

## National News

### **Study Finds Corona Crisis Response in Bangladesh Riddled with Pervasive Governance Deficits, Sees No Concrete Plan Ahead**



Widespread irregularities and corruption in the government adopted initiatives in tackling COVID19-led challenges have deeply affected the healthcare system of Bangladesh, thus contributing to a growing crisis of public confidence in the wake of likely 2nd wave of spread, a recent study by Transparency International Bangladesh has found.

According to the study titled Governance Challenges in Tackling Corona Virus (Part II), follow-up research of a study previously released, the crisis has not only exposed the deep-rooted corruption in the health sector but also new scopes for corruption have been created circling the crisis at the same time. Besides, the study observed that low virus detection through controlling policy and mechanisms is being touted as a political achievement – portraying it as "pandemic control." Although Corona Virus transmission has recently been decreasing to some extent in Bangladesh, it continues to be a big health hazard. The numbers partly reduced mainly due to Govt. imposed restraining policy of limiting the number of detection tests.

Since the detection of the first COVID-19 patient in Bangladesh on 8 March 2020, the country currently ranks 20th globally in terms of the total number of affected. The study also identified ongoing corruption-friendly tendencies during the pandemic, i.e. theft from relief and incentive programmes depriving the actual beneficiaries, hiding irregularities, corruption and mismanagement by restricting disclosure of information; taking bureaucratic decisions ignoring specialist opinions in tackling challenges, etc. According to the study, there are no testing facilities in 35 districts of the country yet. So far, 113 labs across the country have been designated for the virus test, but 38 of them have not run any tests since 2 August.

The study findings were shared in a virtual press conference by TI Bangladesh on 10 November 2020. The anti-graft watchdog also placed 15-points recommendations to tackle the crisis and strengthen good governance, stressing on a coordinated action plan in combating the likely 2nd wave of the pandemic.

In the Press conference, it was revealed that TIB carried out this study as a second phase of the research work that was conducted to identify challenges of good governance in various activities undertaken by the government during the first three months of Corona Virus spread released on 15 June 2020. This 2nd part of the study is being conducted as a follow-up to monitor the progress of various indicators of governance in the post-June 15 period up to 31 October 2020.

In the press conference, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, Adviser-Executive Management Professor Dr. Sumaiya Khair and Director-Research & Policy (R&P) Mohammad Rafiqul Hassan were present. TIB Director-Outreach and Communication (O&C) Sheikh Manjur-E-Alam conducted the virtual event. Deputy Programme Manager (DPM)-R&P Md. Julkarnayeen presented the study findings at the event, accompanied by research supervisor Senior Programme Manager-R&P Shahzada M Akram. Other researchers of the study team were DPM Mohammad Nure Alam, DPM Morsheda Akter, Programme Manager (PM) Taslima Akter and PM Manzoor-E-Khoda of R&P.



Researchers conducted the study using mixed methods with three types of survey on healthcare services and social safety net programmes, polling 3131 people, including health service recipients, beneficiaries of social safety Net programmes and health service providers. The data was collected between June 16 and October 31, 2020.

According to the study, health workers in most hospitals did not get PPE with WHO standards. Although the government claims that there is no crisis of isolated bed and ICU beds for COVID patients, the survey shows that 5.4, 32.4, and 30.2 per cent of the service recipients across different divisions of the country did not get oxygen cylinder, ventilator support and ICU beds respectively. In addition, 9.9 per cent of the healthcare service recipients received false reports from the laboratory, and 8.7 per cent of the patients died because they did not receive healthcare on time in the health centres. Medical personnel at most health facilities were not provided with the safety equipment as per World Health Organization (WHO) standards.

Ordinary surgical masks were provided instead of N-95 or KN-95 masks to 48.6% of hospitals. Furthermore, all of the hospitals had vacant positions for doctors, while 89.1 per cent had empty positions for nurses.

The study found that a few syndicates were controlling all procurements in the health sector — allegedly involving some health ministry officials, DGHS, Central Medical Storage Depot, Anti-Corruption Commission, and some senior officials of different hospitals.

Citing research findings, Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said, “There have been massive deficiencies in every governance indicator for the government adopted initiatives at both national and local level in tackling Corona Virus. Most of those deficiencies and violations are man-made. Taking advantage of both the Corona crisis and the crisis that put the health sector under pressure, corrupt individuals, influential people and beneficiaries of corruption have joined in the grand festival of corruption. As a result, widespread corruption has taken place and is still ongoing. So far, we have only seen some officials transferred or made OSD [Officer on Special Duty] after serious allegations of corruption were brought against them. Although the ACC has been active to some extent, it seems as if they have been roaming within their self-set boundaries. As a result, the so-called godfathers of corruption have remained out of reach. Only a few people in the front row have been dragged out.”

Due to corruption and irregularities, the survey has identified that 12% of the beneficiaries of cash aid and 10% of Open Market Sales (OMS) cards were victimised while getting listed. An average of Tk220 was paid as a bribe to be listed for government relief, and in the case of cash incentives, 56% of recipients were victims of irregularities and corruption. 18.9 per cent had to pay a bribe to get on the list, while 36.1 per cent had to request an influential local figure to refer them for the list. About three lakh beneficiaries have been named more than once for aid. Three thousand government employees and 7,000 pensioners were included on the relief list. In addition, over 100 people said they had to prove their political identity to get on the list. Of the people involved in corruption, the local MP, chairman, member, councillor or mayor were found to be involved in an overwhelming majority of the cases.

The study also observed that no public employee had received the government-announced compensation so far except the first doctor who died from Covid-19. A tendency to serve personal interests through irregularities in relief and incentive programs persists, depriving the affected families at the field level. The report has further observed that the expansion of private testing facilities and urban-centric government-run laboratories exposed the fees for tests, depriving poor people and putting them at risk of harassment and corruption.

According to the study, most of the committees formed by the government to deal with the Covid-19 situation in Bangladesh are now ineffective. "When corruption in the health sector has widely been discussed and emerged as one of the most important issues at the national level, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health did not even hold a meeting during this period," said Dr. Zaman. Expressing concerns over govt. adopted restraining policy that led to controlling relevant initiatives and information during the crisis, Dr. Zaman said, "As a result, data has been regulated, tests have been regulated, and public access to health care has decreased. The government was more active in controlling the disclosure of information than controlling corruption. Which is very worrying and in conflict with our constitution."

"Despite warnings from the top echelons of the government about the likely second wave of transmission in winter, we do not see any specific policy or strategy to deal with the second wave of infection without some scattered announcements," concluded Dr. Zaman.

The study came up with 15 recommendation points, including health sector procurement in e-Government procurement (e-GP); the expansion of testing facilities in all districts, formulation of specific plans with proper coordination of experts for tackling the probable second wave of Corona Virus transmission; adequate management of medical waste with additional training; extension of free sample testing facilities to all districts; coordination among implementing agencies; ensuring free flow of information including media on public procurement abolishing restrictions on disclosure of information; the utilisation of private hospital services through specific plans; the implementation of expert committee recommendations, and the proper implementation of incentives packages.



## Torturing journalist Golam Sarwar: A threat to gag the media, says TIB

**Dhaka, November 2, 2020:** The incident of abduction and torture of an online journalist Golam Sarwar was to threaten independent journalism and gag the mass media, said Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) issuing a statement today.

Expressing grave concern, the anti-graft watchdog said that finding the journalist in an unconscious and mentally-traumatised condition after going missing for three days is not an isolated incident.

In the statement, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman has said, “Journalist Golam Sarwar's disappearance and later finding him in an unconscious state is not an isolated incident at all. Rather, it is a continuation of the culture of threat, intimidation and torture to gag independent journalism and the media.”

Terming the incident as a barbaric example from medieval era, he said that this shows the current condition of the media that they are going through.

"There are a number of other such incidents in recent times, of which we do not see any proper investigation or trial. Shall we then assume that the government, as well as the law enforcement agencies concerned do not take the incidents of assault, torture and even abduction and disappearance of journalists seriously?" he asked.

He also explained that it conflicts with the position of the Prime Minister's commitment to ensuring free media, independent journalism and the occupational safety of journalists.

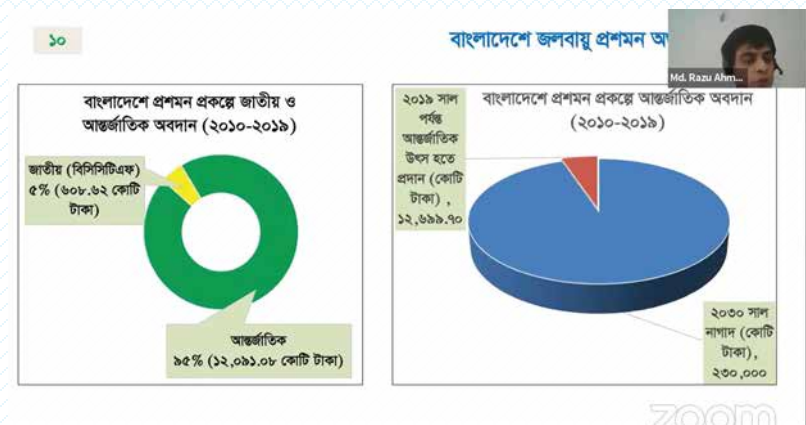
Referring to another disappearing incident of photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, Dr. Zaman said that the country shows repeated failure in solving the disappearance cases, and despite the country showing support for independent journalism, freedom of expression and free media, in reality, every effort is being made to control the media in both institutional and informal ways.

## TIB: Over fifty percent climate mitigation funds lost to corruption, mismanagement

Tk37.07 cr of the total budget of Tk68.18 cr is not accounted for

5 November 2020: Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has said 54% of total money allocated for climate change mitigation projects has been misappropriated through corruption and mismanagement.

TIB revealed the damning statistics in its new report through a virtual press conference on Thursday.



Md. Razu Ahmed Masum, assistant manager, research (climate finance governance) of TIB, presented the research paper, titled “Climate Change Mitigation Finance and Project Implementation in Bangladesh: Governance, Challenges and Way Forward.”

A total of Tk68.18 crore was allocated against the projects. Of the amount, Tk37.07 crore is not accounted for. The Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh (CAG) did not audit any of the projects, states the report.

All the projects were tendered on the basis of political recommendations. A former minister’s private secretary took 10% of the total budget as a bribe for the approval of three of the seven projects.

The study, commencing in June 2018, ended in September 2020. Implementing agencies, contractors, public representatives and locals were interviewed to gather information.

In one of the projects undertaken by the forest department, all equipment vanished after project completion, and yet to be located. The forest department also planted 100,000 fewer trees than it was supposed to, as per project documents.

Other lapses by the forest department include misappropriation of funds and planting of seedlings of lower quality than required as per project documents.

One of the projects undertaken by the local government division showed expenses to be 70% greater than the actual figure.

The Power Development Board, for its sole project, showed each acre of land to cost Tk1,100,000 more than the actual price.

It is clear that large amounts of money were lost to corruption and misappropriation, said TIB.

Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of TIB, said: “Projects are taken and implemented by political influence, and public opinion is ignored. Even the CAG office and IMID of the planning commission did not audit and evaluate the projects.”



“Lack of public participation, accountability and increased political influence created the opportunity for corruption,” he said.

### **State of funds from international sources**

For climate change mitigation, Bangladesh has only managed Tk12,700 crore so far from international funds and other sources despite aiming to receive Tk230,000 crore within 2030.

Between 2010 and 2019, Bangladesh got 95% of its funds for climate change mitigation from international sources. Only 5% of it was paid by the Bangladesh government.

“Only 15% of the money received from international sources are taken as grants. The rest is taken as loan and in other forms,” said Dr. Iftekharuzzaman.

“The government is not taking the correct steps to receive international funds. Moreover, Bangladesh itself is increasing carbon emissions by building new coal and LNG based power plants. By doing so, the country is losing its image in the international arena.”

### **Recommendations**

TIB recommended proper monitoring, audit and evaluation of projects and preparing public reports based on such activities.

It also recommended taking necessary steps to make sure the accountability of implementing agencies and contractors and their capacity to do the job before approval of any project.

Furthermore, TIB demanded necessary steps to punish those involved in corruption in completed projects.

## **Over sixty percent fear retaliation while reporting corruption: Barometer 2020**

24 November 2020: Almost 75 per cent Bangladeshi citizens think government corruption is a big problem in their lives, according to 'Global Corruption Barometer: Asia 2020'.



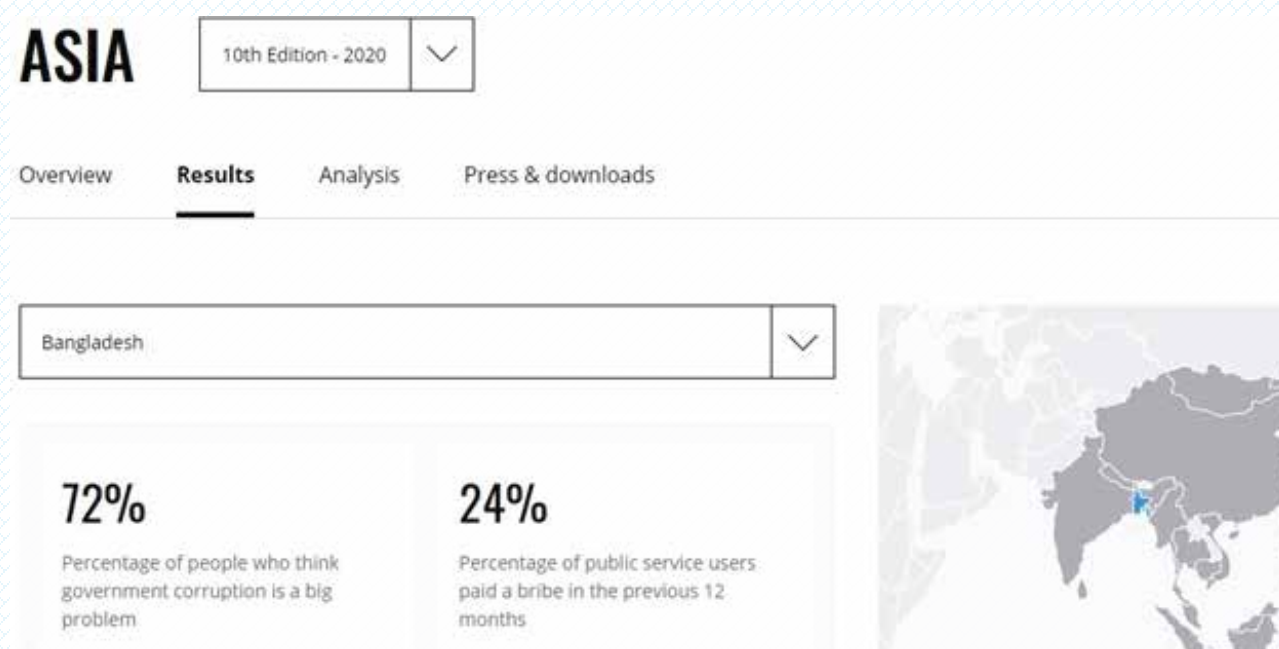


It reveals that 24 per cent people paid a bribe for public services in the past 12 months, 9 per cent faced or knew about extortion and 22 per cent used personal connections for public services during the period.

The corruption barometer report, published recently by Transparency International, covered 17 countries where "corruption remains one of the key challenges", despite vast socio-economic and political differences.

"Although reporting cases of corruption is critical to curbing the spread, a majority of citizens (54 per cent) think that if they report corruption, they will suffer retaliation" the new report observed.

In Bangladesh, it said, 63 per cent people "are particularly concerned about retaliation". Such fear is reportedly prevailing among 63 per cent Indians and 69 per cent South Koreans.



Bangladesh stood 146th among 180 nations in TI's Corruption Index 2019.

Surprisingly, according to the barometer report, while most citizens consider corruption a big problem in their countries, they still voice positive support for the actions taken so far by their governments.

In Bangladesh, it added, 87 per cent of the people surveyed said the government is doing well in tackling corruption.

The report found that Myanmar has the highest percentage of citizens who think that the government is doing well in tackling corruption (93 per cent). Such rate is 85 per cent in the Philippines.

"This contradiction may be a sign of recent progress of some governments or a reluctance from citizens living in authoritarian regimes to blame the government," the report explained.

When contacted by a Bangla newspaper, TI Bangladesh chapter's Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said the barometer report reflected the actual state of corruption in the country.

It also showed that a higher percentage (47 per cent) of Bangladeshis say corruption decreased in the past 12 months while 40 per cent think corruption increased and 11 per cent believe it remains static during the period.

According to the report, asked if ordinary people could make a difference in the fight against corruption, 82 per cent responded positively and only 13 per cent negatively.

## **Enforcing law effectively to stop violence against women: TIB**

25 November 2020: Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) on Wednesday demanded effective enforcement of laws to stop violence against women and girls in the society as crimes like rape cannot be prevented due to the lack of exemplary punishment in time in most of the cases.

The organization also stressed the need for coordinated initiative to change the social mind-set towards women, said a press release sent to the media on the eve of the 16-day activism against gender-based violence launched globally on Wednesday.

The TIB strongly demanded ensuring tough and exemplary punishment through fair judicial process for those who are directly or indirectly involved in every incident of violence against women and girls.

It said the repression on women and girls has risen alarmingly amid the ongoing coronavirus crisis due to many reasons including social mind-set, financial insolvency, visible incompetence, neglect and partiality of a section of the law enforcers, lengthy judicial process, insecurity and greed for power and assets.

“The coronavirus pandemic has multiplied the violence against women alongside the health crisis,” said TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman.

According to the counts of non-governmental organizations providing legal assistance to repressed women, the incidents of violence against women have increased by 70% till March-April last compared to its trend in the previous year.

“A brutal crime like rape is spreading like an epidemic due to lack of justice,” he said.

Dr. Iftekharuzzaman said though the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000, and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010, remain effective, very few perpetrators got sentences in the cases filed under the laws.

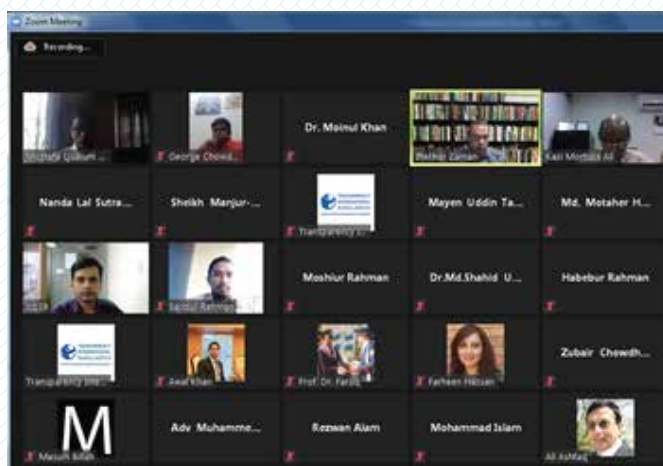


## Annual Meeting of Members Held

The Annual Meeting of Members (AMM) 2019-20 expressed concern over the irregularities and corruption occurred in the country's health sector during the coronavirus pandemic, gradual rise of incidents of violence against women and children, and continuous institutional and non-institutional pressure on the media. Moreover, TIB members called upon the concerned authorities to ensure effective participation of youths in fighting global events like the coronavirus pandemic as well as in the decision-making process to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

TIB members also expressed deep concern over the failure of Anti-Corruption Commission and other related institutions in controlling massive corruption that persists in the country, despite having sufficient legal basis. Members also added that TIB has been subjected to "unwanted and premeditative" comments because of its activities and research reports, which turned out to be an ill-attempt to avoid responsibility. As TIB is adamant to be impartial in its organisational activities, similarly the members of this organisation are also adamant to maintain political impartiality both in personal and professional life.

The Annual Meeting of Members 2019-20 was organized on 26 November 2020 virtually due to ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Some 44 TIB members with different professional identities, who have been voluntary involved with the organisation and its social movement against corruption, participated in the meeting. Moderated by the TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, the meeting was chaired by Kazi Mohammad Mortuza Ali, representative of members at the TIB General Assembly. Members expressed their satisfaction over the research, advocacy and campaign activities conducted by TIB during 2019-2020 fiscal year.



The members strongly urged to ensure appropriate punishment for the perpetrators as an effective step to stop violence and rape against women and children. They also called for the expeditious distribution of incentives to all frontline health workers and ensuring the participation of non-governmental organizations in assisting the marginalised and backward communities across the country. Commenting the pressure on the media is a bad omen for democracy, the members urged the government and all concerned to open the way for free journalism immediately. As an active partner in achieving the SDGs, the meeting also called for creating a conducive environment for the youth to be able to make decisions, formulate policies and strategies, set action plans and play the role of implementers. The members also demanded to ensure the impartiality, objectivity, efficiency and professionalism of the administration, law enforcement agencies, anti-corruption commission, judiciary, election commission and human rights commission.

To overcome this crisis in the banking sector, the meeting demanded to formulate a commission that is completely independent, neutral and free from the control of the government or the central bank and will be responsible to formulate and implement strategies with short-, medium-, and long-term action plans. In the concluding remark, members urged the government to take measures to create a just, well-governed and democratic Bangladesh.

## Dhaka YES and CCC Activities

**26 Nov. 2020:** In partnership with Jahangirnagar University Debate Organisation (JUDO) the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) celebrated the International Anti-Corruption Day 2020 by organising an International Debate Tournament titled TIB-JUDO Eminence Pre UADC.

Holding the theme Zero Corruption in COVID 19 Response Stop Corruption, Save Lives, 96 debaters, 35 Judges and 71 Organizers participated from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia and New Zealand. The prize-giving ceremony was held on 02 December following a webinar.

Dr. Iftekhruzzaman, ED of TIB, Dr. Bashir Ahmed, Faculty of JU and Mostafizur Rahman, renowned researcher were the key speakers of the webinar.

Professor DR. A.T.M. Atiqur Rahman, Moderator of JUDO, Professor DR. Mohammad Alamgir Kabir, Director, TSC, JU, Abdullah Ahmed Chowdhury Mamun, SPO, Rupali Bank Limited and Founder President, JUDO, Asif Mehedi Adi, Chair, Bangladesh Debate Council, Audrey Lee from Monash University and Representative of Core Adjudicator Panel were the guests in different sessions of this event.

On 26 November, Jessica Musulin, Member, Core Adjudicator Panel of this tournament conducted a workshop on the debate with the 100 debaters. The whole event was organized virtually and different sessions of this event were live on the Facebook page of TIB and JUDO where the event reached to 145,479 people and the total post engagement were more than 5 thousand. A total of 71 debate sessions were conducted in this tournament with different topics on good governance, gender equity, accessibility and others.

The final round of the international debating competition took place on November 29. The results were later announced after a virtual high-level Panel discussion on Governance Challenges in Tackling Coronavirus on December 2, 2020.

**12 Nov 2020:** Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and Information Commission (IC) jointly organized two days online RTI training workshop for the Designated Officer (DO)s in Khulna division on 11 & 12 November 2020 under the partnership with the Information Commission (IC). The chief Information Commissioner Martuza Ahmed was present as the Chief Guest in this training workshop. Suraiya Begum, ndc Information Commissioner, IC and Hasibur Rahman, Executive Director, MRDI made presentations as the trainers of this training workshop. A total of 30 participants from Khulna division took part in this online training workshop.

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