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Corona virus crisis: For survival, fight Covid-19 pandemic like a war

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By Gajendra Haldea

Covid-19 seems the deadliest enemy that mankind may have ever known. It is not only invisible, its fury, reach and damage are unpredictable. It has rendered the world's most powerful nation as the most helpless while the vibrant city of New York virtually became a ghost town. There is no cure nor vaccine, as of now or in the near future, and the only preventive measures are social distancing and masks. India's challenge becomes exceptionally acute due to the size and density of its population as well as the prevailing levels of poverty coupled with an inadequate health infrastructure and a stressed economy.

Going by the number of Covid-19 cases, India may be in the top five by end of June, and the top two by end August. By October end, India may well be at the top – both in number of cases as well as the death toll. Sounds alarming, but if you look at Europe, US and Brazil, this seems plausible. Moreover, when the lockdown was imposed across India on March 25, the number of confirmed cases was just 536, which rose to 1,38,845 as on May 24, i.e. a rise of 259 times over a period of

just two months – despite the lockdown. In other words, the number of cases was doubling every seven and a half days, on an average. Yet, we argumentative Indians will endlessly debate multiple issues and defy any consensus on the impending disaster or the stringent measures required to contain it, thereby continuing to be ill-prepared, both as a society as well as a nation.

The government has taken several steps to contain the pandemic, but the enormity, complexity and uncertainty of the problem has left several gaps. Testing has been grossly inadequate; medical equipment has been in short supply; migrant distress has caused great suffering; the Central government has placed insufficient information in the public domain while some states seem to be doctoring information; there are multiple centres of authority causing delays as well as dilution of accountability; and many seem to be functioning through trial and error. The deficit in consensus building, planning and coordination is writ large while optics and politicking do not seem uncommon. This needs to stop forthwith.

In particular, the low levels of testing leading to inadequate diagnosis, treatment, contact tracking and containment; poor enforcement of preventive measures; and the migrant imbroglio, each suggest lack of capacity in anticipation, planning and implementation. The government's unwillingness to share information that could have enhanced awareness and people's participation has only compounded matters.

The government or its think tanks have neither made any projections nor suggested alternative scenarios for the purposes of planning and action plans. In case this has been done, it seems shrouded in secrecy. Possibly, the government could be withholding its projections so as to prevent panic among the people, but in the process it seems to be creating an all-pervasive complacence that would only accelerate the spread of the disease.

The economic destruction that Covid-19 would cause worldwide may be greater than the damage caused by World War II. The loss of lives will also be enormous. The war against Covid-19 must, therefore, be fought in that perspective. The Centre should set up a War Room – preferably headed by the NSA (National Security Advisor) and including other top level functionaries and domain experts, as necessary – reporting directly to the Prime Minister. It should be given the freedom, authority and resources to plan and implement the war effort.

Bureaucracies cannot fight wars as they do not have the requisite mindset or training. They would prefer to order ammunition supplies only when the enemy is round the corner – for they are inherently slow, cautious and risk-averse. On the other hand, a general in the War Room would order and store ammunition much before the enemy forces start moving. He would also quickly augment and deploy his forces and fire power where they are needed most. Whoever is chosen to head the War Room must be allowed to function like a general or else it would be a War Room only in name.

Focused attention would be necessary for Mumbai, Delhi and other large cities that account for a major proportion of the infected population. A War Room should not mean that the role of states and local authorities would diminish in any manner. They would continue to function like vital field formations that would actually fight the war, albeit under a unified command that would professionalise all operations.

People's participation would be critical to the success of this war effort as it would help save lakhs of lives and trillions in incomes. Maximum information must be put in the public domain and detailed daily briefings conducted on all important aspects of the war effort, especially as the lockdown is eased.

Needless to say, the War Room would coordinate and ensure timely supply of test kits, medical equipment etc., besides provision of doctors and health workers. Special attention would be required for the safety and well-being of health care 'warriors' who often face traumatic conditions. The War Room would plan, strategise, prioritise and direct the operations with a single-minded focus on defeating this gruesome enemy.

This is not to say that life should come to a standstill. Even during a conventional war life goes on, but with all the precautions necessary for minimising loss of life and property. So has to be the case here. The grim scenario projected here should not be discarded as exaggerated fears. Nor should the proposed reinventing of the national response be regarded as presumptuous advice. The writing is on the wall.