

National News

TIB calls for rigorous enforcement of Prime Minister's pledge of no tolerance to any irregularity in Covid 19 response; Demands accountability in public procurement



Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has called for strict and unbiased enforcement of Prime Minister's pledge that no irregularity shall be tolerated in government response to the crisis related to Covid 19. A statement issued to the media on 01 April, 2020 says that the Prime Minister's statement confirms TIB's demand that there is no alternative to highest level transparency and effective corruption control as prerequisite for successful response to this type of major crisis. TIB says that it now remains in the hands of her party leaders, activists and beneficiaries at all levels, administration, law-enforcement agencies including the Police to enforce the Prime Minister's pledge. On the other hand, in this extraordinary situation although public procurement may genuinely need to be fast-tracked, all measures must be taken to ensure accountability. TIB also calls upon the government to guarantee that the supply chain of food and other essential daily consumables remains intact.

Referring to the statement of TIB on Corona virus related crisis issued on 28 March 2020, Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of TIB says that the Prime Minister's strong statement was well-expected. He says, "as much as the Prime Minister's pledge is encouraging, it is now incumbent upon her party leaders, activists, supporters and beneficiaries to effectively enforce it. People would expect them not only to be respectful to her pledge, but also refrain from taking advantage of this extraordinary national crisis for involving in illicit practices for political mileage, corruption, abuse, misappropriation and extortion".

Referring to the good examples in Shibchar of Madaripur and Bahubol of Hobiganj set by the prompt action taken against perpetrators of misappropriation of government supplied low-price rice and edible oil, Dr Zaman said, "although those involved were locally influential for links with ruling party or otherwise, the rigour with which the relevant administration officials and police acted has encouraged us. But on the other hand, credible complaint has been reported that some members of the police misappropriated money from cash boxes of some shops in Shitakundu in the pretext that the shops were kept open. We want to consider this Sitakundu incident as an isolated one and hope that the Shibchar and Bahubaol examples will be the model to follow by everyone in administration and law enforcement across the country. In case of any deviation exemplary disciplinary actions must be ensured".

The executive director says, "the fact that governance deficit and corruption, particularly in a section of personnel in administration and law enforcement in Bangladesh is widespread, is a common knowledge. On the other hand, in the current extraordinary crisis situation it is only natural that in addition to the added responsibility and power, they are being entrusted with additional resources. Those who are prone to corruption in normal conditions, will be even more tempted to further corrupt practices. The Government

must therefore attach top priority to mainstreaming anti-corruption, transparency and accountability in all stages and aspects of management of Corona crisis”.

The statement further said, it is also natural that in order to meet the crisis and manage its evolving socio-economic impact government activities like public procurement and distribution need to be fast-tracked. In spite of such obligation of speedy handling of procurement and distribution, all measures must be taken to ensure accountability and transparency. Under no circumstances can anyone be allowed to indulge in undue profiteering and take advantage of this crisis for immoral and illegal enrichment”.

“The supply chain of essential food and daily necessities including perishable products must be maintained steadily ensuring transportation of such products with the assistance of police and if necessary calling upon limited and specifically assigned tasks to army personnel under the supervision of the civil administration. Failure to maintain the supply chain of essential consumables and perishable goods will deepen the crisis and push the farming population of rural areas in particular into extreme disadvantage and poverty”, the statement said.

**TIB strongly condemns violation of security and health right of RMG workers by factory owners;
Public health held hostage to bargain advantage**



TIB has strongly condemned the inhuman violation of safety and health right of RMG (readymade garments) workers as factory owners forced them to report to work under the threat of layoff at a time when public holiday has been announced upto 11 April to ensure social distancing as the key preventive measure against spread of Corona-Covid.

In a statement issued on 05 April 2020 to the media, TIB says that the insensitive act of factory owners which is detrimental to public interest has pushed tens of thousands of workers as well as people at large to severe risk of infection. TIB considers it a violation of safety and health right of RMG workers that under pressure of the factory owners the workers have been forced to rush to workplace in extremely adverse conditions from very faraway for fear of losing job.

Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director of TIB says, “As advised by health experts, people are being strongly advised by the Government to stay indoors except for unavoidable emergencies for next few weeks which are considered to be of highest risk of Covid-19 spread in the country. Global supply chain of RMG related products is standstill and there is no scope shipment of products at this stage, while the RGM products or any of its ingredients are not perishable. It can be nothing but sheer selfish conspiracy that workers have been forced to report back at work and thereby magnify their as well as the wider society’s vulnerability to Corona-Covid.”

“One of the first key decisions of the Prime Minister as she declared the Corona-related challenges as national crisis was to stand by the RMG sector. About 85 percent of the 5000 crore fund she announced to be disbursed as loan subject to an insignificant service charge to pay wages and benefits of export-oriented industries are targeted to the RMG sector. Even then the sector leaders took this step against public interest by pushing the workers and members of the public to higher than ever risk of spread of the virus.”, the statement said.

It added, “Workers returned to workplace from afar taking huge risks. Then at about midnight the BGMEA made a further confused call to close factories. The factory owners have been clearly too insensitive to consider the pains the workers have to sustain to return to respective home again. Moreover a large number of factories are reportedly still open adding to further confusion and misery of the workers.”

“It was expected for good reasons after the Rana Plaza tragedy that Bangladesh would no longer face such intensities in RMG sector. Alas, the factory owners have once again demonstrated that compared to their narrow self-interest not only workers’ welfare but even greater public interest is of no value. Let’s not forget that in case of Rana Plaza tragedy workers were coerced to report to work inspite of the risk of collapse of the building identified by experts. In the same manner despite knowing fully well that social distancing is top priority at the most vulnerable period the factory owners and their associations have repeated the same feat”, the statement said.

Referring to credible media reports quoting several factory owners, Iftekharuzzaman said that no words were enough to condemn that the factory owners have taken this unbelievable course of taking workers rights and public interest to hostage as they preferred the government fund to be outright grant rather than refundable loan at negligible service charge.

“It is also shocking that although the relevant and some other ministers as well as some public representatives are from the RMG sector, the rights of the workers and public interest have been violated so brazenly. Question may be genuinely asked if there are vested interests within the government who are operating to hold the Government hostage to promote their narrow self interest out of the Corona-Covid driven national crisis. We call upon the Prime Minister to identify such elements and take firm action”, the statement said.

Free Flow of Information Indispensable for Effective Response to Corona Crisis; Ensure Health and Professional Protection of Media workers: TIB

Free flow of information is indispensable for effective response to Corona-Covid19 crisis, says TIB, and calls upon media owners and the Government to ensure proper health safety and professional protection including regular salaries and benefits of the media professionals. It also proposed a provision of special risk incentives, especially frontline reporters.

In a statement issued on 9 April to the media, Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director of TIB said, “free flow of information is indispensable for effective response to the national crisis created by Corona-Covid19 crisis. It is clear that no country in the world had adequate preparation of capacity to prevent and control the virus. It is only natural that there will be deficits and weaknesses in managing the crisis. Therefore, no hiding of information or any predicament to its disclosure, but free and unrestricted flow of information must be ensured at higher than normal level. To that end, we call upon the media houses and the Government to ensure that the reporters and other media professionals must be provided fullest possible health safety and professional protection, especially regular salaries and benefits including appropriate risk incentives”.

TIB says, media workers are taking worst possible health risks to discharge their professional duties to ensure people's access to information as well as creating public awareness. Many frontline reporters and other media professionals are working without even minimum level of security which is as risky for them as for community infection. Considering the space and nature of their work, infection of one media person may have a chain effect of infection of severe nature. At least one such case of infection of a reporter has forced home quarantine for over fifty of his colleagues. In this context TIB is calling for highest possible types of health safety measures for media persons.

Some media houses have introduced protection measures like roster duties on weekly basis, provision of mask and hand sanitizers, measuring body temperature at office entrance, application of disinfectant in workplace and partial work from home. Commending such initiatives, **Iftekhharuzzaman** said that these were however neither enough nor applicable for all, and added that media owners must ensure that their employees do not expose themselves to health risks while discharging professional duties. Use of PPE (Personal Protection Equipment) should be made mandatory for frontline media persons and media houses must provide the same. Transportation facilities from home to workplace and back by properly equipped vehicles should be ensured.

Referring to long-nourished problem in the sector, the statement further said, "in most cases media persons are not provided any benefits other than salaries like provident fund, gratuity or health insurance. Many of them are not even paid salaries regularly. Ironically the media houses have been tactfully depriving the newsmen of their due entitlements for long. Quite some time before the Corona crisis, arbitrary lay-offs have been reported on the pretext of cost reduction. The same has happened even during the present crisis in at least one TV channel. Some channels do not also pay regular salaries. This is disappointing for a sector where most of the entities are owned by rich and powerful corporate houses. The current crisis has opened an opportunity for them to demonstrate that they represent responsible corporate behavior. They can do so by providing risk incentives in addition to mandatorily ensuring health safety, professional protection and regular salaries and benefits".

"Media should be immediately recognized as essential public service, and the special provision made by the Government of low-interest loan for the export-oriented sector to ensure uninterrupted payment of salaries and benefits of workers should be made applicable for media sector too. At the same time the Newspaper Owners Association, Association of Television Channel Owners, Editors' Guild and various associations and unions of journalists should demonstrate professional integrity to be able to work together to cope with the challenges faced by the media persons in the current extraordinary crisis situation", **Iftekhharuzzaman** concluded.

Corona-Covid-19 Crisis Relief Operation: The role of ruling party local committees should be restricted to assisting the administration

Reacting cautiously to the formation of ward level local committees of the ruling party in the context of relief operation during the Corona-Covid-19 crisis, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) demanded that their role should be limited only to assist the local administration. In a statement issued on 17 April 2020 to the media, the TIB says that it is not unusual to raise doubt about the extent to which such committees will deliver any positive result in a context where a section of local level political leaders and activists are being reportedly found to be involved in widespread corruption of various types including embezzlement, hoarding and misappropriation of relief goods.

Iftekhharuzzaman, executive director of TIB said, "The country and the people are confronting a mega crisis due to the epidemic. The ultra-poor are facing the worst risks. They have been joined by many others rendered unemployed by the lockdown. Relief goods must reach everyone without any pilferage, and there is no scope of partisan political consideration. The Prime Minister has pledged exactly the same, and we

want to be assured that the Head of the Government's declaration will be strictly enforced in relief operation".

He said, "the new committees can serve the purpose only if they can stay above partisan bias. The opportunity may then be created that no one in need of food will be deprived. But it must also be borne in mind sadly that nearly all of those involved in various misdeeds like corruption, embezzlement and thievery are reportedly politically linked. Hence, a concern is not baseless that the new relief committees might in fact become platforms for further irregularities".

Commending examples of the way a section of the administrative officials took stern action against some perpetrators, Iftekharuzzaman said that the public officials should discharge the key role in relief operation, including oversight and monitoring with highest levels of integrity". The committees linked to political parties should only assist the local administration and must in no way be allowed to become a means of partisan influence on the administration so that the relief operation does not become a fest of corruption.

"At the same, we call upon the administration to strictly enforce legal action against the corrupt without any regard to political identity", said Iftekharuzzaman. TIB suggested that the list of recipients of the relief goods including quantity and date of distribution should be disclosed for public information regularly through website, so that any gaps and irregularities can be monitored.

From the very onset of the crisis TIB has been stressing upon the authorities that to succeed in coping with it there is no alternative to transparency, accountability and effective corruption control. The Prime Minister has also warned strongly against corruption in relief operation. The primary responsibility to comply rests with political leaders, activists and other beneficiaries of political linkage as well as administration, and law enforcement agencies including the police, the statement reiterated.

Covid-19 crisis response and recovery: TIB calls upon international donors to provide unprecedented level of support to Bangladesh and ensure highest standards of transparency and accountability

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) calls upon Bangladesh's Development Partners (DPs) to ensure greater than ever support to the country in its efforts to the Covid-19 crisis and recovery, and at the same time to ensure the highest standards of anti-corruption, transparency and accountability at all levels.

Need for more robust support than ever

In a statement issued on 26 April to the media, TIB says, no country of the world was fully prepared nor had the perfect capacity to cope with the Covid-19 global pandemic. Bangladesh could not be any exception. In spite of commendable economic performance in GDP growth and many other socio-economic indicators as well as globally acknowledged disaster management experience, the crisis has exposed Bangladesh to worst ever challenges of sustaining the progresses achieved in the health sector and beyond.

Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director of TIB said, "while full consequences of the crisis remain unpredictable to be assessed in concrete terms at this stage, it is clear that Bangladesh will certainly require substantial donor support. Hence our call to DPs as trusted partners of shared interest, for deeper and wider support to Bangladesh than ever before".

More transparency, more accountability

“We also consider DPs as valued partner in Bangladesh’s compulsions to prevent and control corruption by promoting transparency and accountability. We, therefore, urge upon them to ensure that anti-corruption principles and practices are specifically ensured in all initiatives or projects at all levels of decisions, designs and implementation”, TIB said.

In management and recovery from mega crises like this, funding decisions and project implementation process may often genuinely need to be fast-tracked. However, nothing justifies any compromise of proactive and on-demand disclosure of information including unrestricted reporting by media and civil society including freedom of opinion, the statement added.

“Public procurement, as rushed as it may often require to be in crisis situations, must be subjected to transparency and accountability. All kinds of procurement risks like collusion, political bias, conflict of interest and over-pricing must be prevented by ensuring compliance and accountability without favour or fear. Improved transparency and accountability will boost public trust and credibility of the government as well as donors. Lack of openness will create greater opportunities for abuse of power and discretion as well as collusive corruption and rent-seeking” the executive director said.

“The Covid-19 crisis has overwhelmed the world by unprecedented challenges. At the same time, it also calls attention of all stakeholders to be more vigilant to ensure integrity, in which strategically designed contributions of DPs can add great value, expects TIB”, the statement said.

CCC News

TIB’s Core Actors Voluntary Initiatives in Corona-Covid-19 Response

TIB inspired Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), Citizens for Transparency (Swajan), Youth Engagement & Support (YES) and YES Friends groups came up with their humanitarian responses during the CORONA-COVID-19 pandemic. They undertook a series of voluntary activities in April 2020 ranging from public awareness campaigns to food distribution and financial support for the vulnerable people who are hit hard. 1131 Core Actors of TIB, predominantly youth, are voluntarily involved in CORONA-COVID-19 response initiatives. Among them 348 are CCC members, 177 are SWAJAN members, 452 are YES members and 154 are YES Friends members. They are involved individually, under the platform of CCC or in alignment with the local administrations and different Social, Cultural and Professional Bodies and Voluntary organizations.



Defying unknown health risks, especially the self-motivated youth volunteers of TIB have taken it to their



responsibility towards their community during such a crisis. YES and YES Friends members of 45 CCCs in 38 districts and 7 Upazilas in Bangladesh have taken various steps to help the community people. They have engaged themselves as volunteers of District or Upazila administration, City Corporation, Union Parishad etc. They also contributed in listing of persons desperately in need of relief. The guidance of respective CCCs paved a smooth way for the volunteers.

Awareness Raising Activities

The YES and YES Friends members have launched various awareness campaigns including, distributing leaflets, masks, soap, hand sanitizer, bleaching powder in their respective communities. Besides, some YES and YES Friends members initiated to prepare hand sanitizer and mask and distributed along with soap, hand gloves, bleaching powder etc. to the community people. They also demonstrated good practices to help avoid contagion, explaining the right way of wearing a



face mask and washing hands according to the guidelines of the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Health. Some of them assisted administration to ensure that non-

resident returnees in the locality properly maintain the rules of quarantine. Many of the volunteers have joined in spraying antibacterial drugs in crowded areas like the local mosques, hospital premises, different important roads, local transports etc. They also used megaphones to request people to remain at home and maintain necessary social distances.

Awareness raising activities

- Distribution of leaflets on CORONA-COVID-19
- Awareness raising through megaphones
- Making people aware by sharing different Video Clips in social media, sending SMS etc.
- Sharing updated news on Corona crisis in Social Media.
- Teach people how to wash hand properly.

Fund Mobilization by CCCs for reaching out to the most vulnerable



A number of CCCs have mobilized fund for supporting Corona-Covid-19 ridden vulnerable Core Actors (CCC, Swajan, YES and YES Friends) by distributing cash, food items and other necessities. Similarly, fund has been mobilized to support the vulnerable people of their community by distributing basic food items and other necessities like soap, hand sanitizer, mask, bleaching powder etc. The recipients included the day laborers and the destitute including the marginalized groups like tea garden laborer, scheduled cast and Trans- gender people. They are also providing financial support to the vulnerable people including newspaper

hawkers and CNG-auto-rickshaw drivers. Some youth's assisted with distributing meal to the street children, transgender and other floating people of their locality.

Many Core Actors stand beside the community peoples to reduce the impact of COVID-19 in the banner of different voluntary organizations or individuals. They have actively engaged themselves in fund mobilization and relief distribution activities. In addition, Core Actors specially the YES and YES Friends Members have supported local administration and different voluntary organizations to reach out to the people in need.

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