

Dear colleagues, partners and friends,

After 120 days of the pandemic in Bangladesh, we are still struggling to come up with quality testing. The recent [Regent Hospital scandal](#) (detailed later in the report) highlighted the sorry state of the health sector -- both in governance and the quality of service in the private sector.

Unfortunately, I experienced this first hand myself while having to do my own tests in both a public and a private sector lab. I received both a positive and a negative report in two successive days. This seems to be a growing phenomenon across the board - the increasing inability among the public to rely on lab results. On the brighter side, the day after my positive results came in, I did receive a call from the tele medicine section managed by DGHS and a2i to ensure that I knew I could seek telemedicine support though. This gave me comfort that once someone is in the system, they are being monitored. I am doing well, however, and not showing any symptoms. I will do a final test at ICDDR,B tomorrow to make sure that I do not have the virus.



Testing kit shortage:

The official data seems to show that the infection rate is going back and forth within a range. It is difficult to be specific as the testing numbers have steadily gone down.

- The [shortage](#) of testing kits serves as a major setback as efforts increase to scale up COVID-19 testing facilities. Some laboratories have discontinued COVID-19 sample testing due to the shortage of kits, and are struggling to meet the daily targeted number of tests as per samples collected. A 300-bed government hospital in Narayanganj of central Bangladesh - one of the most affected areas in the country - suspended testing for five days. However, **more than 500,000 testing kits remain in storage, awaiting approval from the authorities**, while testing centres in high-risk zones in Dhaka, Gazipur and Narayanganj have lowered the number of daily tests due to the shortage of kits.
- The government has decided to use GeneXpert machines to detect COVID-19 patients faster. [There are 270 such machines across the country](#), many of which are operated by BRAC to detect TB. Testing kits are needed for the machines though. Bangladesh is trying to procure 30,000 kits with the help of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

There will be serious repercussions on Bangladeshis' ability to travel outside Bangladesh if the quality and quantity issues around testing are not rectified. This was evident last week when a Qatar Airways flight carrying passengers from Dhaka carried almost 30 COVID-19 infected patients, resulting in [suspension of passenger entry from Bangladesh for 90 days](#).

There is certainly some change in behaviour

Having said that, the news around lack of hospital facilities for patients has reduced as most patients are deciding to have home remedy rather than seek hospital care. There is certainly a growing social acceptance and less fear of the virus as recovery rates are improving. Our own data of BRAC staff contracting the virus seems to be improving even though we are almost fully operational in the field. However, more combinations of testing and accurate data are needed to understand this changing phenomenon.

COVID-19's impact on the economy

- **Bangladeshi [exports](#) took the heaviest hit in the last quarter, crashing by 51.20%** to USD 4.7 billion. The fall in earnings was mostly driven by the slump in the apparel sector and leather goods. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association data, global apparel buyers stalled or cancelled work orders worth USD 3.18 billion. Leather and leather goods exporters saw work orders on hold or subjected to cancellation worth USD 200 million.
- **A post-COVID Bangladesh could see rising inequality that puts the progress of the past decade at risk** - unless [job creation](#) is put at the heart of recovery - according to a study conducted by Centre for Research and Information (CRI). The study emphasised that low-income and labour-intensive jobs in the informal sector have been the most affected by the pandemic. The study made suggestions to resume labour-intensive infrastructure projects and provide immediate access to finance for unbanked micro, small and medium enterprises in the informal sector.
- **Bangladesh is one of the leading rice producers in South Asia, with its rice-dominant agriculture sector showing encouraging performance for two decades now.** This achievement is vitally important for the country, with rice production and supply being a significant determinant of Bangladesh's food self-sufficiency and security. This year, due to pandemic-induced economic shock, a harvest was even more important for farmers. **Despite a good harvest, why is the price of rice so high? We explore this in detail in the report.**

Silver linings:

Two specific things I want to highlight to show the resilience of Bangladeshis:

- **Remittance continued to [increase](#) last month.** As the last fiscal year just concluded, remittance hit an all-time high of USD 18.20 billion. Bangladeshis sent home USD 1.83 billion in June - the highest in a single month - in a significant boost to the country's foreign exchange reserves. There are a number of contributing factors to this; the 2% incentive that Bangladesh Bank gave to encourage workers to send remittance through official channels, workers being fearful that they would have to come back and hence sent all their savings and, although, the Bangladeshi expatriates are facing various disruptions due to the struggling economies they reside in, they did not stop sending money to their relatives in the country. There are currently 10.2 million Bangladeshis working in 174 countries across the world.
- **Bangladesh's [garments](#) sector is stepping up as the global demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) continues to rise.** In the midst of reports of international buyers cancelling orders, apparel companies are increasingly receiving [work orders](#) for protective equipment. Considering the potential, the national budget for fiscal 2020-21 waives the VAT charges on manufacturing PPE products and their raw materials.



Emerging challenges

- **Fake COVID-19 test reports are making [headlines](#)**, after a hospital's branches in the capital were raided by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). Regent Hospital was found issuing fake COVID-19 certificates, charging high fees for testing and treatment of inpatients, and operating without a renewed license. The owner of the hospital has several charges against him and remains at large. This scandal is an addition to an earlier COVID-19 testing [fraud mentioned](#) last month.
- **The recent monsoon floods have affected more than 7.5 million people across 23 districts in Bangladesh, temporarily displacing 2.8 million people. Learn more about the current situation in the report.**

Please see a much detailed [report](#).

If you would like to see any particular issue covered, please let us know at: covid19response@brac.net.

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