmir, one should never lose sight that it has been under the occupation of India since Partition and Pakistan took bold initiatives but could not succeed. The key to the Kashmir solution lies with the UN and US and Pakistan is fighting the case

very courageously. The writer has overlapped the situation on the western borders. The US shall pull out completely from Afghanistan but it will take time and not before a complete patch-up between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and Pakistan will continue playing its mediatory role.

Mukhtar Ahmed
KARACHI

Diversity needed

The written constitution of this country provides that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex or region, but unfortunately discrimination is in the blood of many in authority positions in this land of ours. It is very unfortunate that there is too little attention paid to increasing provincial, regional and ethnic diversity at work, workplace discrimination. It is imperative for all people to be equal because only then our society would develop in true sense of the term.

Hashim Abro
ISLAMABAD