

The Business

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ILO warning

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO's) warning that half of the world's workers are in danger of 'having their livelihoods destroyed' is hard to digest but not nearly as hard to understand given how fast the world is changing because of the coronavirus. With entire countries shut down – some only just beginning to slowly and cautiously open up – it was only a matter of time before things like earnings and employment became very serious issues indeed. And it is no surprise that International Labour Organisation's empirical research also shows that workers at the bottom of the food chain are the most vulnerable. For them, especially daily wage earners, every day in lockdown means another day without work and therefore without pay and food as well. And there's only so long such an arrangement can last. It turns out that of the global workforce of approximately 3.3 billion people, more than two billion work in the informal economy where jobs are not protected by social safety nets, and more than 1.6 billion of them are in serious risk of being wiped out in the second quarter of 2020.

These are times when governments have to step in to protect people's lives and livelihoods. Countries with effective social safety nets are better prepared, of course, since they always keep enough reserves to meet emergencies, at least in the near to medium term. Indeed, the system has just kicked in and people are registering for unemployment benefits in most developed countries, so there is no immediate burden on workers or states as they assess the situation going forward. But countries like Pakistan, with no unemployment benefits or anything of the sort, both the people and the government face a very different kind of situation. Here the government collects money in the name of workers' benefits like social security and workers welfare fund, of course, but none of that is ever available. As time passes and the world is no closer to a vaccine to cure COVID-19, the development of a global army of jobless, starving workers is becoming a very real possibility. Such circumstances – when desperate people resort to desperate measures to feed their families – provide the perfect ingredients for social unrest, a sharp rise in the crime rate and destabilisation on a scale not seen in a very long time. Since this is an international problem the response must also be truly global. World leaders must, therefore, join hands and devise a workable strategy now, before it is too late.

RAFIA ZAKARIA

This week, after weeks and weeks, the world began to open. In Sindh the trading markets opened on Monday, one of many reopenings across the country. Even as these first steps towards returning to 'normal' were carried out, experts admitted that the decision to reopen has been a difficult one. "We can only project trends two weeks ahead with confidence," one of them said. "The rest is conjecture."

Conjecture is shaky ground on which to begin something new. As we know, the virus that causes Covid-19 can take up to two weeks to produce symptoms. Those who are sick today, and Pakistan has had over 30,000 sickened, were likely infected around two weeks ago. The fact that we have been in lockdown for the past several weeks means that the rate of transmission has been slowed. As shops and businesses reopen and people let down their guard, it is inevitable that the virus will begin spreading again.

This is troubling for several reasons. First, the length of the lockdown means that all of us are psychologically lulled into the sense of having undergone something difficult (historic). All the limits placed upon us, a shut-down world along with the constant paranoia that the virus may be lurking here or there on this surface or that surface, have been exhausting. With the world opening up again, there is an inevitable feeling of want-

The Eid challenge

ing to partake of an optimism that says, 'everything will be okay'. The particular pressure of this will be most acutely felt as Ramazan ends and Eidul Fitr approaches. Because the number of cases around that time will still likely reflect the transmission rates from the lockdown period, many people could be lulled into celebrating as normal. With Ramazan so significantly affected by the lockdown, many will want to meet relatives, have get-togethers and catch up with all the people that they have missed seeing during the lockdown. Even though the virus remains in the population and there is no cure and no vaccine, people can be goaded into pretending that the problem has been solved and that it is time to move on.

Eid, then, is the test that awaits us. Now that we have learned to have office meetings and iftaris and sehris and college lectures and school homework online, can we also come up with a social-distanced online Eid? The answer seems elusive. The people to whom I spoke about how this may turn out seemed to fall in one of three camps: those who have not taken the lockdown seriously and are eager for things to reopen so that they may return to 'normal'; those who took the lockdown somewhat seriously but were not completely sure that it was necessary; and finally those who took

the lockdown seriously and are terrified that the reopening is premature and should have been postponed until there are more positive prospects regarding treatments. Of the three, the last are most amenable to alternative means of celebrating the biggest holiday on the calendar, pursuing a more meditative and spiritual focus that prioritises charity over the usual shopping and socialising. The problem, of course, is that it is impossible to estimate which of the three make up the greater number of Pakistanis.

If you are one of those who belong to the third camp, wanting to continue limiting social contact and wearing masks and gloves, you could have some particular challenges ahead. The uncertainty of the pandemic means that family members can belong to any one of the three camps, including those who think that the lockdown was unnecessary and social-distancing is a circus. Many of them are likely to insist on visiting and inviting and pressuring others to feel the same way. The fatalism that says that death and illness and recovery are not in human hands can sometimes be deployed to excuse carelessness about health and hygiene and disease transmission. Just a few of them in any extended family can break down the defences of all those who want to be more careful, who do not want to endanger those

Danger in the neighbourhood

KAMILA HYAT

In a country not well known for its discipline or its civic sense, the decision by the federal government after a meeting of the National Coordination Committee – that we as citizens should ourselves assume responsibility to prevent the spread of Covid-19 by observing social distancing voluntarily and with discipline – was never going to work.

Evidence of this already came just a day after the lockdown was 'relaxed' in most parts of the country, with people in Lahore (and other cities) markets literally pouring over each other in the first frenzy of Eid buying. Similar scenes lie ahead. It is highly unlikely that people unaccustomed to observing measures that benefit the entire community but require some sacrifice will agree to distance themselves. This is all the more true given that so much confusion has been created over the Covid-19 pandemic, with the prime minister at times describing it as a 'mild' health problem, at other times agreeing that it carried more danger and creating entire labyrinths of confusion when it came to the question of lockdown.

Experts from within the country, including an entire host of doctors, have warned that lifting the lockdown, which was extremely poorly enforced in the first place, at a time when the number of cases and the number of deaths is still expanding is a hugely dangerous step. Currently, we are seeing about 1,000 new cases per day. Doctors also point out that the true rate of death will become apparent only two weeks after this rise and that the comforting notion also suggested by the PM that South Asians may somehow be protected against the

virus because of their inherent immunity carries no scientific proof at all. In the UK, regardless of wealth and living conditions, more South Asians and other people of colour are dying of Covid-19 than white people.

There have been whispers from within the administration that what government has in mind is building a herd immunity. This is an extremely controversial idea and the only country that has seriously tried it out is Sweden. The results are extremely mixed, with a much higher death rate recorded in the country compared to its Scandinavian neighbours who have locked down, despite the fact that Swedes are believed to be among the most civic-minded people in Europe.

Civic-mindedness itself is not an easy idea to understand. According to social scientists including academics in behavioural economics and public health at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School and affiliate faculty of the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics, people who have secure jobs and can work remotely are more likely to comply with social distancing instructions. This is not hard to understand. The other factor is the degree to which they trust their government and believe its advice is accurate and for their benefit. This belief is high in all Scandinavian countries, even if it is sometimes flawed. The tendency to obey governments and not defy instructions is also deeply rooted, perhaps for somewhat different reasons, in Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and other countries. Even in these circumstances, Hong Kong, which has been extremely successful in curbing even the second wave of the virus by easing lockdowns only after the spike had begun to flatten, has introduced electronic wristbands to monitor the location of persons asked to

self isolate because they had been in contact with a victim of Covid-19. People who follow government-introduced measures and believe they will have a positive impact wish their country to look good before the eyes of the world. There are also other factors which Pakistan does not appear to have handled too successfully. One is that a lack of confusion is imperative to gaining public cooperation. A study of Italians by the Johns Hopkins institutes listed above found that when people expect measures to last a relatively short time, they are less willing to comply if the measures are then extended for a longer period of time. This is called a 'negative surprise' by social scientists. The opposite is also true. When people expect measures to last a long period of time, such as several months, but then find they are in place for a much shorter period often prove to be more compliant. Managing expectations as well as building trust in the government is then essential to ensuring voluntary compliance with government decrees.

The fact that we lack on both these fronts and that people still seem unclear if Covid-19 is even a reality, it will be extremely difficult to ensure social distancing or responsible behaviour. We have already seen people openly violate the SOPs put in place for mosques during Ramazan. There have been very few penalties even in cases where blatant violations of the 'rules' are taking place. This relatively small sample would suggest that the idea put forward by the PM that people look after themselves will not work very well. This is all the more true in a situation where even now, they are not clear about the spread of the virus from one individual to the next and the fact that Covid-19 is unique in the pace

of its spread. No individual or group of individuals should have the right to determine who lives and who dies. To further complicate matters, the latest research emerging from the West shows that Covid-19 is capable of acting in different patterns and can claim the lives of very young people, including teenagers, because in some cases it leads to the formation of clots in the blood which can travel into the brain, the lungs or the kidneys and quickly destroy them. The results of more deaths than hospitals can cope with can be seen in Ecuador, where in a nation of 17 million nearly 2,000 have died and coffins are literally being left on footpaths by families who do not know what else to do.

This is something out of a horror story. Pakistan's doctors fear that a relaxing of the lockdown combined with the lack of individual discipline will need to a rapidly worsening situation. Even Punjab said it had proposed that large towns in the province be kept shut down. Balochistan has refused to lift its lockdown given the spike in cases it has seen, while Sindh too was reluctant to do so. The pandemic seen at NADRA offices as people collected funds given out for Covid-19 relief also reflects governmental failure to maintain its own advice. There is also an open lack of social distancing at other places and, while Imran Khan may have much sympathy for the poor, we wonder why he had not thought about them before as prices rose well ahead of the Covid-19 scourge and how he intends to prevent the flurry of deaths which could occur if Covid spreads into our shanty towns, with signs that this is already beginning to happen in Karachi. People lack the will and understanding to



Words for the poor

KHURRAM HUSAIN

SO apparently 2.2 per cent of the population dying from a highly contagious disease is an acceptable risk to take, but a 1.5pc contraction in total economic output is not. That is what the underlying message is behind the government's decision to order a lifting of the strict social-distancing announced by the provincial governments around March 23.

Monday was the first working day after the new, far-reaching exemptions to the lockdowns were announced on Saturday, and what we saw were grievous sights of packed bazaars in virtually every city around the country. A feast for the virus, which one doctor from the frontlines desperately tried to warn people is dangerous – "it literally devours your lungs" he tweeted.

The current case fatality rate in Pakistan is 2.2pc, if you do straight arithmetic on the number of cases against the number of deaths. The finance ministry and the IMF have both said they expect the economy to contract by 1.5pc in the current fiscal year, where it had been growing by just under 3pc in the first three quarters of the fiscal year that ran from July to March. This means the impact of the lockdowns, which were expected to run from April to June when this estimate was drawn up, would not only negate whatever meagre growth there was in the economy, but actively turn the needle back into negative territory.

But is this reason enough to throw caution to the winds and reopen the economy? If you're looking at the money, then yes but if you're looking at the lives then no. What exactly was the government looking at when they made this decision over the weekend? After all, their own data, and their own statements in that press talk where the announcement of the far-reaching exemptions was made, showed that the graph of the infections was still trending upward, sharply, and fatalities were continuing to rise.

For an answer on where the government is getting its guidance from in these times, recall that memorable photograph of Prime Minister Imran Khan accepting a donation cheque from Faisal Edhi. Take a closer look at the two other people in the room at the time, shown in the picture. One is a massive property developer in Lahore, and also a textile giant with massive interests in the spinning sector and one time served as chairman of the powerful All Pakistan Textile Millowners Association (APTMA), and the other is a scion of one of the country's largest industrial families with massive textile interests in Faisalabad and Lahore.

Now listen to how Faisal Edhi himself describes the encounter in one of his television appearances after the picture came out. He says he entered, waited for six or seven minutes while the prime minister talked to the two industrialists in the room, then while leaving one of the two gentlemen told him "this is

Faisal Edhi, Abdus Sattar Edhi sahib's son" and then the prime minister stopped, and for half a minute, says Faisal in his interview, he got a chance to speak briefly with him in the door as he was leaving.

Now consider this. If somebody was genuinely concerned with how the poor and the daily wagers are faring through the lockdowns, there are not many people in the country better able to tell you than Faisal Edhi. After all, he and his organisation deal with them on a daily basis, including for death rituals and healthcare provision.

Anybody with even a remote concern for the poor, should they find themselves face to face with Faisal Edhi, would pepper him with at least a few questions. How are they faring? How many dead bodies are you receiving? How much do they understand the risks presented by the virus? What are good ways to target assistance to them? What can I do to help? There was none of that. The prime minister took the cheque (prompting some to wonder why the prime minister of a country should be taking donations from a charity that itself runs on donations), lent a perfunctory ear to some logistical problems faced by the charity organisation whose money he was accepting for his own corona relief fund, and left. The Rs10 million donation to the relief fund was the price of the entry ticket for Faisal Edhi.

The only reason I'm using this example is because many people are familiar with it. Otherwise, it is not difficult to see that it is not the interests of the poor that animate this government, but those of the rich. By the time the meeting took place, around Rs45 billion had been released to the "export sectors" under the prime minister's Covid-19 package for exporters. In the previous three quarters, another Rs47bn was released for them under the Export Enhancement Package. A few days earlier, the cabinet had approved an amnesty scheme for property developers, disguised as a 'construction package', which the prime minister claimed was to help provide jobs for the poor affected by the lockdown, but in reality he had announced on Nov 11, 2019, that "construction is the government's top priority" and this package had been in the works since then.

There is nothing unusual here. It is a deeply Pakistani trait for the country's leadership to serve the poor with their words and the rich with their deeds. There is a long pedigree to this peculiar brand of two-facedness, of doling out goodies to the rich in the name of the poor. This time, however, this gambit is being used to play with the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. The government has done an especially poor job of public messaging to awaken the populace to the dangers of the virus, how it transmits itself, what behaviours should be avoided and how social-distancing should be maintained. The result is people don't take the danger very seriously. And now they lift the restrictions, in the name of the poor. God help us all.

Letters to the Editor

Remembering Jaidi

Athar Shah Khan alias Jaidi breathed his last on 10th May 2020 in Karachi. Born in Rampur in 1943, he moved with his family to Lahore, Pakistan in 1947. He was a radio host, a poet, a writer, an actor, and a comedian par excellence. His radio programme 'Rang hi rung Jaidi ke sang' was aired for a record 19 years, amusing both young and old during its run. Jaidi's innocence in writing and acting won him accolades throughout career. He was a genuine artist who employed ingeniously crafted humour and comic characters and to deliver perceptive social messages.

His epic dramas, 'Intezar Farmayey', 'Ba Adab Ba Mulahiza Hoshiyar' and 'Lakhon Mayn Teen' amused millions of people. An iconic figure of comedy in a country where good comedians can

be counted on one's fingers, Khan brought smiles to the faces of his viewers.

His spontaneous dialogue delivery, wit, and acting acumen, earned him a special place in the hearts of people, rarely achieved by actors. His physical appearance and comic actions were second to none. It is hoped that students of literature will study his prose and poetry so that his contributions to the fine arts are not forgotten.

Iffikhar Mirza
ISLAMABAD

Democracy subverted

Prime Minister Imran Khan, like his predecessors, derives his legitimacy from the National Assembly, under the 1973 constitution. As does the bureaucracy, security establishment and the judi-

ciary. It is parliament where all state policies must be debated and adopted. Pakistan avoided getting involved in the Iraq War because of a parliamentary vote. Pakistan is perhaps the only country which was geographically carved out of an existing Subcontinent, the culmination of an arduous democratic, political struggle. When we wavered from democratic processes and betrayed Quaid's vision of a modern democratic welfare state, this country has ever since been in a perpetual crisis. The root cause is undoubtedly the coup of October 1958 where a dictator destroyed the political order, abolished existing political parties, and targeted East Pakistani politicians under martial law regulations. All this was in total violation of the directive Jinnah gave while addressing officers at Staff College Quetta in 1949.

Malik Tariq Ali
LAHORE