

PM’s leadership in global fight against climate change laudable

Bangladesh must also protect its own natural resources

THE PM’s proposals at a virtual UN roundtable on climate action on the sidelines of this year’s UN Genral Assembly on Thursday has shown the leadership role Bangladesh can play in the world’s fight against the impacts of climate change. This is especially appropriate as Bangladesh is among the most vulnerable countries to climate change. It is also a country that has provided crucial models of disaster management for other countries to follow and is the current chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum. PM Sheikh Hasina has highlighted five precise recommendations that aim to combat the adverse effects of this very real threat the world is facing.

She called for leaders to encourage stronger international collaboration, limiting global temperature increase up to 1.5 degrees Celsius and implementing all Paris provisions. She also reiterated the need for funds promised by countries to be made available to vulnerable countries, the need for polluting countries to contribute to mitigation measures and emphasised the fact that rehabilitating climate refugees is a global responsibility.

We laud our prime minister for her decisive, firm message to the international community reminding world leaders that they must all work together to face the challenges posed by climate change. Bangladesh is already facing the consequences in the form of increased flooding caused by rains and river erosion that have left thousands of people homeless and destitute. Similar fates are shared by other vulnerable countries which include both developing and developed nations. At this time, every country has a role to play and this includes Bangladesh. While we should be supported by the international community in our fight against climate change impacts, we too have a responsibility to do our bit. Bangladesh must lead by example, by preserving its forests especially the Sundarbans which provides protection against cyclones and floods and switching to renewable energy sources like many other countries have done. We hope that our government will therefore take such decisive steps while providing leadership to the world in this looming environmental challenge that threatens the very existence of humankind.

How many more girls will have to die at the hands of stalkers?

Arrest the murderer of Nila Roy immediately and bring him to justice

WE are shocked and outraged at the gruesome murder of Nila Roy, a 10th-grader of a local school in Savar, by her stalker Mizan on September 20. According to Nila’s family, she was on her way to the hospital with her elder brother to have her respiratory problem examined when they were stopped by Mizan. Mizan threatened to kill her brother and asked him to leave and forcefully took Nila to an abandoned house owned by his father where he stabbed her to death.

Reportedly, Mizan, the prime accused in this case, has been a member of the infamous “Shakil and Sakib” gang in the area. Shakil and Sakib are the sons of a local influential Awami League leader who used their father’s influence and power to cover up their crimes. According to the locals of the area, members of this gang often used to stalk and assault girls and are also notorious for extorting people and businesses as well as being involved in the drug trade. Although the gang committed many of these crimes in broad daylight, people in the area did not dare to protest fearing repercussions. They also alleged that the abandoned house where Nila was stabbed in is a crime hub where Mizan and other criminals used to gather regularly.

As Ain o Salish Kendra reported, from January till August this year, a total of 152 women were sexually harassed by their stalkers and of them 10 committed suicide and three attempted to commit suicide. Two of them were murdered by the stalkers because they protested. Nila is yet another girl who was murdered because she did not give in to her stalker’s demand.

In 2011, the High Court ordered the government to set up separate cells at every police station across the country to deal with cases of stalking. Have those cells been formed as yet? The regular incidents of sexual harassment by stalkers across the country gives us a signal that those directives by the court were hardly heeded by the concerned authorities.

We demand immediate arrest of Mizan, the stalker and murderer of 14-year-old Nila. The members of the “Shakil and Sakib” gang also need to be apprehended as they allegedly abetted Mizan in committing the crime. We would like to see prompt police action in arresting the murderer and demand justice for Nila.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Drug trade on the rise

The rate at which drug dealing and drug abuse is on the rise is surely alarming. In the past, such things would take place in narrow alleyways or similar places, but recently that is not the case. I have witnessed such acts multiple times out in the open. It is a very uncomfortable sight when the offenders, especially the youth, show such disregard for the people around them. Often, many are also under the influence, so they don’t even realise how wrong their behaviour is and it projects a very negative image of our society.

It seems that the law enforcement agencies are not doing enough to curb such activities. Drug use amongst the youth is a severe problem which tends to impact their personality, physical, social and emotional wellbeing in a very destructive manner. We must all collectively act now to help the youth from going astray before it’s too late.

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EDITORIAL

Preparing for the Covid-19 vaccine

Strategic and operational priorities

MOHAMMED PARVEZ IMDAD

AS the Covid-19 pandemic continues and it’s second wave has already hit several countries, the need and urgency for the much expected vaccine has become critically more important than before. Despite extensive global efforts, it seems the vaccine (with compliance of relevant requirements and stages) will not be ready before the end of the current year or early next year.

There are strong indications that the vaccines currently at third or fourth stages of production and clinical trials, should be on board for marketing and distribution within the next six months to one year. The international community would expect more visible, substantive and results-based role and coordination from the World Health Organization (WHO) in this regard. Further clarity and updates on the range of collaboration between respective governments and key vaccine manufacturing and distribution agencies worldwide and subsequently efficient sale and distribution could be useful at this stage. Should developing countries be able to get the vaccine straight from manufacturing companies or should governments concerned need to have bilateral agreements with the manufacturers? Will WHO be able to confirm levels of compliance with required standards and effectiveness of the vaccines that are first expected to enter the market? Will WHO facilitate multilateral mechanisms for sale/distribution of the vaccine? The UN Secretary General has cautioned against “vaccinationalism” that propels segregated efforts of nations in proceeding with vaccines only for internal use. The global approach on vaccine should be centred on the Secretary General’s observation, “None of us are safe till we are all safe”, and efforts should be directed accordingly.

In Bangladesh, the Technical Committee tasked by the government and the pharmaceutical manufacturers are keeping track of the vaccine developments worldwide. Despite the initial challenges, actions taken within Bangladesh seems to reflect some positive trends, as compared to several other countries in the region and even beyond. It is high time to assess how well prepared we are to ensure most efficient use of the “effective vaccine” as soon as it is available. Have we identified our strategic priorities and envisioned interventions to get the best outcome? Based on these, there is a need to focus on the following aspects on an urgent basis:

Strategic framework and operational layout

We need to have in place a broad-based strategic framework and operational layout for procurement, storage and distribution of the vaccine. Based on our constitutional provision to ensure health of all citizens of the country, there is a need for a comprehensive plan to ensure every citizen of the country is well covered (the vaccine needs to be given in two stages to the same recipient). It may not be possible to obtain the enormous quantities of the vaccine in one stage. In that case, the vaccine may be obtained in stages covering one to two years. Other interrelated priorities within

the proposed strategic framework should include market review and monitoring, assessment of costs, storage, distribution and supportive governance and managerial mechanisms.

Monitoring trends and progress and assessing market

To add further value to our preparedness exercise, it is necessary to closely track and monitor current trends and progress in vaccine production worldwide. It is important to urgently proceed on advance negotiations (on cost, quality and delivery) and finalise agreement with governments and key pharmaceutical companies worldwide. We need to consider options of procuring/obtaining vaccines from multiple sources depending on our comparative advantages and overall health-related interests. The policy choices may revolve around whether we should wait for further details on the effectiveness factor or

as the stages of distribution. The process should be demand-driven as well as need-based. WHO and member countries may have different views as regards to the early stage recipients. For Bangladesh initial recipients should include elderly people (60 and above and patients with critical illness and those vulnerable to Covid-19 infection), physicians and medical staff, administration and law-enforcing agencies, electronic and print media staff, students, and people representing various professional groups and subsequently, all other segments of the society. The two core principles for the whole exercise should be: whoever needs the vaccine should have it without hindrance or difficulties and no one should be left behind.

Enabling infrastructure, storage and mode of distribution

The vaccine needs to be stored in compliance of prescribed requirements



A laboratory technician fills a syringe with a COVID-19 novel coronavirus vaccine candidate ready for trial on monkeys at the National Primate Research Center of Thailand at Chulalongkorn University in Saraburi.

PHOTO: AFP

(for instance high freezing) and this shall remain a major challenge for several countries including Bangladesh. Creating the enabling and supportive infrastructure would involve additional expenditure. It is essential to identify storage centres countrywide (probably at least one storage centre in every divisional headquarters) monitored by the district administration with the help of local civil surgeon, and citizens committees comprising public representatives and professional groups.

Access and affordability

The key objective of the whole process should relate to ensuring access of the vaccine to all citizens at affordable prices. “Leaving no one behind” should be the underlying objective in ensuring access and affordability. Prices may be determined based on annual income levels. However, it may be required to significantly subsidise the cost of vaccines in order to ensure access for the poorest segments of the population.

Strengthened institutional mechanism, implementation and monitoring

The task force assigned by the government is working in accordance with the given mandate. To better achieve the above-stated objectives, the current functional and institutional mechanisms need to be further strengthened through the following: Cabinet committee supervision, national commission on combating Covid (comprising experts, public representatives, law enforcing agencies and key NGOs with anti-covid programmess). The proposed national commission and current task force will strengthen and expand the range of cooperation to ensure efficient implementation of the vaccine access and distribution process.

Governance and management instruments

Given the challenges in implementing Covid eradication programmes, special attention should be given to improved governance and efficient management at every phase—access, storage and distribution. This is critically important to eliminate any form of corruption or unethical practices in the process of storage and distribution. The parliament may consider enacting an ordinance or appropriate regulatory framework for ensuring accountability as well as transparent and credible outcomes.

Continued focus on health precautions

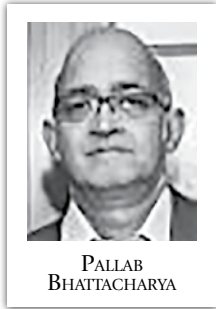
Along with the recommended arrangements, it is important to continue the current health advisory practices. Given the impression that vaccine itself may not be sufficient at least in the short to medium-term to eliminate or significantly reduce Covid risks, continued focus on practices to “keep safe” should add value to check spread of the virus—till the pandemic is fully within control.

Gearing up the potential for local production of vaccines

The vision of “leaving no one behind” would be best achieved stimulating local production through technical compliance, fiscal incentives and external collaboration. Bangladesh’s promising and vibrant pharmaceutical sector should be able to support and facilitate this in the medium-term (two to three years). Health collaboration focus in inter or intra-regional cooperation frameworks could stimulate further research and propel search from best practices for better outcomes.

We should act fast on addressing the above issues whether we get the vaccine within this year or the next. Speedy decisions aimed at effectiveness, access and overall sustainability are crucial in moving ahead with the best interest of our people. Business continuity plan aimed at meeting pandemic-related challenges should add to our competencies in cushioning health-related shocks, for our overall national interests. As Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goals and targets appear shaded with uncertainties and possibilities of delayed implementation, meaningful multilateralism is what the international community should aim for.

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louder than it was less than a year ago when the same prohibition had gone into force. The reason was simple: last year when the ban was implemented, the price of onion in the domestic market had ranged between Rs 100-150 per kilo. This September, the price was in the range of Rs 40-45 a kilo when the export ban was announced. One of the main reasons for soaring price this year is excessive rain and flood in the major onion growing areas. But one cannot ignore the role played by an artificial shortage created by onion traders both at wholesale and retail markets and middlemen.

So, did the Indian government this time come out with a knee-jerk reaction? Could it have waited for some more weeks when the price could have risen further and then act? Not that onion prices in domestic market showed a downward trend post-export ban of September 14. In fact, it went up to Rs 50 55 per kilo. However, the ban may have slowed down the price rise. But it amply summed up the web of issues that defy an easy solution.

One easy answer for the September 14 ban on onion export was that it was done to ward off any negative impact the rising prices of the kitchen staple would have on the people of the eastern state of Bihar where fresh assembly elections are due in October this year. The Bharatiya Janata Party and its bigger ally Janata Dal (United) led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar are keen to return to power in Bihar. So, the BJP-led federal government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi obviously did not want to take any chance with the onion price which had proved

the saffron party’s Achilles’ heel in the elections in the past. It may be recalled that last year, there was no such immediate electoral compulsion to rein in onion prices before the ban was imposed in September. In fact, at that time, India had gone for imported onions from Egypt, Afghanistan and Turkey to tame domestic price. Another worry for the government over rising onion prices this year was that the latest data on consumer price index-linked inflation for August was 6.69 percent, higher than the Reserve Bank of India’s (RBI) upper target limit of 6 percent.

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the UAE are among the largest markets for onions from India. No doubt, the onion export ban by India in 2019 and 2020 did create misgivings in Bangladesh, the biggest importer of Indian onion.

So, should India go for export ban on onion or for that matter any other agriculture produce to check prices at home? The opinion, as usual, remains divided. One view is that if the government resorts to banning exports to control prices, it hurts farmers’ interests. But what about consumers’ interests? No government can be mindful of just one side and be oblivious of the other. Clearly, there is a need to strike a balance between the two and that is easier said than done.

Whenever onion prices in domestic markets go up, the government has exercised two options: i) impose minimum export price and if that does not work; ii) ban export. Last year, the government had chosen a graded approach by first imposing minimum export price and when that failed to put a brake on the rising price, it went for the export ban. This year, the government did not go for a calibrated approach. It skipped the first option and jumped to the second, reflecting a sense of urgency primarily with an eye on Bihar poll.

A section of Indian economists

Act. The aim was to ensure the market forces are allowed free play in availability and pricing of these goods.

The ordinance was replaced by a bill which got the stamp of parliamentary approval on September 22 in what was touted as a major farm sector reform. The bill allows traders, retailers and exporters to stockpile the six commodities without having to incur any penalty. However, the legislation also envisages that the stock-holding limit, which is an instrument to check surging prices, will come into play only in case of “extraordinary circumstances” like war, natural calamity or a situation of substantial price rise in order to protect the interests of the consumers. This makes it clear that any talk of completely free market and deregulating a sector is a myth because any government of the day cannot allow a free-for-all. This means exports will be allowed only as long as local prices remain under control. Economics can seldom be delinked from politics.

The problem with onion, and any agricultural produce for that matter, is

that it remains subject to the vagaries of weather and price fluctuations. It has been suggested by some that one solution to ensure that high onion price does not pinch the consumers is to cut duties and taxes on petrol and diesel that will give households a lot more breathing space. It has also been suggested that a ban on exports cuts the farmers’ income from onions and thereby escalates the agrarian crisis. A major flaw in the second suggestion is that it does not take into account that the benefits of the rise in agricultural produce prices do not always reach the farmers and are siphoned off by middlemen and commission agents who help take the produce to local wholesale markets.

Another argument against onion export ban is that it hurts India’s goodwill as a dependable exporter. A lot of effort goes into building export markets. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the UAE are among the largest markets for onions from India. No doubt, the onion export ban by India in 2019 and 2020 did create misgivings in Bangladesh, the biggest importer of Indian onion. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had hinted at her displeasure last October when she had visited New Delhi a few days after the ban was clamped in 2019. This year, the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry wrote a letter to its Indian counterpart asking the Indian authorities to ensure that Bangladesh is not inconvenienced by the export ban.

A viable option for India, as recommended by economists from time to time, is to have a buffer stock of all essential foodgrains and release them into the market in times of shortage or soaring prices in order to insulate consumers on the one hand and protecting farmers from the burden of anti-inflation measures on the other. A credible buffer stock hinges on the creation of a countrywide network of storage facilities for crops. There is a home and the world for India to take care of when it comes to foodgrains and therein lies the dilemma.

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