



Strengthening the digital dimensions of tolerance and inclusion in Bangladesh during the COVID-19-pandemic

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is much more than a monumental public health and economic crisis. It is also a security threat – both on and offline. Owing to massive digitization, the pandemic created an infodemic of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, including by violent extremist actors. The Partnerships for Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh (PTIB) program, a UNDP-led initiative focused on preventing violent extremism since 2017, was well-positioned to respond to this spectrum of harms due to its experience with tackling risk factors both on and offline. The program rapidly pivoted to address these evolving challenges. It did so through a combination of highly focused research, monitoring, citizen engagement and targeted outreach. In the process, it created a model for adaptation and replication in other parts of the world.

To be sure, the COVID-19 pandemic is profoundly destabilizing for Bangladeshi government, businesses, civil society organizations and the wider population,

The COVID-19 pandemic is much more than a monumental public health and economic crisis. It is also a security threat – both on and offline

especially the most vulnerable. It has negatively impacted public service provision, disrupted retailers and supply chains, and directly impacted the lives and livelihoods of people, not least migrant, minority, disabled, LGBTQ and single-headed households. The pandemic led to widespread restrictions on mobility across Bangladesh with what promises to be intergenerational consequences on lives and livelihoods. At the same time, it also accelerated the digitization of Bangladesh, with people turning to the internet for information, services, work and social connections. This “digital domain” offers both opportunities and challenges.

Recognizing the destabilizing effects of COVID-19 both on and offline, UNDP responded by swiftly adapting the PTIB program to evolving realities. It leveraged a data-driven approach and cutting-edge research to generate situational awareness

and strategic insight for national and international partners, including on the digital dimensions of extremism. UNDP simultaneously invested in community and youth-led programs to give voice to minority voices and reinforce values of diversity, inclusion, and tolerance to counter the threat of radicalization. By empowering tech savvy youth, PTIB was able to reach a much wider audience – over 10 million people directly - with public information campaigns. Moreover, by reducing the risks of digital propaganda and radicalization, PTIB helped strengthen the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 and the building of a more peaceful, just and inclusive society.

Central to the success of the pivot to the COVID-19 crisis is the PTIB's prioritization of real-time monitoring and analytics. PTIB partners such as the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO), the Cox's Bazar Research and Analysis Unit (CARU) and the SecDev Group (SecDev) produced more than 80 high-quality knowledge products reaching thousands of government, private sector and non-governmental stakeholders. The creation of reliable data and transparent analysis helped create a shared narrative about the scope and scale of misinformation and extremism. It also generated insight into the dynamics of fake news and hateful content on social networks and encrypted platforms and the likely consequences of inaction. The proactive dissemination of short visual reports written in an accessible style helped shape the thinking and strategies of the host government, private sector entities, international partners, and a range of non-governmental organizations and media outlets.

Another key factor behind the effectiveness of PTIB is its direct citizen engagement and outreach to counter COVID-19 related misinformation and radicalization. PTIB fielded a series of activities that built on its successful Digital Peace Movement and Diversity for Peace campaigns initiated some years earlier. These initiatives involved over 12 public online events, hackathons with young innovators and dozens of social media campaigns reaching an

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audience of millions of Bangladeshis. Research findings and public events were frequently picked-up by national news outlets, extending the reach of PTIB. By purposefully privileging minority voices - including the hearing impaired, transgender communities, and linguistic and ethnic minorities - PTIB shared values of inclusion, diversity, tolerance, and secularism.

What is more, PTIB supported a range of research initiatives to better understand the wider online ecosystem of online harms. For example, PTIB commissioned a study on Open Web COVID-19 Disinformation in Bangladesh. The study identified a relatively compact, yet robust, ecosystem of financially-motivated disinformation in Bangladesh. The content is generally clickbait, with a focus on Bollywood gossip, fake health news, and inevitably, information about COVID-19. The networks are run by a small number of operators, mostly with profit motives with varying degrees of success. More disturbing, the content of these sites became decidedly more dangerous throughout 2020, including allegations that the vaccines were designed specifically to hurt the Muslim population.

Several lessons emerged from PTIB with relevance to Bangladesh and more widely:

Acknowledge the digital dimensions of misinformation, radicalization and extremism during crisis. The digital domain is an incubator for online harms, including the spread of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and extremist content. It is not just a space for recruitment and planning attacks. It is a setting in which radical ideas can become normalized and where hateful content can inspire physical violence. PTIB has evolved in concert with the digitization of Bangladeshi society and is increasingly relevant to wider programming of governance and citizenship.

Adopt a comprehensive approach to countering COVID-19 related misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and extremism. The PTIB actively invested in monitoring and mapping COVID-19 related events and digital trends across social media as well as empowering local youth groups and community-based organizations to counter these threats. The adoption of a multi-track approach combining powerful data-driven analytics with real citizen engagement and outreach was a key feature of its success.

Ensure a flexible and adaptive strategy that accounts for the evolving nature of the misinformation and extremist threat. Disinformation and extremist narratives, and the networks that propagate them, are often highly adaptive. The messages and ecosystems in which they are shared can change rapidly, especially when governments and tech companies are trying to take them down. PTIB pursued an agile approach, including tailoring responses and communications as appropriate.

Mobilize multiple audiences and reach across several media platforms. The PTIB adopted a multi-platform approach to monitoring trends and disseminating information. Products were shared in person to valued stakeholders and via institutional channels as well as conventional media. And by sharing campaigns on Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram, YouTube and other outlets, partners could rapidly expand their digital footprint.

Involve youth in the design and implementation of measures to counter COVID-19 misinformation. The PTIB made an effort to engage younger people at all stages of the intervention - from monitoring trends to formulating practical responses, including public awareness campaigns. Their insight into shaping the content of messaging, the medium of communication and the mode of dissemination made a real difference in reaching a wider audience. Some also acquired additional digital literacy skills in the process and had a multiplier effect when it came to outreach.

Introduction

The Partnerships for Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh, or PTIB, was originally conceived to prevent and reduce violent extremism both online and off. Launched by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) after a high-profile terrorist attack in 2016, the program consists of an array of initiatives to strengthen social cohesion and respect for diversity. The Holey Artisan Bakery attack was a wake-up call about the digital dimensions of extremism, not least because of the way it was planned in cyberspace.¹ PTIB rapidly pivoted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, amplifying its research capacities, public messaging, citizen engagement and outreach to counter a deluge of misinformation. It very intentionally designed interventions so as not to leave anyone behind, including by working with young people, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, and the transgender community in the fight against disinformation and extremist violence.

At the center of PTIB's COVID-19 strategy is the generation of high-quality information and research on the digital dimensions of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and extremist content in order to inform action. Partners involved in gathering, analyzing and disseminating insights on misinformation and extremist content are the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO), the Cox's Bazar Analysis and Research Unit (CARU) and the SecDev Group. Likewise, citizen engagement was mobilized through the Digital Peace Movement (DPM) - including the Digital Khichuri Challenge and Peace Talk Cafe - and the Diversity for Peace initiative - including a series of campaigns driven by a network of national and community-based organizations. By targeting disinformation, intolerance and hate speech, especially against minorities, migrants, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, PTIB has a key strategy in countering the factors giving rise to violent extremism.

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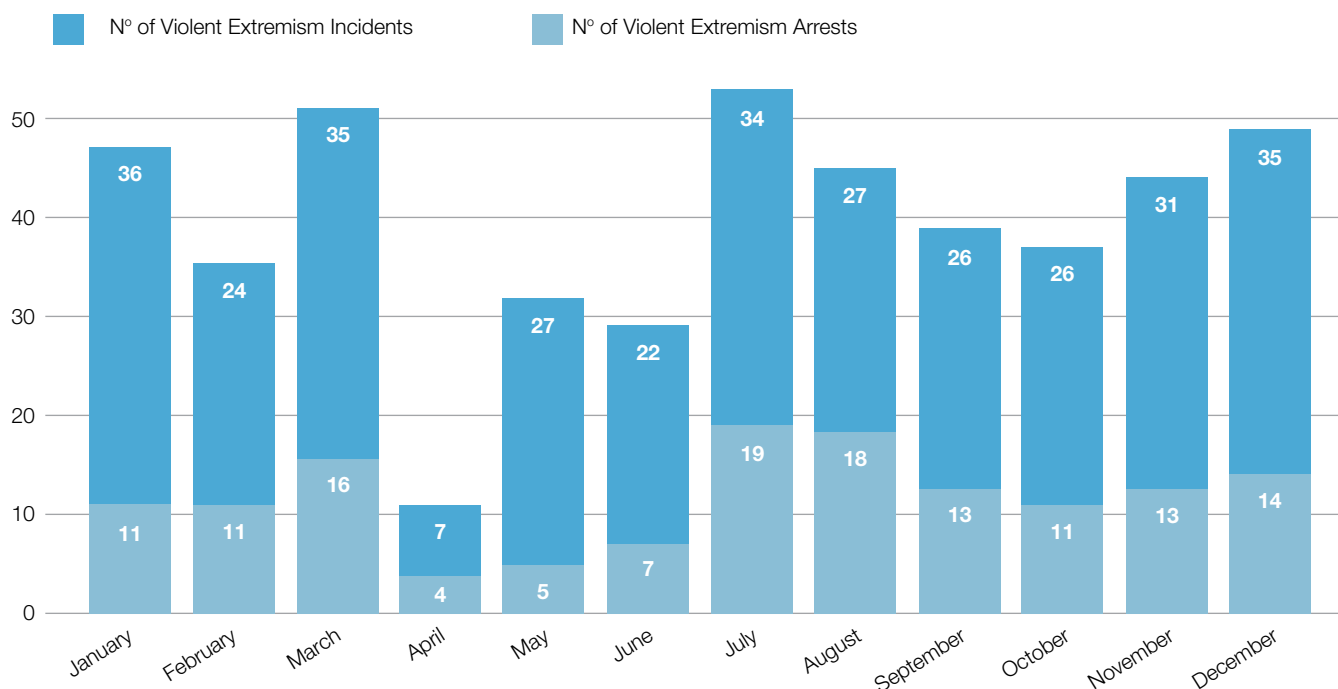
The PTIB is an innovative model for countering misinformation and preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh with the potential for global replication. For one, the program is squarely aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 16. Moreover, it offers a flexible approach credited as one of the most “effective” and “impactful” counter-extremist initiatives in the country. Knowledge products disaggregating COVID-19 related trends are widely valued. Remote gatherings and digital campaigns generated millions of views on social media. In short, PTIB filled a crucial knowledge gap with respect to understanding of violent extremist narratives in Bangladeshi cyberspace, described by an independent evaluation as “an example of what might be possible in other countries and contexts.”

This report considers the origins, outline and outcomes of PTIB since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The first section considers the overall context of misinformation and extremism in Bangladesh. Section two reviews the evolution of PTIB and the ways in which it pivoted to address new online risks generated by the pandemic. The third section offers highlights of key activities in 2020, revealing the scope and scale of the program. The final section summarizes several lessons and recommendations emerging from the process. While PTIB has generated impressive results in 2020, it is also important to note that.

Extremism and misinformation context in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has not experienced a serious terrorist attack since the brutal attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in 2016. Even so, a review of available data between January and December 2020 suggests that violent extremist incidents have remained comparatively stable in 2020, with a total of 142 incidents and 330 arrests (Figure 1). Violent extremists have become increasingly active in cyberspace.² The number of followers of violent extremist sites tripled in 2020 to 3.8 million. And while extremist digital threats are not necessarily new, they risk getting much worse if left unattended.

Figure 1. Reported violent extremist incidents and arrests in Bangladesh: January-December 2020

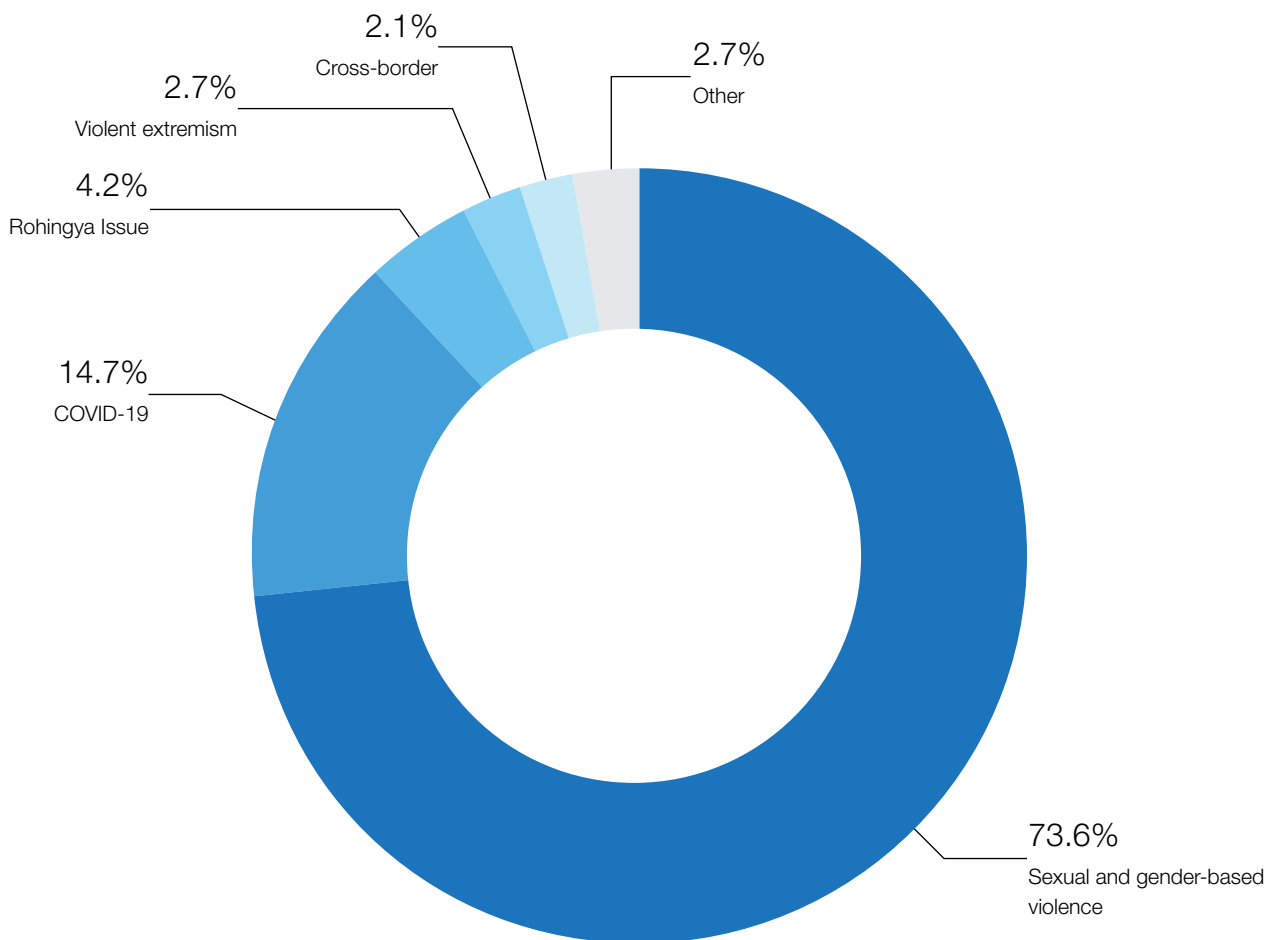


Source: BPO (2020) reconstructed from data

One reason for the rising levels of digital extremism and online misinformation is the scale of digital onboarding of Bangladeshis since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of citizens accessing the internet during the health crisis increased by an astounding 50 percent since March 2020. Many residents are accessing the internet as their primary source of news, as well as to access health, education and other

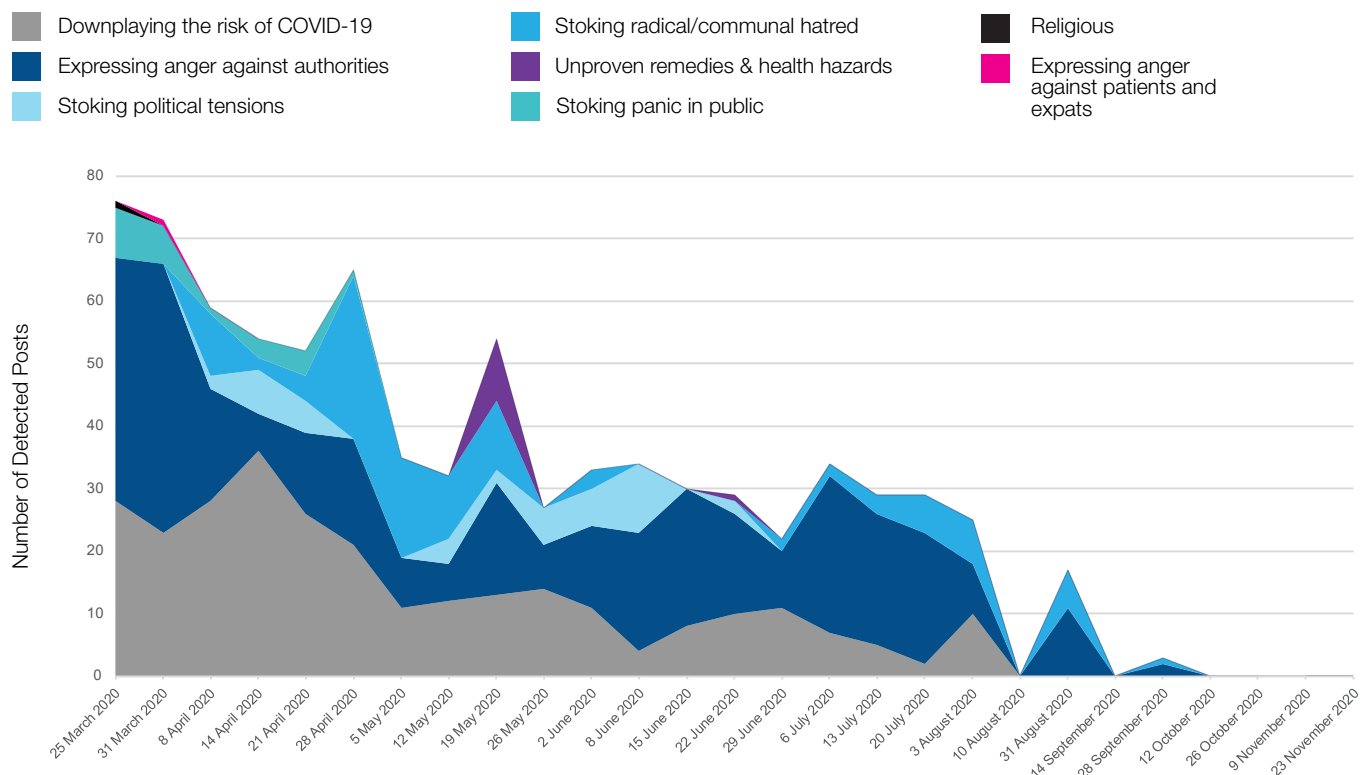
services. Not surprisingly, the surge in internet use coincides with a rise in anti-government, anti-secular, and anti-minority messages that are reaching a widening audience. Communal violence - directed against Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian minorities and religious sites - also started rising, albeit less intensely).³

Figure 2. Breakdown of reported incidents: March-December 2020



Throughout 2020, misinformation, hate speech and violent extremist content has seeped into non-extremist social media groups and pages. Due also to the expanding influence of radicalized bloggers, Bangla-speaking social media user exposure to and engagement with such posts rose during the early period of the COVID-19 crisis before steadily declining. Events occurring outside Bangladesh have also had

a destabilizing influence on online activism in Bangladesh, with groups such as Al Qaeda of the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) growing in popularity.⁴ Violent extremist groups and fringe ideologies have tried to discredit COVID-19 related efforts, undermine government legitimacy, and condone violence against secular-minded people and people they describe as “blasphemers”.

Figure 3. Weekly trends of COVID-19 related disinformation posts: March–November 2020⁵

Source: SecDev (2020)

In Bangladesh and around the world, violent extremist groups are intent on exploiting cyberspace to propagate hate speech and polarize the population. By encouraging communities to separate and segregate themselves, such groups can reinforce divisions and sow intolerance of “the other”. One way to hasten this process is by attracting large audiences to their social media channels and spreading divisive rhetoric and misinformation. Extremist groups are likewise adept at leveraging geopolitical developments to inflame animosities and shaping religious content to attract and then radicalize subscribers. Aware of efforts by national and international authorities as well as tech companies to block them, they are actively deploying counter measures to maintain audience share.⁶

Due in part to the activities of PTIB, many extremist Internet sites and social media channels were identified, removed or otherwise rendered harmless in 2020. Most Islamic State affiliated public channels in Bangla were taken down, though some networks continue to share hidden encrypted communications. Even so, the number of interactions per Facebook post on violent extremist channels surged by 250 percent between the first quarter of 2019 and the first quarter 2020, from an average of 99 interactions per post between April and June 2019 to 347 per post during the same months in 2020. This is partly due to the simultaneous growth of Islamist bloggers expressing support for AQIS.

Domestic and international authorities have taken steps to address the weaponization of social media. The PTIB is the largest expression of this effort. Helping people of all ages to identify, question, and interpret what they read and share on social media is the first step in neutralizing divisive, exclusionary and ultimately hateful rhetoric designed to divide and polarize communities. During the latter half of 2020, the extent of disinformation related to COVID-19 steadily dropped. Dozens of extremist channels were removed, although AQIS's YouTube account still has hundreds of thousands of subscribers. There was a more than 40 percent reduction of extremist content across roughly 400 social media channels between April and September 2020. Indeed, over 90 percent of Bangla channels affiliated with the Islamic State were removed between April and June 2020.⁷ That said, these kinds of channels are resilient and often reappear under new names soon after being shut down.

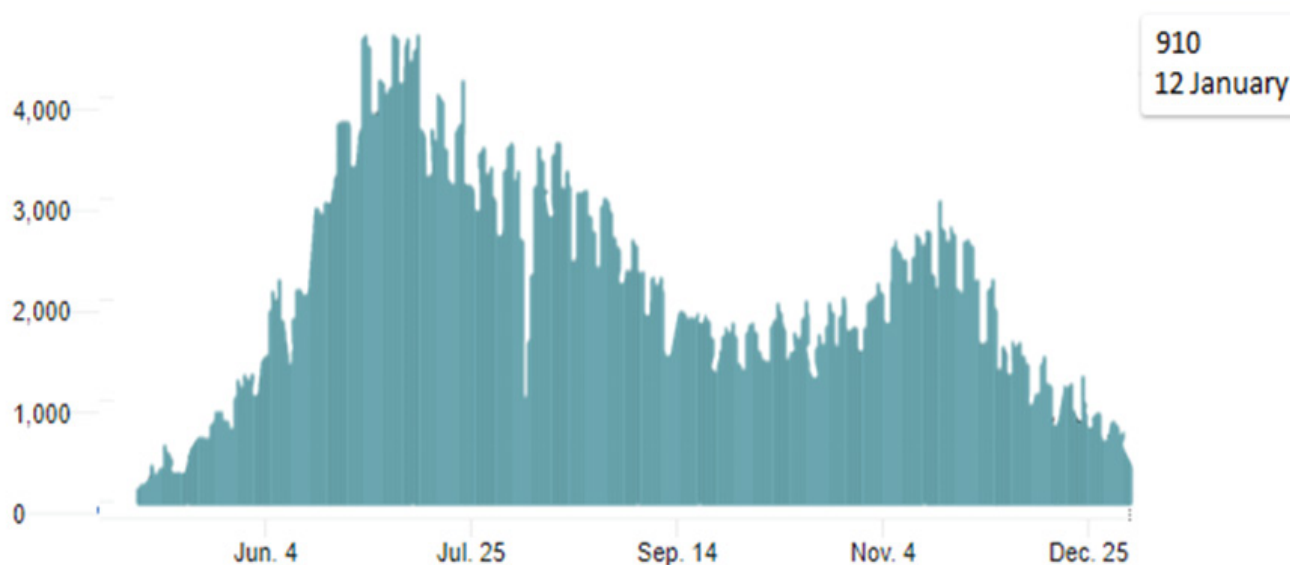
Background on PTIB and the COVID-19 pivot

The PTIB was launched in 2017 to prevent and counter violent extremism and the factors giving rise to hate and intolerance in the wake of a major terrorist incident the previous year. Over the course of four years, PTIB fielded a host of interventions to monitor and respond to sources of tension, reduce stigmatization and discrimination and enhance social cohesion across a diverse Bangladeshi society. It was conceived as a community-based platform to diminish extremism and strengthen local resilience.⁸ A 2020 evaluation described PTIB as “relevant, effective, efficient, and sustainable”.⁹

The program re-oriented research to identify sources of disinformation, reinforced youth-based programs to strengthen activities around public awareness and digital literacy, and ramped-up strategies to mitigate stigmatization and discrimination of specific groups - including front-line workers and victims of the pandemic.

Starting in March 2020, the PTIB pivoted its activities to address the misinformation and rising extremism accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic. The program re-oriented research to identify sources of disinformation, reinforced youth-based programs to strengthen activities around public awareness and digital literacy, and ramped-up strategies to mitigate stigmatization and discrimination of specific groups - including front-line workers and victims of the pandemic. By bolstering shared values and a diverse conception of Bangladeshi identity, PTIB intended to reinforce stability and minimize tensions. A conscious effort was likewise made to neutralize radical and intolerant messaging, including extremist groups bent on taking advantage of the disorder generated by COVID-19.

Figure 4. COVID-19 daily change in reported infections: 2020



Source: JHU (2020)

PTIB effectively ramped-up existing activities and added new areas of focus to address COVID-19-related risks.¹⁰ This included, inter alia, adjusting monitoring and research to monitor suspected COVID-19 related mortality and morbidity (since locally generated data was patchy), alongside more traditional indicators related to violence and victimization. PTIB also expanded monitoring of fake COVID-19 narratives advanced by extremist groups on social media as well as hate speech in conventional outlets. Community-based programs and youth activists were also mobilized to counter discriminatory and hate speech as well as proactive advocacy based on principles of inclusivity, tolerance and respect.

PTIB is credited with successfully adapting to the “new realities” of the pandemic, especially in terms of protecting the most vulnerable of society. The intervention is lauded for its enterprising and proactive approach to countering disinformation and disrupting extremism both online and off. It is widely admired for its flexible approach, as well as its ability to efficiently mobilize local partners to

rapidly engage on issues needing attention. This partnership-based approach helped circumvent cumbersome bureaucratic procedures while ensuring that interventions were tailored to the unique local contexts on the ground.

The emphasis of PTIB on data-driven analytics helped establish “facts on the ground” and a means to assess the real risks associated with COVID-19 both online and off. The continuous and high-resolution monitoring of online threats, including the rapidly shifting ecosystems of extremist and radical actors, positively shaped communications and programming strategies of government, UN, donor and non-governmental operations. The refocusing of programs to protect vulnerable groups and promote diversity and tolerance - including social media campaigns, online events, and the production of knowledge products for media - resonated with a wide range of stakeholders (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Mapping PTIB's COVID-19 pivot

Area	Program	Activities	Outputs/outcomes
Research and monitoring	BPO	COVID-19 monitoring and reporting on violence and misinformation. Activities involve (1) collection of open source data on victimization and tensions; (2) tracking of metrics related to fines, rumors, protests, violent incidents, fatalities with COVID-19 symptoms.	<p>BPO online dashboard: The dashboard generated almost 8,000 individual views and roughly 21,000 views by late 2020. The Facebook page also has over 43,000 followers.</p> <p>BPO weekly reports: BPO produced 28 weekly/ bi-weekly COVID-19 graphics since March 2020 and disseminated these to over 1,200 policy makers, media outlets, community groups, and development partners.</p> <p>BPO Webinars and books: BPO generated a six-part webinar series called “Understanding COVID-19: The Power of Data” and another eight-part series with the journalists titled “COVID-19: Social Tension, Cohesion and Response in Bangladesh”. It also produced an edited volume titled “COVID-19: the other side of living through the pandemic” with 24 contributors and a series of other outputs.</p>
	CARU	COVID-19 rumors and intolerance monitor. Activities involve (1) expanding media monitoring on COVID-19 related issues nationally; (2) developing a database on COVID-19 related incidents and news; and (3) publishing media monitoring weekly updates.	<p>COVID-19 Rumor and Intolerance Monitor: CARU produced 26 issues of the monitor between March and September 2020.</p> <p>Active outreach: CARU products have reached over 200 separate recipients in government, business, the international community and local NGOs/institutions, and is widely distributed through email and social media.</p>
	SecDev	COVID-19 Disinformation Watch. Activities involve (1) tracking online misinformation and disinformation across multiple platforms; (2) track violent extremist actors sharing violent content online; (3) hosting periodic training sessions with PTIB stakeholders to explain findings and methods.	<p>COVID-19 Disinformation Watch: SecDev produced over 18 weekly and 9 biweekly reports between March and December 2020 reaching hundreds of government, diplomatic and academic specialists, embassies and a range of NGO and academic partners.</p> <p>Violent Extremism Monitor: SecDev produced 4 quarterly reports featuring assessments of online activity in relation to COVID19. These reports reached national authorities (MFA and counterterrorism and transnational crime units), NGOs and UN agencies, as well as embassies and bilateral development agencies.</p>

Area	Program	Activities	Outputs/outcomes
Citizen engagement and outreach	Digital Peace Movement		
	Digital Khichuri Challenge	Hackathon challenge: Multiple incentive competitions to encourage young people to develop COVID-19 related solutions.	The 2020 COVID-19 challenge resulted an event with 500 submissions and 14 teams that developed innovative digital tools to help prevent stigmatization of patients and front-line workers.
	Peace Talk Cafe	Peace Talk Cafe: COVID-19 themed digital events in 2020, building on the successes of 2019.	Hosting of 3 events focused on COVID-19 related misinformation, stigmatization against frontliners and violence against women. The talks reached several thousand people in 2020.
	Peace quiz	Quizzes for Peace: Short online events targeting young people used to help message around COVID-19.	Hosting of strictly online events involving thousands of people in 2020.
	Social media campaigns	Facebook campaigns: A wide range of social media outreach strategies to promote digital literacy in relation to COVID-19 misinformation	In 2020, a total of 26 separate campaigns and adverts, including 8 public service announcement messages, 15 static posts and several videos focusing on raising awareness about COVID-19. Total audience reached is in the millions of people.
	Diversity for Peace		
	COVID-19 diversity promotion activities	Events launched in 2020 with minority and vulnerable groups to promote inclusion, tolerance and secularism.	A combination of 4 offline events and 16 documentaries/video content, 2 videos focusing on transgender community, people with disabilities, tea garden communities, ethnic and minority language groups. Social media outreach reached at least 12.9 million people online and another 5,680 people offline.
	Diversity Talks	Diversity talks designed to raised awareness about the gender, youth, disabled, and transgender dimensions of COVID-19.	At least 9 separate diversity talks held in 2020, reaching approximately 1.6 million people online.
	Youth peace ambassador training	Engaging youths from diverse identities to promote peace and harmony back in their communities	460 youth peace ambassadors were trained online and offline in 2020.
	Grassroots and government engagement providing support, coaching and training	Work with CSOs to help promote diversity, inclusion and tolerance in relation to COVID-19.	At least 9 CSO organizations were selected in 2019 and some started implementing initiatives in 2020. Some work was postponed, while others were re-oriented toward COVID-19 response.

Reviewing PTIB programs

PTIB's COVID-19 combines research, monitoring, citizen engagement and outreach. The emphasis on data-driven approaches to track the character and content of misinformation and extremist content was key to developing a shared understanding of the challenges, and a framework for action. By diligently tracking COVID-19-related trends on the ground and mapping online influencers and trends in social media, PTIB partners could apprehend how interventions could lower tensions, reduce discrimination and limit stigmatization. The PTIB also equipped partners, and in particular Bangladeshi citizens, with the skills and know-how to counter online harms, expand networks of solidarity, raise awareness, and empower minority and vulnerable groups. Engaging young people and deploying social media to disseminate messages was critical to the program's effectiveness.

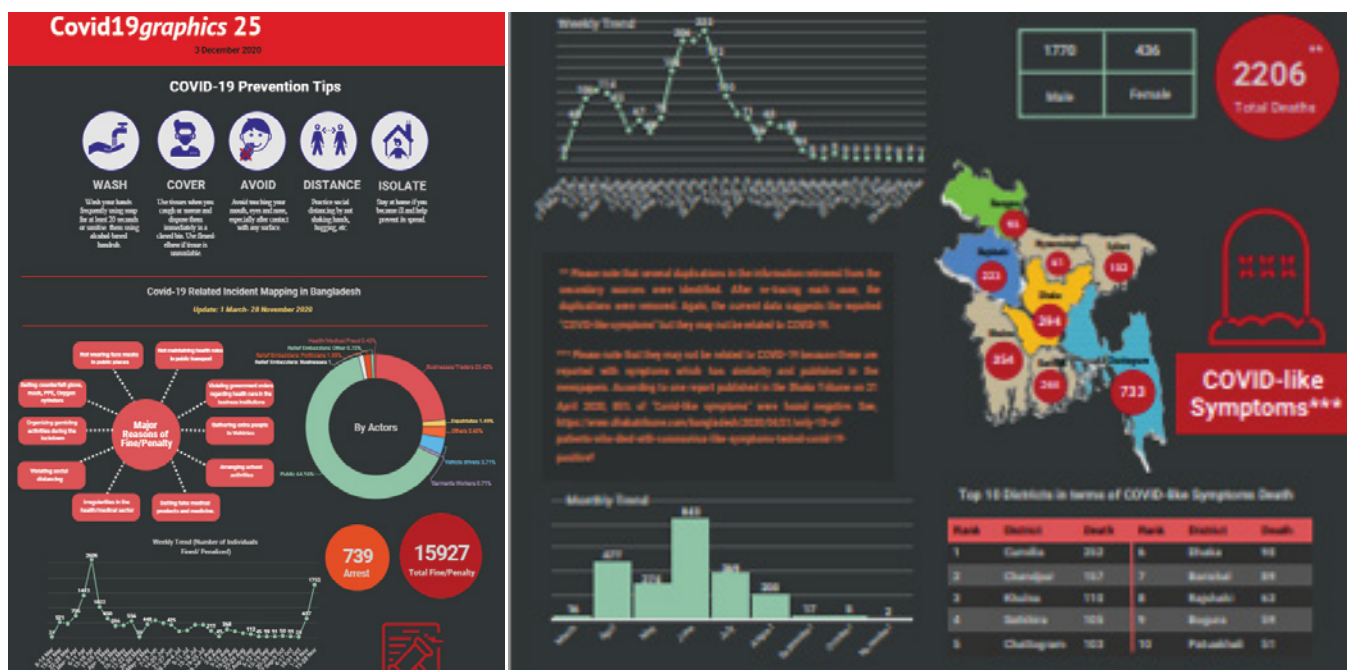
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Research and monitoring

The BPO COVID19 monitoring and reporting platform collects and visualizes data on multiple types of violence and victimization. Overseen by the University of Dhaka, BPO developed a new series of "COVID19 graphics" highlighting the ways in which government lockdown measures, and resulting socio-economic uncertainty and distress influenced social cohesion and wider unrest (see Figure 6).¹¹ Infographics tracked rumors, abuses, protests and outbreaks of violence connected to COVID-19. The BPO also hosts an interactive dashboard that displays timely incident data and distributes bimonthly "peace reports" circulated to a wide range of partners. Finally, BPO organizes events, publishes books and even supports a course on preventing violent extremism.¹²

Overseen by the University of Dhaka, BPO developed a new series of "COVID19 graphics" highlighting the ways in which government lockdown measures, and resulting socio-economic uncertainty and distress influenced social cohesion and wider unrest.

Figure 6. COVID19 graphics



Policy makers, media outlets and researchers praised the quality of analytics generated by BPO, in particular the COVID-19 graphics. According to professor Imtiaz Ahmed, the director of the center hosting BPO, collected data could help appraise the validity of alternate sources of COVID-19 related information including infections and fatalities. Such data, professor Ahmed claims, provided “ground truth” and helped who, despite protests and riots, how Bangladesh remained comparatively stable throughout the crisis. Products such as the BPO’s Peace Report and Peacegraphics also generated mediatic traction, including being featured by the Bangladeshi Daily Star and Prothom Alo. Former Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque commended the BPO for taking a “big step to fill the data gap”. He said that by “explaining issues like social tension through numbers and figures, [the graphics] contributed to the statistical practice of knowledge, and help in a big way”.

Public events generated considerable visibility across Bangladesh. For example, during a webinar entitled COVID-19: Social Tension,

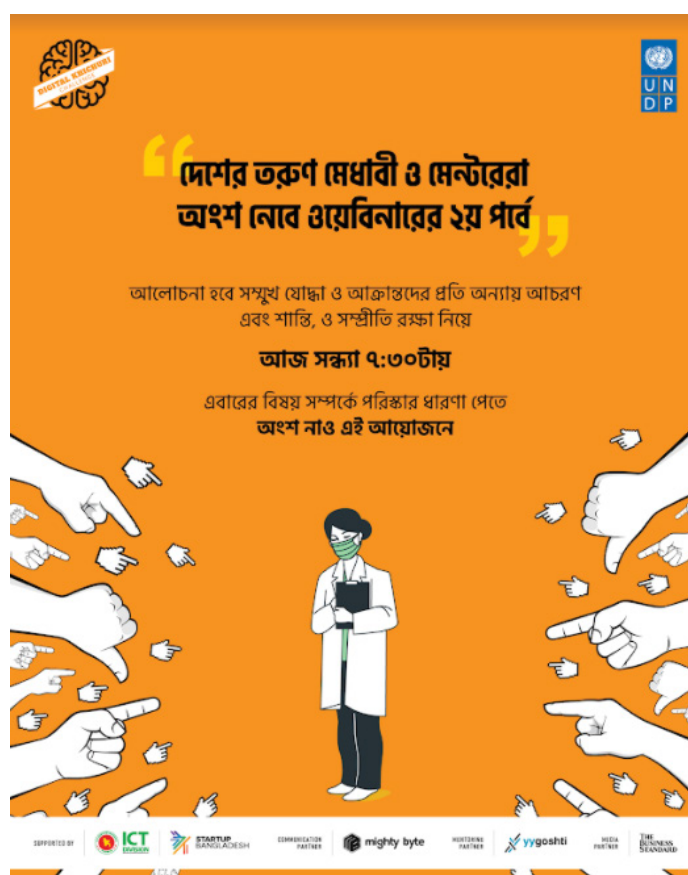
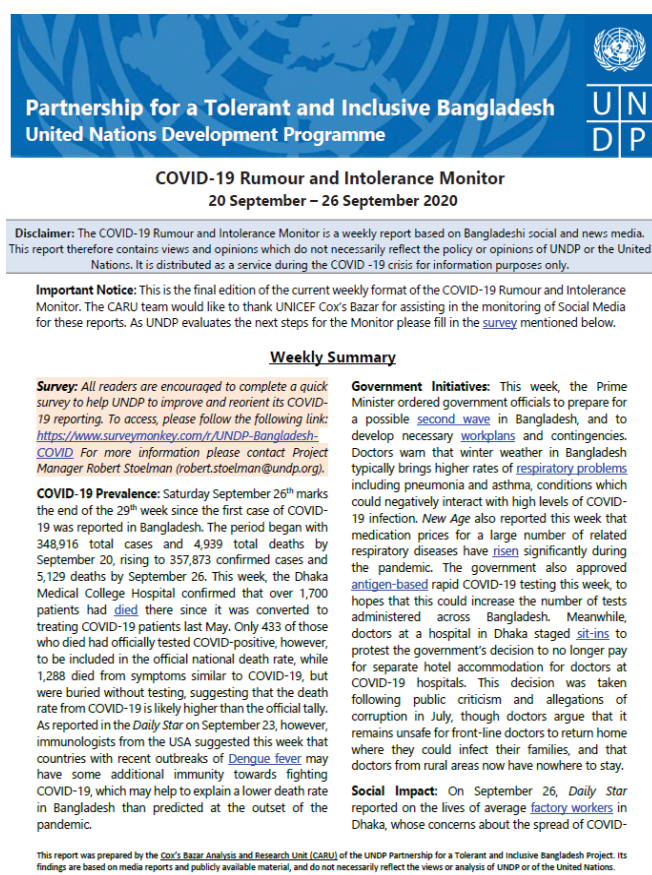
“the importance of credible, reliable, timely, and quality data.” He added that “If such data is not available in the public domain, fake information will fill in the vacuum”.

Cohesion, and Response in Bangladesh, UNDP Resident Representative Sudipto Mukerjee underlined “the importance of credible, reliable, timely, and quality data.” He added that “If such data is not available in the public domain, fake information will fill in the vacuum”. Mukerjee explained the decline of COVID-19-related disinformation posts was due to strong counter-narratives: “as the impact of the pandemic became more visible in Bangladesh, public health entities sharing legitimate information about COVID-19 made significant progress in disseminating vital information online, and subscriptions to their social media channels soared”.

The CARU rumor and intolerance monitor likewise re-oriented some of its activities to focus on the challenges associated with COVID-19. After government-sanctioned COVID-19 restrictions kicked-in, CARU began monitoring COVID-19-related rumors and intolerance across the country. In addition to regular weekly, monthly and thematic coverage of Cox's Bazar and the Rohingya refugee situation, CARU produced 26 issues of the monitor between March and September 2020 (see Figure 7). The monitors featured weekly updates based on

open sources. CARU also surveyed roughly 150 popular Facebook groups to capture online sentiment related to COVID-19.¹³ According to Kevin Goh, from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, CARU briefs “saved significant effort for practitioners not having to refer to multiple sources”. Meanwhile, Gabriel Hjort from Sweden's Ministry of Foreign Affairs commended the briefs for being “comprehensive enough to enable quick reading and easy understanding.”

Figure 7. CARU rumor and intolerance monitor



CARU played a critical role in informing programming priorities across the UN and some international partners. This was helped by mapping positive (showing appreciation and awareness) and negative (concern, disapproval and rumor) stories in conventional and social media and then representing this data geospatially. After receiving support from UNICEF, CARU expanded its monitoring functions between

June and September 2020. Findings from CARU generated insight into the dynamics of online intolerance and hate speech, as well as the spread of COVID-19 related misinformation. According to local respondents, analytical outputs produced by CARU shaped strategies to counter extremism and misinformation, including by the national government (MFA, MDMR, RRC, MoD), UN Women, UNODC, UNOTC and the private sector

more broadly. Indeed, Ovick Alam, co-founder of WebAble Digital, described CARU products as “very insightful and timely ... [and] well presented too, especially the social media and geographic breakdowns.”

The SecDev COVID-19 disinformation watch is a large-scale monitoring system following an array of social media platforms to measure the dynamics and ecosystems of COVID-19 related misinformation and extremist actors. Like BPO and CARU, SecDev rapidly shifted gears in March

2020 in order to measure how extremist groups were undermining pro-health messages and radicalizing subscribers online. SecDev generated 18 weekly reports and 9 biweekly reports between March and December 2020, reaching an audience of hundreds of national government, multilateral and bilateral, and non-governmental partners in Bangladesh and outside. SecDev also continued with its violent extremist monitor report, including 4 quarterly issues, that likewise were widely distributed (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. COVID-19 Disinformation Watch

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION MONITOR BANGLADESH MARCH-JULY 2020

A weekly digest produced by the SecDev Group that tracks harmful COVID-19-related disinformation in Bangla online. With funding from the UNDP's Partnership for a Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh programme, SecDev has been able to provide the United Nations, public authorities, and technology platforms with insight on COVID-19-related disinformation that could lead to imminent harm.



12,098

Number of posts analysed by SecDev from channels known to disseminate COVID-19-related disinformation since 1 March



694

Number of COVID-19-related disinformation posts identified and reported on by SecDev since 1 March

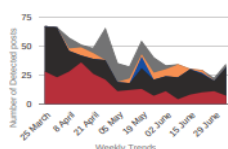


25 Million

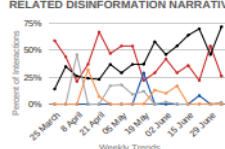
Total audience interactions with disinformation posts identified by SecDev since 1 March

Four months into the pandemic, disinformation posts on COVID-19 persist online. The number of new disinformation posts and the level of audience engagement with these posts have levelled off. Yet, as the toll of the lockdown mounts, false claims attacking government and public health organizations engaged in the COVID-19 response have increased.

NUMBER OF DISINFORMATION POSTS



AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH COVID-19-RELATED DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES



DOMINANT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

- | Disinformation posts that downplay the risk of COVID-19 | Disinformation posts that incite anger against authorities | Disinformation posts that seek to stoke political tensions | Disinformation posts seeking to incite racial or communal hatred |
|--|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 does not spread in environments above 23 degrees Celsius. Muslims are not affected by COVID-19 and should not refrain from public prayers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 is an international conspiracy led by the WHO to destroy Bangladesh's economy and undermine Islamist values by forcing women out of their homes to join the labour force to make ends meet. Assault journalists and anyone who supports the lockdown. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, a convicted war criminal and Jamaat Islami leader, will be released from prison because of the COVID-19 crisis, according to YouTube channels designed to look like legitimate news portals. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Chinese are deliberately spreading COVID-19. The virus should be used as a weapon to infect infidels. Bidyandono (an NGO founded by a Hindu) is distributing COVID-19 as a pretext for converting Muslims, in a bid to destroy Islam. Muslims must take action to stop these efforts. |



COVID-19 Disinformation Monitor: Bangladesh

November 29th, 2020
The SecDev Group



This is a weekly digest that tracks COVID-19 related disinformation in Bangladesh online. The report identifies COVID-19 related disinformation that could lead to imminent harm. It provides context and details, for example, how the content is spread and how it is used. The report is produced by the SecDev Group, a non-governmental organization that works to promote digital security and human rights. The report is available in Bengali and English. The report is available at www.secdev.org/.

The pick-up of these analytical products was comparatively high, providing senior officials with deeper awareness of online radicalization. A simple survey of roughly 20 respondents from across the Bangladeshi government, international community and civil society revealed that at least 40 percent received and read SecDev products on a regular basis. Users were primarily from donor organizations, private partners such as

mobile network companies, non-governmental organizations, and United Nations agencies. All respondents overwhelmingly described these products as “very” or “exceedingly” informative, useful, well-written, well-presented and timely. The majority of readers also use it as part of their professional work to inform program decisions.¹⁴ Kevin Goh, from the Department of Foreign Affairs for Australia described the SecDev outputs

as “particularly helpful for those who do not read Bangla ... [and providing] a useful understanding of related cultural issues.”

In order to deepen analysis of online harms, UNDP commissioned a report called Monetized Open Web COVID-19 Disinformation in Bangladesh in late 2020. The assessment explored the ways in which the “open web” – including clickbait and junk news sites – were seeding large scale disinformation efforts on social media platforms. The study revealed a compact and robust

ecosystem of financially-motivated open web disinformation. Networks are typically run by a small number of operators, mostly motivated by financial gain. Beginning in June 2020, the research uncovered strong anti-lockdown narratives as well as speculation that the pandemic would end before the end of the year. From December 2020 onward, more pernicious anti-vaccine narratives surfaced, including that the vaccines were made of pork fat, that Muslims should avoid it, and that Jewish people created the vaccine to kill Muslims.

Citizen engagement and outreach

Originally launched in 2016, the Digital Khichuri Challenge was designed to engage young people in programs to leverage new technologies to foster peace and tolerance. Over the course of three years, it involved 250 students and 600 groups in various “challenges”, mobilizing over 10,000 young people. In 2020, the DKC pivoted some of its activities to address stigmas directed against groups affected by COVID-19. This

included a focus on reducing the targeting of COVID-19 patients and frontline medical workers. Participants were encouraged to formulate solutions through interactive Idea Labs. In 2020, 14 teams were selected from 500 submissions, with ideas presented in July 2020 (see Figure 9).¹⁵ The event was positively endorsed by Zunaid Ahmed Palak, State Minister for the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology.

Figure 9. Digital Kichuri Challenge – Online Edition



PTIB also supported more than 26 separate COVID-19 related digital campaigns in 2020 (see Annex 1). These included digital messaging on the risks of COVID-19 infections, rules for safe physical distancing, calls to stay indoors, fact-checking of posts, messages related to fake news, support for front-line workers, and protection of minorities. Campaigns were disseminated on Facebook and through web-events. The reach was impressive: just five short online videos intended to raise COVID-19 awareness generated over 1.1 million views and 2 million potential viewers. A campaign celebrating Bangla New Year and highlighting mental health generated over 419,000 views and reached some 1.1 million viewers. One of the most effective campaigns involved hundreds of students discussing the economic costs of COVID-19 that produced 404,000 views and an audience of over 5 million.

Meanwhile, the Peace Talk Cafe events successfully engaged younger people in COVID-19 response. At least two events were held during the pandemic in 2020, focusing on violence against women during lockdown and disinformation. According to moderator Nobonita Chowdhury, the PTC is an “extraordinary platform for bringing together the right young people, sharing their experiences and shining a light on sensitive and pressing issues”. She added that these events were “youth driven, youth focused ... and working towards bringing social change.” According to PTIB’s Communications Officer Farhana Shahnaz, “there is a dearth of platforms where youth can share their opinion and perspective and the PTC has helped meet that gap.” This was achieved by sensitizing younger people about the need for social cohesion during crises and the importance of wariness related to spreading misinformation and stigmatizing front-line workers. This resulted, in Shahnaz’s words, “in greater sensitization of youth on critical topics, more youth participation in analysis of pressing issues, and the creation of a platform to talk about their work and impact.”

Figure 10. Diversity Talks – Online Edition



Diversity for Peace initiatives were likewise rapidly re-aligned with COVID-19 challenges. Some 4 events were hosted - reaching out to minorities and vulnerable groups (see Figure 10). According to Ashok Kumar Chakma, the executive director of Moanoghar, PTIB programs were able to bridge gaps between otherwise divided groups. The director of Tahzingdong, Ching Shing Prue, agreed that a particular strength of these interventions included the social media messages promoting tolerance that helped strengthen coexistence, respect for cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, and promoted a sense of inclusiveness. The Earth director Mohammad Mamum Mia underlined how D4P programs helped fight online discrimination and hate speech by educating and inspiring younger people. Meanwhile, the General Secretary of B-SCAN highlighted the critical role the program played in supporting accessibility challenges, including in the capital Dhaka.

According to Nahim Razzaq, a member of parliament and member of the parliamentary standing committee of the ministry of foreign affairs, the **Diversity Talks** in particular assembled a fascinating and diverse constituency in a single dialogue. The idea of bringing policy makers, sports and cultural icons and marginalized groups together was key. He especially singled out “government buy-in in the discussions” as critical, together with follow-up with inputs from ethnic minorities, transgender communities and the disabled. While

The idea of bringing policy makers, sports and cultural icons and marginalized groups together was key.

the shift to digital conversations was necessary, for “people to speak out, you need to meet them in person”. In future rounds of diversity talks, Razzaq believes that discussions could focus on more specific issues to generate actionable recommendations. These sentiments were echoed by Shale Ahmed, the executive director of Bandhu, who underlined how these initiatives positively supported the transgender community.

The Diversity Talks were instrumental in highlighting the “shadow pandemic” of gender-based violence. During Talks in June 2020, UNDP’s deputy representative, Van Nguyen, drew attention to how “the home has become the most unsafe place for many women during the COVID-19 pandemic”. To provide support to at-risk women and girls, UNDP Bangladesh reactivated a toll-free hotline 16430 and worked closely with government departments and ministries to channel attention to the issue. The UNDP has helped ensure that partners recognize the ways in which gender-based violence affects both mental and physical health. To this end, it has encouraged a whole-of-society approach to tackling gender-based violence.



Figure 11. COVID-19 social media campaigns to fight online harms



The diversity for peace measures stimulated intercultural, inter-ethnic, and inter-faith exchange. Interventions helped connect people, communities and cultural groups with artists and activists, according to the director of SEHD, Philip Gain. Ratul Dev, the executive director of Gen Lab, claimed that “the strengthening of social relationships among people of diverse communities was critical to shifting attitudes”. H Al Bana, from Peacemakers Studio, also signaled the importance of showcasing people from diverse backgrounds on a single platform. To be effective, however, community needs and contextual factors need to be designed into products and outreach, contends Rafsanul Haque, the general secretary of Life 101 Foundation. This also means being attentive to the particular challenges facing people with disabilities, according to both Iftekhar Mahmud, head of PwD and Salma Mahbub from B-SCAN. It also requires engagement in multiple languages and dialects, a point raised by Ching Shing Prue from Tahzingdong.

Another powerful output of the diversity for peace initiative was the training and support provided to “youth peace ambassadors”. In 2020

“the strengthening of social relationships among people of diverse communities was critical to shifting attitudes”.

alone, some 460 youth peace ambassadors were provided with on and offline training in methods and communication skills. These ambassadors were exposed to expert-led courses on peace, tolerance, and harmony. On returning to their communities, the ambassadors led self-driven campaigns to raise awareness about the the core values and ideas gleaned from the course. The training exposed a wide range of young people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to one another, helping some of them overcome the fear of the unknown and work toward common understanding.

There was a wide variety of diversity for peace outreach initiatives on social media during the COVID-19 period (see Annex 2). Specifically, there were some 35 separate actions in 2020 ranging from COVID-19 health advisory and awareness posts to messages to interfaith

outreach, tributes to frontline workers, and homage to humanitarians (see Figure 11). Some of these social media campaigns - most of them featuring Facebook videos and posts - reached a significant audience. For example, a persons with disability -friendly awareness message on Facebook generated over 45,000 views and reached 73,000 people. A diversity talk honoring relief workers produced over 14,000 views and reached as many as 32,000 people. UNDP often partnered with local organizations including Bandhu, IED, Peacemakers, Life 101, SEHD and TazhingDong in order to reach an even wider audience in multiple dialects.

The sheer volume and reach of positive engagement with the content and activities of PTIB implies that there is greater awareness and receptivity of the risks associated with COVID-19-related misinformation.

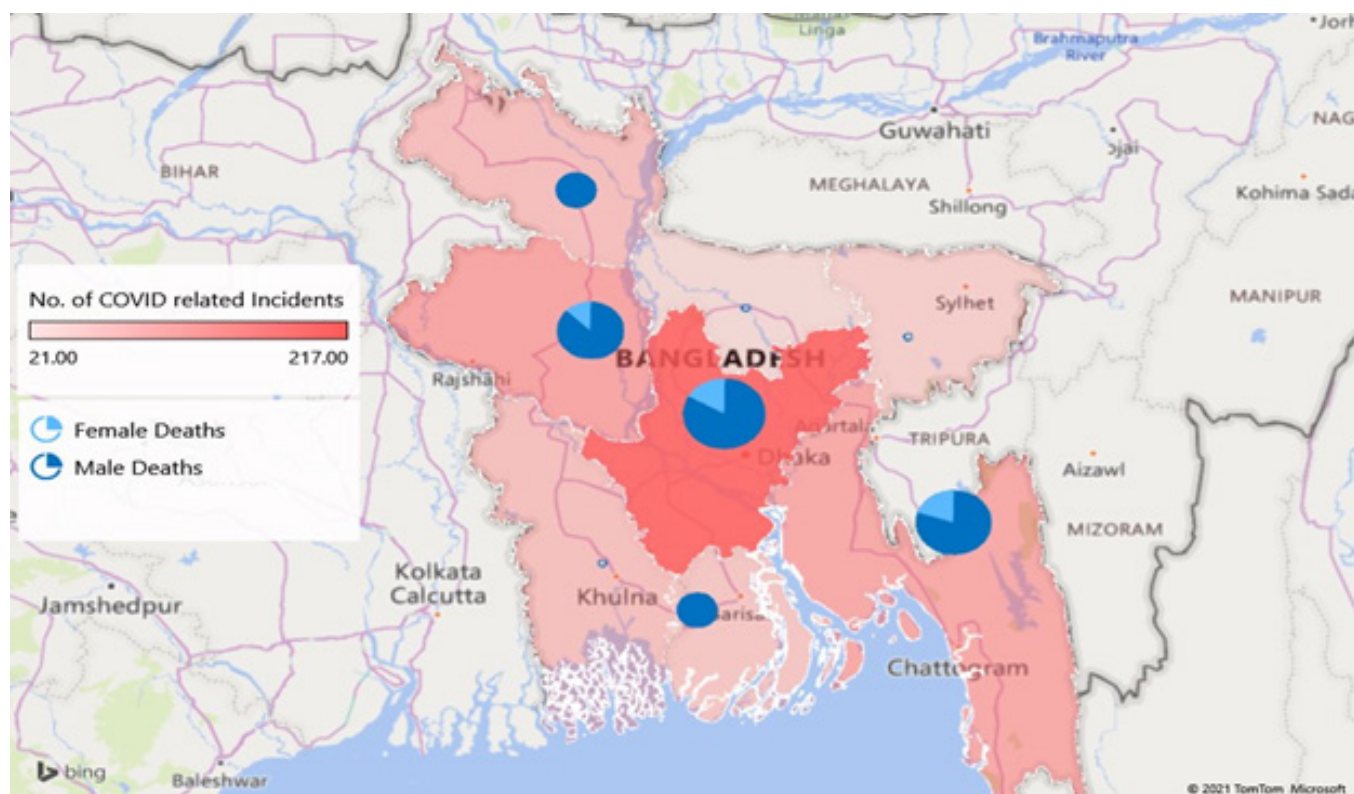
Delivering results

The PTIB generated a host of positive impacts. Project activities clearly influenced attitudes across a wide range of sectors, though it is still too early to determine if they resulted in durable behavioral change. The sheer volume and reach of positive engagement with the content and activities of PTIB implies that there is greater awareness and receptivity of the risks associated with COVID-19-related misinformation. The take-down of offensive content including hate speech and extremist messages recommended by PTIB partners also indicates that technology companies are listening. More research is needed to demonstrate the extent of behavioral shifts and wider effects related to extremist activity. Even so, as the Swedish representative observed, PTIB helped a wide range of actors “access factual information”, crucial to better decision-making and planning.

The PTIB program helped put the prevention of violent extremism on the national agenda. For one, BPO, CARU and SecDev outputs helped shift the narrative on misinformation and extremism. A thick body of evidence and

maps was translated into accessible insights for a wider public. Over 80 products such as BPO’s COVID-19 and peace-related graphics and material generated by CARU and SecDev were produced, some of it featuring in media stories throughout 2020, including The Financial Express, Daily Star, Prothom Alo, Jungator, Jaijaidin, New Age, and Banglanews24 (see Figure 12). Findings were also linked to international media outlets such Foreign Policy, which likewise generated national repercussions. Also, Peace Talk Cafe, Diversity Talks, and cultural events received considerable public attention, spreading key messages to a wide audience. UNDP estimates that activities reached over 18 million people on social media.

Figure 12. Reported COVID related incidents in Bangladesh: 1 March 2020 - 1 December 2020¹⁶



Source: BPO (2020)

PTIB helped shape overall UN Country Team priorities on fighting misinformation and preventing violent extremism. Interviewees noted how findings were used to construct an “integrated” strategy to fight misinformation and extremism and strengthen partnerships across national and international fronts. Analytical outputs contributed to meaningful policy and programming improvements. They helped establish a “knowledge hub”, offering deep insight into the dynamics of the spread of misinformation and the dynamics of online radicalization and extremism. Operationally, these activities helped strengthen UNDP, UNICEF, UNODC and UN Women programming. In addition to providing visibility and profile to the UN, it also inspired innovative solutions from Bangladeshi start-ups. BPO, CARU and SecDev products were also picked-up by several private sector groups as well featured public service announcements. Moreover, information fed into real-time early warning strategies, and helped

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identify risks to specific at-risk groups including minorities, religious groups (Tablig), health and medical professionals and others.

PTIB-supported measures also contributed to identifying and removing misinformation and disinformation posts online. Specifically, SecDev detected a 25% reduction in the roughly

390 channels featuring extremist content and misinformation in April 2020 and another 43% reduction in September 2020. Over the same period, Telegram's anti-IS campaign helped detect and take down a vast number of IS-affiliated channels. In fact, over 90% of Bangla IS-affiliated channels we monitor were taken down between April and June 2020. That said, AQIS channels continue to operate on Telegram. These posts downplayed the risks posed by the pandemic and often incited anger against the government and public health authorities. Violent extremists were involved in exploiting social media and spreading propaganda, as did more radical religious authorities that opposed messages related to peace, tolerance and secularism.

According to an evaluation of PTIB, "The SecDev social media monitoring has provided insights into online extremism that were not gathered in any systematic way before PTIB's engagement". National authorities, UN agencies and a wide range of bilateral entities used these findings to help inform counter-extremism and prevention programs. These findings helped re-orient messaging toward more moderate and secular networks. UNICEF's communications officer, Amiya Halder, noted how "SecDev Disinformation Watch was the main product [the agency] used". It helped the agency's "Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) work tracking misinformation on social media. The focus on known disinformation actors improved UNICEF's volunteer network monitor public misinformation posts and report them for removal, as well as produce counter-narratives. It offered "excellent trend analysis" and allowed for demographic and geographic disaggregation.

Recommendations and lessons

The PTIB program formulated a **straight-forward theory of change**. At the center of the program is the focus on inclusion and tolerance to undermine efforts to sow division and polarization. The proposed means of achieving these goals is by mobilizing young people, minorities and vulnerable groups, and promoting digital literacy. The expected outcome is that Bangladeshis will be better equipped to distinguish between what is trustworthy online content and what is otherwise untrue (misinformation) and manipulative (disinformation). This entails investing in assessing the digital ecosystem, and helping citizens identify, interrogate and interpret online information. Ultimately, a more cautious and critical engagement with digital content can help improve resilience to exclusionary and ultimately violent extremist rhetoric.

The PTIB **operationalizes a range of UN norms and principles** to promote safety and protect the most vulnerable. Very generally, it reflects the ambition and priorities of SDG16 and the goal of building more peaceful, inclusive and just societies. Moreover, it represents an effort to locally implement the guidance set out by the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect¹⁷ and the best practices advocated by the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism.¹⁸ PTIB also reflects the priorities established in the Secretary General's Plan of Action on Hate Speech¹⁹ and his 2015 call for every country

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to develop a coherent and context-specific strategy for preventing violent extremism.²⁰ The focus on deepening tolerance and inclusivity through locally-owned initiatives also reinforces priorities such as national ownership.

A 2020 evaluation of PTIB identified at least three core areas where it added value to preventing violent extremism.²¹ This includes (1) **a research facility** that improves data-collection, awareness and decision-making to mitigate the drivers of extremist-related violence; (2) **citizen participation** to increase local engagement, especially among youth, migrants and religious communities - both online and off; and (3) **government engagement**, especially in relation to sensitization of the challenges, as well as emerging global best practices on ways to promote social inclusion and tolerance. The PTIB expressed all three virtues in its pivot to address COVID-19 related challenges, while also maintaining a high operational tempo, an innovative approach, and considerable flexibility as conditions change.

A short-list of key **recommendations** from PTIB include:

Apply a data-driven and evidence-based approach: The credibility of PTIB resides in part on the quality and integrity of its research. Until recently there was limited nationwide data on online and offline extremism and misinformation, much less as it related to COVID-19. There was often a mistaken belief that this was a “youth” or “minority” problem, with dangerous implications for public policy. Outputs generated by BPO, CARU and SecDev and other local partners changed this. According to Kevin Goh, from Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs: “it was helpful to have confirmation in recent months that violent extremist channels were moving away from COVID-19 to other topics [and that] protests and stigma were reducing”.

“it was helpful to have confirmation in recent months that violent extremist channels were moving away from COVID-19 to other topics [and that] protests and stigma were reducing”.

Ensure ongoing and sustained monitoring of misinformation and extremism:

Misinformation and violent extremism are random and stochastic - they are not linear and predictable. They are often comparatively low probability and high impact events. The PTIB recognized that monitoring and response thus required a level of persistence, even when the situation appeared to be comparatively stable. There is a risk of prematurely lowering one’s guard, and the continued focus of PTIB on monitoring changes in the ecosystems of digital propaganda and violent extremism are positive features

Mobilize strategic partnerships for wider outreach:

In order to incubate and accelerate positive social narratives and counter fake news and misinformation related to COVID-19, PTIB mobilized the digital peace movement and diversity for peace partners. The ability to work with partners, transition projects, and deliver stunning outcomes is testament to the quality of these many partnerships. The PTIB is focused on preventing extremism by reinforcing the resilience of local networks and actors. This includes identifying and mitigating identity-based tensions, strengthening social cohesion in vulnerable areas, addresses issues of stigmatization and discrimination, and supporting champions to maintain peace and tolerance.

Engage with youth, especially

online: The PTIB emphasized more informal, unstructured, and comfortable encounters (as opposed to more formal exchanges). Examples included “hackathons” to encourage young people to develop online solutions to promote inclusion, tolerance and diversity. It also developed powerful visual heuristics and simple messages for online campaigns on popular social media platforms. By successfully tapping into youth culture and networks, PTIB was able to reach a much wider audience than might ordinarily be the case.

Account for and accommodate

evolving government priorities: The PTIB was originally designed to reinforce government-wide priorities to diminish violent extremism, enhance a culture of peace and strengthen community resilience. Yet it has proven flexible to also support assistance to Rohingya refugees since August 2017 and improve responses to the COVID19 crisis since March 2020. To date, research outputs reaches dozens of government officials from foreign affairs, home affairs, education, cultural affairs, women and children’s affairs, parliament, the armed forces and counterterrorism and transnational crime unit.

Adopt a learning-organization and flexible approach. The PTIB exhibited a high degree of flexibility with the advance of COVID-19, adapting quickly to changing circumstances on the ground. Indeed, it was one of the first UN programs to do so. This is due both to a mindset, and a decision to keep the program administratively “light”. Flagship projects were agile and shifted focus as required. The program regularly experimented with new methods (“learning lab”), adopted internal monitoring/evaluation processes to strengthen management and research capabilities, and routinely sought capacity building support as needed. Program staff regularly drew on international best practices to maintain relevance. This ability to learn from mistakes is widely admired.

By successfully tapping into youth culture and networks, PTIB was able to reach a much wider audience than might ordinarily be the case.

Among the many **lessons learned** from PTIB, a few that stand out include:

Respond rapidly and flexibility in

crisis: In under a week, PTIB pivoted and started adjusting projects to COVID19. BPO, CARU and SecDev were able to respond rapidly with insights. Briefs were made available even before COVID-19 was formally announced in Bangladesh. PTIB filled an information gap to deliver reliable data on COVID-19 related mortality, morbidity, social tensions and gender-based violence as well as misinformation and disinformation online.

Build situational awareness online and

off. PTIB partners generated high resolution analysis of digital harms as well as real physical violence. Using open source intelligence, the program has generated over dozens of short weekly, monthly and quarterly reports shared with government, multilateral and bilateral partners and civil society partners. The opening rate is several times the industry average. Good awareness depends on a continuous flow of high-quality and trustworthy analysis. It can also help dispel rumor and speculation, clarifying the nature of challenges and building genuine understanding.

Grow the digital footprint. The PTIB vastly increased its digital profile since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, BPO products and reaching over 7,000 viewers and 18,000 pages online by August 2020. The program’s Facebook page had over 43,000 followers within a few months of going-up and maintained relatively strong user engagement. The program claims to have reached over 260,000 on social media and at least 8 million

potential viewers. The program is placing a greater emphasis on data-driven story-telling and digital communications, key in the COVID-19 era.

Expand national capacities to monitor and respond to online disinformation and hate speech.

The focus on building-up local capacities of research entities, non-governmental organizations and government agencies is a down-payment on future counter-extremist capacity. While external partners provide ongoing support, the PTIB has fostered local know-how and expertise. It is among the only entities working on these issues in Bangladesh, including on the basis of opensource information sources. Between 2017-2020, BPO has half a dozen training courses on PVE to over 40 officials. Online webinars have also been conducted, including on findings and methods.

Practice inclusivity, diversity and digital literacy.

PTIB focused squarely on engaging directly with vulnerable groups and engaging them in the co-production of outputs and dissemination strategies. The promotion of digital literacy across all sectors of the population is critical, key to building up the immunity and resilience to misinformation and extremism. The biggest risk in Bangladesh is not a major violent attack, but rather deepening intolerance and castigation of difference. It is important to remain vigilant about growing divisiveness and intolerance since this is the breeding ground of hate.

Focus on the structural drivers of radicalization and extremism.

Ultimately, the long-term threat to Bangladesh is the regression of norms and values related to everything from female empowerment and girls in schools to intolerance of secularism. Inter-group intolerance and declining in faith in government can exacerbate these trends. Shifts from Afghanistan to Iran are a reminder of how quickly societal rules can turn from the secular to religious. Bangladeshis are justly proud of their diversity, but this will not endure on its own.

The focus on building-up local capacities of research entities, non-governmental organizations and government agencies is a down-payment on future counter-extremist capacity.

PTIB has excelled in targeting misinformation and the drivers of extremism where other programs have stumbled. It has a basic theory of change and has generated a formidable analytical capability in a short period of time. The program's outputs are clear and of practical use to a wide network of stakeholders. It also operates in a new and innovative manner, offering innovative messages and clever dissemination strategies, while also reaching out explicitly to poorer and marginal communities. PTIB is constantly adapting to new challenges - displaying the characteristics of a "learning organization" - and has generated overall positive impacts.

Ultimately misinformation and violent extremism are challenges that are hard to predict and can emerge at virtually any time. They are difficult to anticipate and prevent. They are also deliberately mobilized to divide communities, generate a sense of fear, and deepen uncertainty. PTIB, by design, is focused on bringing people together, creating shared purpose and strengthening the resilience of Bangladeshis, especially those who are potentially more susceptible and affected by radicalization. Success is not just measured by changes in attitude and behavior, but also improvements in processes and relationships. In this way too, PTIB has helped form the basis for understanding challenges, discussing them, and taking action.

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Annex 1. Digital Khichari social media outreach in 2020

Name	Type	Views	Engagement	Reach
Protecting frontline workers and patients	PTC	62,500	5,152	203,655
Reducing the risks of COVID19	FB static		118	1,355
Raising awareness about misinformation	FB video	1,129,400	79,186	2,095,552
Independence day and COVID19 sensitization	FB video	31,700	9,804	699,454
Safe distancing awareness content	FB static		49	507
April Fool's Day and COVID19	FB static		99	1,462
April Fool's Day and COVID19	FB static		83	713
International Fact Checking Day - 5 posts	FB static		294	2,294
Call to stay indoors	FB static		432	2,912
Quarantine Talk	FB video		35	814
World Health Day 2020	FB static		143	1,928
Pohela Boishakh resolution in Tiktok	Campaign	419,200	33,082	1,197,497
Fake news in the time of covid-19	PTC	6,700	10,599	47,644
Earth Day 2020	FB static		42	740
Ramadan wish post		148	53	727
May Day 2020	FB video	32,00	4,833	276,228
May Day quiz	Campaign	64,300	8,395	325,699
Awareness for fact checking	FB video	187	54	823
Women in Pandemic: Survive, React, Evolve	PTC	4.,900	1,604	145,38
Post thanking frontline fighters	FB video		55	1,205
World Environment Day 2020	FB video	375	87	1,998
Social distancing edition of Digital Khichari	Campaign	404,500	112,044	5,253,080
SecDev disinformation report contents	Campaign	32,100	4,908	357,396
Misinforamtion and targeting of migrant workers	Webinar		187	1518
Eid Al Adha 2020	FB video	17,800	3,867	109,088

Annex 2. Diversity for Peace social media outreach in 2020

Content Category	Partner Name	Type	Views	Engagement	Reach
UNDP COVID Advisory		FB static		18	265
PwD-friendly awareness message		FB static	45,000	1,500	73,000
Happy Independence Day		FB static		23	397
TG community in COVID response sensitization post	Bandhu	FB static		645	3,400
WHO message on COVID		FB static		136	1800
COVID awareness in Tripura dialect	TazhingDong	FB video		32	1000
Call for action for youth peace ambassadors	The Earth	FB video		79,995	2,090,765
Anti-Corona spray by a Muslim man in a Mandir in Karachi		FB static		3	254
Mental health awareness post		FB static		22	649
Paharer Rong art contest		FB static		22,400	310,000
Interfaith awareness post		FB static		4	168
Online quiz on diversity	Life 101 foundation, Quizards				99,322
General awareness post		FB static		37	873
Corona awareness advisory in Marma dialect	TazhingDong	FB static		55	317
World Health Day		FB static		78	4,900
Introducing Peace Ambassadors		FB Static		19,720	221,622
Thanking front-line health workers post		FB static		4	392
Corona awareness advisory		FB static		29	795
Marma song on COVID	TazhingDong	FB video		120,600	34,200
COVID post on tea garden worker	SEHD	FB static		5	277
COVID post		FB static		2	110
Training for Youth peace ambassadors		Webinar, FB static		18,410	271,816

Table continuation

Content Category	Partner Name	Type	Views	Engagement	Reach
Diverse faces of Bangladesh	SEHD	Virtual photo exhibition		765	3,954
Tribute to frontliners		FB static		3	461
World Humanitarian Day		FB static			
Inspiring Story - 2 with AI Manahil	Peacemakers studio	FB video	42,250	13,000	113,650
Gender-based violence during COVID	Bandhu	Diversity Talks	10,700	430	6,800
Homage to humanitarians for COVID response	IED	Diversity Talks	14,300	830	32,500
COVID response by Islamic religious leaders		FB video			
Human Stories on COVID heroes		FB video	1,400		
Soft launch of Amader golpo comic series	Life 101 foundation, Quizards	FB static	14,988	9,717	271,143
PWD sensitization message		FB static		293	1,900
Interfaith COVID awareness message		FB static		9	205
Autism awareness		FB static		50	500
Role of Digital Platforms in COVID Response and Awareness	The Earth	Diversity Talks	530,264	63	2,200
International Day of Peace		FB static		20	615
Human Stories on COVID heroes: Mohammad Mohasin	Peace Makers	FB video	1,400	427	6,500
COVID know your heroes	Life 101, Human Library	FB static			
Documentary on tea garden workers	Peacemakers studio	FB video	30,300		90,000
COVID know your heroes	Life 101, Human Library	FB static		12	334

Table continuation

Content Category	Partner Name	Type	Views	Engagement	Reach
Survey questioner	Gen Lab	FB static			74,570
Human Stories on COVID heroes: Mxt Rani	Life 101, Human Library, Quizard	FB video	29,000	53	425
Inspiring Story: COVID humanitarian response by Alems	Peace Makers	FB video	10,000	2,100	25,300
Leaving No One Behind While Responding to COVID	The Earth	Diversity Talks		20,645	288,424
COVID know your heroes	Life 101, Human Library	FB static		13	409
Promoting Peaceful Coexistence among people of diverse identities in Covid-19 pandemic	The Earth	Diversity Talks		5020	243,518
Online Peace Hackathon	The Earth	FB Live, static		26,804	286,234
Online Peace Week	The Earth	FB Live, static		25,406	163,707

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Muggah (2020) “The Radicalization of Bangladeshi Cyberspace”, Foreign Policy, November 27, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/27/bangladesh-islamist-terrorist-networks-internet-extremism/>.
- 2 See Muggah (2020).
- 3 At least 17 people from religious and ethnic minorities were killed between March and September, as communal attacks continued even amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 27 idols were desecrated, 23 temples either vandalized or torched, and 5 cremation grounds or religious institutions destroyed.
- 4 Subscribers to the most popular AQIS Youtube channel doubled between 2019 and 2020 from 330,000 to 600,000.
- 5 This graphic includes channels and posts from Facebook, Youtube and Telegram. Most disinformation posts were from Facebook (87%) and Youtube (12%).
- 6 Our posts (one on Facebook, and 3 on YouTube) singled out religious leaders for acting against Islam by promoting PVE. These posts drew a shocking 300,000 interactions. Al Firdaws News, the AQIS propaganda website, also openly condemned the author of an article published in the major Bangladeshi daily, Prothom Alo, for speaking out against VE groups and promoting interfaith dialogue and harmony. This attack was one of several against individuals and groups advocating tolerance and inclusiveness in Bangladesh.
- 7 See SecDev Disinformation Watch (multiple editions).
- 8 The PTIB was launched following a high-profile attack in July 2016 on a popular cafe - the Holey Artisan Bakery - in Dhaka.
- 9 See PTIB Final Evaluation report, August 2020.
- 10 See, for example, UNDP (2020) Bangladesh Initiation Plan - COVID19-PTIB, 30 August.
- 11 See <http://peaceobservatory-cgs.org/#/highlights>.
- 12 See <http://peaceobservatory-cgs.org/#/about-us/overview>.
- 13 CARU analyzed between 150-200 Facebook posts every week between March and June 2020. From July to September 2020, online interest in COVID-19 steadily declined.
- 14 The survey revealed that users approached the way they revealed trends about COVID-19 related disinformation, provided disaggregated insight into how misinformation circulates (and by whom), and provides some indication of the wider social and economic impacts and how the government is responding. Most users appreciate receiving a short pdf, but there is also interest in the use of an interactive dashboard.

15 See <https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/digital-khichuri-challenge-addresses-social-stigma-against> and https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=899241567252437&ref=watch_permalink for live presentation. See also <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-youth/news/digital-khichuri-challenge-2020-concludes-1934985>.

16 Violence incidents include abductions, assault, battles, clashes, cross-fire encounters, destruction of property, fights, gunfights, mob violence, remote violence, sabotage, sexual assault, terror attacks, violence against civilians another unspecified categories. These are collected by BPO at <http://peaceobservatory-cgs.org/>.

17 See <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/publications-and-resources/GuidanceNote-When%20to%20refer%20to%20a%20situation%20as%20genocide.pdf>.

18 See https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/UNOCT_PVEReferenceGuide_FINAL.pdf.

19 See <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>.

20 See https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674.

21 See <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/12625>.

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