

■ Review Article

COVID-19 Second Bloom and Comfortable Lockdown in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus-2 (nCoV-2) is the pathogen responsible for the COVID-19 infection that has evolved into a pandemic, spreading worldwide in more than 210 countries, affecting hundreds of millions, and forcing populations to be put under lockdowns to stop the spread of the virus. This article provides a brief outlook of the COVID-19 and lockdown situation in Bangladesh, with particular focus on the second bloom of the pandemic since March 2021. With a series of hard and relaxed lockdowns, the country has taken varying stances in combating the virus, with dubious efficacy. The spread of the virus and role of lockdowns in suppressing it has been explored briefly to find the necessity and current situation of lockdown in Bangladesh in the face of the second bloom. The article also highlights the role of the government as well as public perception and their role in it, providing some suggestions to help navigate the crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, second bloom, lockdown, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

With the first case reported in the Wuhan city of Hubei Province in China in December 2019, the novel coronavirus-2 (nCoV-2) infection - an outbreak of a respiratory illness known as COVID-19 - has turned into a global pandemic in a matter of weeks, causing it to be declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020 [1]. Posing a constantly changing and developing situation due to its rapid transmission rates, the COVID-19 outbreak has become one of the biggest challenges faced by the world in recent times, in terms of both human health and the economy. For a lower-middle-income economy like Bangladesh, which also

has one of the world's densest populations, the threat is nothing less than dire. Despite a series of lockdowns implemented in the country since the detection of the first case on 18 March 2020, the scenario seems to only aggravate, putting a question on the measures employed thus far. With an infection rate of above 10%, Bangladesh suffered from the first wave till the end of December 2020 [2]. As new infection cases fell towards the end of January 2021, the second wave hit the country in March 2021, reaching a peak in the first week of April 2021 with 23% of positive COVID-19 test results, stimulating another series of lockdowns to contain transmission [3]. With cases falling by the end of May 2021, the lockdown was lifted as it seemed



Figure 1. Police and army troopers question vehicle drivers at a check post in Dhaka's Panthapath area on the third day of the nationwide lockdown (Dhaka Tribune, 3 July 2021)

the second wave has passed. However, from June 14, 2021 onwards, the country is experiencing a massive surge in infection and fatalities, proving that the second bloom has, after all, not ended. Consequently, a hard lock down has been declared by the Government of Bangladesh since late-June 2021 (see **Figure 1**) to continue due to high infection rate of around 50%, accompanied with a sudden high rate of mortality such as up to 247 people in a day, whereas before June 2021 the mortality rate was recorded below 50 people/day. With increasing skyrocketing infection rates and death tolls, the second bloom of COVID-19 in Bangladesh is at its peak and rising, according to WHO and Reuters [4, 5]. This report aims to give a brief overview on the second bloom, the preceding comfort or loose lockdown given along with the strict one, as well as the current situation.

CURRENT SITUATION OF COVID-19 IN BANGLADESH

With the first COVID-19 case detected on 18th March, 2020, Bangladesh only saw an upsurge in the infection cases between mid-June 2020 to mid-July 2020, recording 3000-4000 patients per day [3]. As the cases dropped by the end of January 2021, with daily new cases falling below 500, the first wave seemed to have ended. However, the sudden rise in cases observed from March 15, 2021, caused panic as the

second wave hit with certainty. The number of cases rose by 90.84% in a week, with a 69.16% rise in fatalities in the two weeks from mid-March 2021 to the end of March 2021 [6]. The numbers kept rising through April to May 2021, stimulating a series of soft and stricter lockdowns, before showing any decrease. The peak during that phase was reached on April 5, 2021 with 47,392 confirmed cases, while the death toll was highest on April 19, 2021 with 668 deaths in a week [7]. Throughout the second half of April 2021, the single-day death toll remained above 100 people, leading the nation to a frenzy.

The pattern of infection throughout the country was specifically concentrated to the capital, Dhaka, and then to the other districts, in the order of population density as well as how urbanized they were. For instance, during the first wave, the number of infected cases was more than six-folds in Dhaka district compared to the next district with the highest number of cases, i.e., Chittagong. In the one-month period of June 2020 to July 2020, the number of infections in Dhaka was 48,863 while that in Chittagong was 7,217. Next in line were the districts of Bogra and Khulna, while the lowest number of cases were recorded in the Mymensingh district. The pattern, however, slightly changed during the second wave. From March 15, 2021 to May 31, 2021, the infection rate remained the highest in Dhaka, with 120,387

number of confirmed cases [8]. The port city of Chittagong, with its industries, dense populations, and tourist spots, retained the second position in terms of COVID-19 infections, staying marked as a red-zone. However, in the following positions of the list, Bogra and Khulna were replaced by Narayanganj and Gazipur respectively, as these districts are closer to the capital. This allowed for more crowd gathering, since there are more industries such as garments and chemical factories in those districts [4, 8]. The number of casualties also followed this sequence, with the highest cases of death from the infection, in both the first and second wave, occurring in the capital, followed by Chittagong, whereas the lowest cases were recorded in Barisal and Sylhet [8]. The levels of infection throughout other districts across the country followed the general pattern of the whole nation, although districts sharing borders with the neighboring country of India showed momentary surges in infection as the virus got transmitted through illegal entries as well as trading happening there [9].

With subsequent lockdown efforts, the numbers fell in mid-May 2021, showing a gradual decline afterward. This situation, however, did not persist. Since June 2, 2021, the overall transmission has increased, again. This increase kept upon its rising steep path throughout June 2021, starting with the border districts with as high as 50 or 60 percent of positivity rates, increasing the nationwide average rate of positivity to go above 20% again by June 23rd, 2021 [10]. Meanwhile, the fatalities attributed to COVID-19 have almost tripled over a month. The recovery rate, which was low till early May 2021 when it showed a sharp increase of about 11% on 3rd May 2021 and kept on rising throughout June 2021, shows a glimmer of hope. However, this is not representative of the actual situation as on June 26th, 2021, the daily death toll shot up by 108 cases: The second-highest jump on a single day since the pandemic unfolded in Bangladesh. This surge has been linked to the dominant Delta variant of the virus, found first in the neighboring country of India. The positivity rate, as of July 30th, 2021, has been recorded as an alarming 30.77%. With less than 3% of Bangladeshis fully vaccinated, the ongoing situation is alarming, with the ever-increasing numbers of positive tests and fatalities, even with a strict lockdown imposed from July 1, 2021.

LOCKDOWN IN BANGLADESH

Its Imperatives and Current Situation

Lockdown is defined as a security measure, enforced during any emergency to stop the public movement from or into an area or location. This is particularly done to ensure public

safety or health [11]. Since the inception of the COVID-19 outbreak, this word has become a household topic with lockdowns of various lengths and degrees being employed throughout the world to fight off the pandemic. Countries all over the world have taken stringent restrictions such as online schools, work-from-home, quarantine for regions with a high number of cases, and most notably, lockdown to slow down the COVID-19 transmission. Bangladesh has not been exempted from it either. With the first series of lockdowns beginning from March 26, 2020, to May 30 of the same year, the lockdown was "strict" at first and gradually made more relaxed for socio-economic purposes, with all restrictions removed in September 2020 [12]. The strict lockdown involves closing the official border entry points, suspending all kinds of public transportation, as well as public movement except in cases of emergency such as purchasing daily necessities, medicines, for burial, and cremation services. All non-essential organizations, businesses, and educational institutions were closed. All shopping centers were closed during that phase, while the restaurants were allowed to be open for select hours and only for takeaway services. No restrictions were imposed on media, emergency services, carriage of goods, medical supplies, and production [6].

The other form of lockdown, the more comfortable, relaxed, or 'soft' lockdown was observed after every period of strict lockdown. It still employed restrictions on the mass movement, but there was no strict imposition, resulting in a near-normal movement and public gathering. In the name of protecting livelihood, the government has displayed lax behavior in maintaining a strict lockdown, particularly during the surge of the second wave during April to 5th August of 2021, resulting in a peak of new infection cases reached with awful results [13]. As COVID-19 cases kept rising at an appalling rate since mid-March 2021, the government had imposed a "loose nationwide lockdown" for one week from April 5, 2021 with a "stricter lockdown" announced from April 14, 2021 onwards, again loosening right on April 25, 2021. Even the markets and shopping malls were opened right before the religious festival of Eid-ul-Fitr in May 2021, causing a massive influx of people and large crowds, creating the most ideal hub for virus transmission (see **Figure 2**). This decision can be said to have instigated the following surge in cases in June 2021, where the infection and death rate reached an all-time high. This renders the entire purpose of the initial strict lockdown useless while evoking cynicism in the way such lockdown decisions are taken by the government [13].



Figure 2. Exodus of migrant workers from Dhaka ahead of coronavirus lockdown in Bangladesh (South China Morning Post)



Figure 3. Bangladesh decides to extend lockdown (Dhaka Tribune, July 2021)

The term “lockdown” is an unfamiliar word to the people of Bangladesh. Being citizens of one of the most densely populated countries of the world, it is only natural for the people of this nation to have trouble understanding the concept of “social or physical distancing” and “lockdowns” without much-needed education on these. Consequently, soft or comfortable lockdowns are rendered as a hoax in this country [14].

Coming to the current state of lockdown in the nation, as of July 2021, the toughest lockdown to date has been allegedly employed, as per the directives of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief of Bangladesh (see **Figure 3**). With the deployment of all levels of law-enforcement units, “anyone, except emergency service providers, going outdoors without an urgent need will face stern

punishment” [15]. The positivity rates and daily death tolls are breaking records every day with each passing day, leaving no alternative but to impose a strict lockdown. Again, a relax lockdown has been declared by the Govt. of Bangladesh from 15 July 2021 for the religious festival, Eid-UI-Adha on 21 July 2021. However, since the majority of the rural and lower-income people are ignorant of the facts about COVID-19, it ultimately results in the mass movement from city to village and vice-versa, increasing the risk of coronavirus transmission throughout the country greatly (see **Figure 2**).

The situation seems to be dire for the garment workers too. Even amidst the strict lockdown imposed from 23rd July, 2021, millions of workers in the readymade garment (RMG) industry need to work without paying any heed to risks, due



Figure 4. An overcrowded ferry that left from Daulatdia ghat on Saturday, July 31, 2021 (Dhaka Tribune)

to poverty, and are returning to work in Dhaka en masse [16]. Despite the so-called stringent lockdown, all modes of public transport were made operational to facilitate the workers' return to the capital from 31st July 2021 to 1st August 2021. This came after the government's directive to allow export-oriented factories to restart production from 1st August 2021, and led to ferry and bus terminals teeming with people ignoring social distancing and hygiene rules (see **Figure 4**). A more relaxed version of the lockdown has, therefore, emerged again, in the name of saving the economy.

Now, a question may arise about why lockdown is seen as the primary or most important way to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. To answer this, it must be understood that viruses are purely pathogenic and parasitic, with varying abilities to infect people. For COVID-19, the consensus throughout the world is that every infected person can go on to infect around 2.5 people; this can easily generate a cascade in which a single infected person can infect many people in a short span of time. The transmission rate in Bangladesh was around 2% when the virus's presence was first discovered, but the rate has since fallen, to about "1.05%" currently. Still, COVID-19 is more infectious than other coronaviruses such as SARS or MERS-CoV. Despite lower fatality rates, this strain has become the worst nightmare for the world, bringing it to a standstill, as it is asymptomatic most of the time: thousands of people with very mild to no visible symptoms have been spreading the virus unaware that they were even infected [17]. The need for strict or ambitious lockdown, is thus, imperative, to crush the infection and fatality curves. This could very well be the

only realistic way for a nation to contain its national-level COVID-19 epidemic before it can turn into an outright catastrophe.

Role of Government and Public Perception

For a lower-middle-income economy like Bangladesh, the implications of a lockdown are far and wide, and not simple. There is no doubt that an extended complete lockdown will majorly hamper the formal and informal business, both the economic and education sectors, leading to speculation of famine and starvation even. There are many issues to address, such as the farmers facing crop loss, along with negative impacts on food production and crop supply chains as transport is hampered due to lockdown. Impediment in the Readymade Garment (RMG) sector and the resulting economic loss is another potential issue that could be quite drastic for a country like Bangladesh, where this sector accounts for approximately 83% of the total national export earnings. Moreover, educational loss as only urban children can attend virtual classes through the internet while children from rural areas or with limited resources are losing out on education, causing them to even drop out, affecting the overall literacy rate of the country, is another aspect to the dire consequences of an extended or prolonged lockdown [18]. In fact, a study performed by World Vision reveals how about 44% of junior-level students fear that they may not be able to continue their education further even when offline classes resume. The same study also sheds light on how a staggering 55% of children are becoming increasingly despondent staying at home, being affected psychologically, while 40% of those suffer from

malnutrition as their parents' incomes plummet due to the lockdown [19].

Here comes the role of the government in question, to effectively deal with and manage the pandemic in the country. While lockdowns are an absolute necessity to curb the infection rates, accompanying measures must be taken to ensure its sustainability and effectiveness. As per the health-emergency disaster risk management (Health-EDRM) suggested by WHO, initiatives must be taken to prevent the breakdown of the various sectors of healthcare, industrial, education, agriculture, research, environment, and finance [20]. The most vulnerable groups in this pandemic include low-income families such as those of daily and informal low wage earners, ethnic community groups, disable population and migrant workers who have just returned. According to a report by BRAC (an international Bangladeshi NGO), there is a confirmed expected increase of 60% in poverty due to loss of income and employment for lockdown [18]. In fact, with the arrival of the COVID-19 outbreak and the first series of lockdowns, the poverty rate in Bangladesh increased by 40.9% with the incomes of 25% of families dropping by a large margin [21]. This is reflective of what an unplanned or improperly managed lockdown can do.

Despite health experts' constant emphasis on extensive testing, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) has been reluctantly cooperative at best. While the neighboring Indian state of West Bengal has been conducting over 60,000 tests daily, with its population being only about half of Bangladesh's, the number of tests done in Bangladesh has hardly crossed the 20,000-mark until now [13]. With majorly underfunded hospital services, insufficient beds for patients, and only 2.6% of the population vaccinated even after 1.5 years of the pandemic, the public perception of the government's role is very skeptical [4]. Moreover, the unplanned lockdowns are further degenerating public perception. As said by the former director of DGHS, the goal of the lockdown was not fixed, resulting in repeated backtracking by the government, and consequent failure of containment as it was supposed to do otherwise [22].

It, however, does not mean that the government has done nothing. But with whatever initiatives the government has taken, there appears to be a lack of proper risk assessment and poor coordination among stakeholders from medical to social welfare to the general public. As easy as it is to point fingers at the authorities, it is important to remember the need for public cooperation as well. An example can be seen

in the surge of infection rates among the industrial workers' post-lockdown despite being provided with healthcare guidelines and social distancing instructions [9]. This portrays the importance of communicating the health risk in the local language to effectively increase awareness about the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

The key to addressing any major health risk is caution and preparedness. In the case of the COVID-19 outbreak, there is no easy or quick end in sight. While vaccines are being developed and applied, countries throughout the world are adopting aggressive non-therapeutic measures such as lockdowns and social distancing to contain the spread of the infection. Bangladesh must also follow the same path, enforcing proper lockdown of necessary duration. It is already seen that the effectiveness of comfortable or soft lockdowns is very questionable, so the government should not be neglectful about enforcing a strict lockdown to protect other areas of the country, as it may prove to be even more costly in the end through the price of lives. The people must also join forces and cooperate, for the government's measures to be successful.

Consequently, it is high time for the government of Bangladesh to come forth with a comprehensive strategic plan to contain the outbreak, along with the cooperation and involvement of non-governmental and social organizations as well as law enforcement. Besides properly planned lockdowns and contingency plans, the government should initiate immediate expansion of testing centers, taking help of life science departments in universities, along with aggressive tracing of cases and contacts, strict quarantines, as well as education to promote good hand hygiene practices, particularly for the marginal populations. It is equally vital for the masses to follow and support all initiatives, starting with following the simple directions to wearing masks properly and maintaining social or physical distancing as much as possible. Identifying the COVID-19 infection hotspots and the cluster areas of the country, and putting them under strict lockdown, while maintaining the rest of the nation through strict public health guidelines and social distancing could be a helpful measure without disrupting the entire economy.

With the dramatic escalation in infection rates, not only the government's actions but individual efforts of the public, combined with directives from the health experts, as well as international help are needed to mitigate the crisis effectively. Overall, the public must be sensible about the state and effects of COVID-19, and realize the use of masks,

hand sanitization and hand wash as a vital preventive measure.

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