

# Coronavirus vaccine for all at no cost

Ensure that we get the best drug

THE government deserves hearty congratulations for deciding to make the coronavirus vaccine available to all free of cost once it is available on the market and we have the money to buy enough for all. We would like to reiterate the prime minister's call to the World Health Organization to declare the vaccine a "global public good" that must be made available to all countries though an "equal access programme". It is a commendable plan indeed, since the nature of the pandemic requires that everyone across the board is included in the vaccination programme. Given the cost of flu vaccines that are available today, which only the affluent can afford, the government cannot risk anybody being left out.

Covid-19 has posed serious health challenges for the world and we are glad to see that countries have come together to produce a vaccine in a much shorter time than what would be needed to produce a new vaccine under normal circumstances. This being a global problem, nothing short of a global programme that includes production, funding for production and availability, as well as funds for the lower income countries for purchase of the vaccine, will make vaccination efforts successful.

At present, nine countries under the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) are engaged in producing the vaccine, and several others countries outside the programme are running their own tests and trials. According to the health ministry, it is engaged in talks with five front-running vaccine producers. While we believe that the higher the number of countries involved, the better it is for the prospect of early production of the vaccine, the efficacy and safety of the drug is very important and we should procure only those that have the seal of approval of the WHO.

While one is not certain when exactly the vaccine might be available, we believe that the government should also work out a distribution plan in advance, including preparing a priority list that should be based on medical and health factors, with the most vulnerable given the top spot. And that should be determined by the health officials alone.

# Delay in forming cell to monitor women repression cases unacceptable

Noncompliance with HC directive undermines public confidence in judicial system

DESPITE a sharp rise in incidents of violence against women and children in recent years, we're alarmed by the consistent failure to comply with a High Court directive to form a cell to monitor progress in rape prosecutions and establish the accountability of court officials including judges, public prosecutors and investigation officers. Over three years ago, the HC had directed the registrar general of the Supreme Court to form this cell. If implemented, this would have played a vital role in ensuring that trials of cases under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000 (WCRPA) are completed within 180 days. It would have also enabled the authorities to check possible negligence by court officials to finish trials on time and take appropriate action. Such flagrant disregard for an HC directive, by the Supreme Court administration no less, despite repeated appeals by anti-rape activists and civil society members, only validates the claim by the latter of deep-seated institutional apathy to prosecuting rape cases with the urgency that they deserve.

Part of the reason for the current culture of impunity emboldening rapists is the extremely low rape conviction rate in Bangladesh. According to section 20 of the WCRPA, the Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals (there are 95 across the country) must finish the trials of cases filed under this law within 180 days of charge framing. Rape is one of the several offences that these tribunals try. Forming a monitoring cell will address only part of the problem, however, as victims often have to endure some combination of disrespect, negligence and prohibitive barriers throughout the justice-seeking process—starting from the initial reporting of a crime through to investigation and trial. This points to a larger socio-institutional problem for which wider reforms are needed. Experts have, therefore, called for a number of legal and institutional measures to empower victims to seek and get justice, including changing the definition of rape to include all victims, regardless of their gender identity or marital status, prohibiting the use of character evidence in rape trials, enacting a Victim and Witness Protection Act, and importantly, training police and court officials on dealing with sexual and gender-based violence, among other initiatives.

Having a monitoring cell to regularly check the progress of trials and ensure the accountability of relevant court officials can be a vital instrument, if not the only one, in ensuring justice for the victims. We urge the Supreme Court administration to step up to the plate and set an example for all justice sector actors so that they play the role necessary to uproot the culture of rape from our society. There can be no excuse for any delay in this regard, given how widespread and dangerous the culture of rape and other forms of violence against women has become.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### No one is above the law

Erfan Salim, son of Dhaka-7 lawmaker Haji Md Salim, was recently sentenced to one year in prison for illegally possessing walkie-talkies and foreign liquor after RAB raided his residence. The culture of impunity has been plaguing our society for too long now. Arrests of those who hold positions of power but tend to abuse them will certainly satisfy the general public. Law enforcement officials are doing a great job and I hope they continue to do so, so that justice can be served.

Arpan Kumar Das, Dhaka

## EDITORIAL

### INSIDE THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS

# Circumstances beckon prudence and vision



C R ABRAR

FROM an unprecedented shutdown of activities due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the country is gradually moving to a new normal situation. Although the spectre of the second wave of the contagion looms large, road, rail and air communications are being resumed, shopping outlets are beginning to see customers, mills and factories are slowly resuming production and construction sites are steadily getting active as internal migrants desperate for jobs flock to the urban centres. Many services that were suspended due to the outbreak of the pandemic are gradually being restored.

Like the rest of the country, life in the Cox's Bazar-Ukhiya-Teknaf region has also begun to pulsate. The huge success of the local administration in enforcing a total shutdown, restricting humanitarian responses to critical activities and barring the movement of people and vehicles, have yielded handsome results. It slowed the spread of the virus and provided opportunities to shore up required public healthcare facilities, including establishing isolation and treatment centres for both Rohingya refugees and the locals.

There is little room for complacency. The congested nature of the dwellings in camps has made it virtually impossible for the refugees to maintain social distancing. There is general reticence to use protective gear. The idea that only divine intervention can cure the disease is pervasive.

The negative perception associated with the virus contributes to a general reluctance to visit clinics for test or treatment, particularly for fever and other Covid-19 like symptoms. Even those

mental health services, maternal/child health services, etc. Diphtheria cases are being reported. These types of epidemics, especially of preventable illness, can in turn erode trust in health services and create a feedback loop where healthcare is not sought or services are not utilised. Enhancing trust, through positive and effective risk communication, can help mitigate this, but only if other health services are provided.

Poor quality of services including non-availability of medicines, language barriers and long hours of waiting also discourage service seekers from accessing healthcare facilities. Therefore, there is an urgent need to improve the quality of services and for decisive action to restore regular medical services through adequate mobilisation of resources.

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less prone to irrational ideas, including those of religious and sectarian bigotry and violent extremism. Education not only shapes individuals' mental abilities to its fullest potentials, it contributes to the development of their talents, instills self confidence and empowers them. It is in such a context of harnessing their human potential that the government may reconsider allowing the re-enrolment of enterprising and talented Rohingya youth who secured admissions on merit in formal institutions, continued their studies without any public assistance but were subsequently de-registered through a government fiat.

The recent spate of violence, resulting in the death of five refugees and the injury of scores of others, has been a worrisome development. Although local media have interpreted the incident as "factional fighting" within the Rohingya community, its links with the drug



PHOTO: COLLECTED

In January, the Bangladesh government's change in policy, which finally allowed education and skills training for Rohingya children, was widely appreciated.

children, was widely appreciated. Notwithstanding the restrictions that the education must be informal and must not use the Bangla language, it was a refreshing departure from a previous stance that breached Bangladesh's obligations according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. One hopes that this is the beginning of efforts to address existing critical gaps in refugee access to education and skills development opportunities, and will eventually lead to "access to appropriate, accredited and quality education" for all children of the area, including Rohingya children.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has delayed the implementation of the new education and skills training programme. There is an urgent need to gear up efforts, with adequate mobilisation of resources by the international community, so that Rohingya children are not deprived further in their pursuit to realise their innate potentials. Retention of skills requires their application. The next logical step could therefore be planning to engage the refugees in income generating activities.

Education not only provides children with the opportunity to advance in their career, it also enables them to think clearly, make a distinction between good and evil, claim their rights and face challenging situations. An educated, informed and engaged youth will be

trade, involving powerful persons of the mainstream community, is also a possibility. These incidents are harmful not only for the security and safety of refugees but also for their reputation and public perception. Needless to say, such incidents reinforce the Burmese position that the Rohingya are a violent group harboured by Bangladesh. Robust efforts to ensure law and order are vital. Also, there is a need for proper investigations into the incident.

Another important matter of deep concern for the refugees has been the renewed call by a section of the media and intellectuals for the relocation of 100,000 refugees to Bhashan Char. Presumably to garner support, impressive accounts and footages are being made available in the public domain of what was earlier perceived to be a hush-hush project. Recently, a visit of a group of journalists was arranged "to assess its habitability". Not surprisingly, the visit yielded a general endorsement. After all, the structures and facilities on the "self sufficient" island are surely more impressive than the thatched, rickety shacks that the refugee currently live in.

Last week in *Prothom Alo*, analyst Kamal Ahmed raised two pertinent questions. Would not the current inmates of the facility, who have been living on the island for months, be the most suitable persons to speak on the issue,

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suffering from non-Covid-19 symptoms, as a result of other illnesses, avoid visiting clinics for fear of being stigmatised. The situation becomes more complex with brewing discontent and tension among the host community that refugees will spread the virus. Disease epidemics have historically been used to create divisions between groups of people and to assign blame.

The emphasis on Covid-19 appears to have overshadowed other critical health needs, such as routine immunisation,

# Climate Vulnerable Forum can change the paradigm on dealing with climate change



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), consisting of nearly 50 of the most climate vulnerable developing countries, which was set up a decade ago on the basis of their common vulnerability to climate change, has now evolved into a more robust group of countries who are no longer only emphasising their vulnerability but rather moving towards resilience.

The leadership of the CVF passes to the head of each country for a period of two years and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has recently taken over this role for the next two years. One of the new initiatives that is being developed under her leadership is for each CVF country to not just develop their respective National Adaptation Plan (NAP) but to think about a more transformational vision to develop their respective Climate Prosperity Plan (CPP). Here, the aim is to go beyond simply coping with the adverse impacts of climate change and rather transform social and economic systems, so that each country is able to prosper even as they become resilient to the adverse impacts of climate change.

There are some key strategies that will be included in preparing such CPPs, although each country will have to develop their own respective strategy based on their circumstances.

Every country, no matter how poor economically, is rich in its human resources. Unfortunately, many developing countries don't invest in the kind of education and training that can make the most of potential human capital.

the opportunities of the internet and digital world is emerging as a tremendous opportunity for young people, so will knowledge and the experience of combating climate change become an asset with significant global demand as countries face the adverse impacts of climate change. Investment in our youth will pay us enormous dividends in the coming decades.

The second investment arena is in the transition of energy, transport and industrial systems from fossil fuel dependence to cleaner and renewable

become cheaper than petrol and natural gas soon.

What needs to be put in place in the short term is an enabling economic and investment environment to attract private sector investment, both domestic and foreign, in the CVF countries. At the moment, foreign investors sometimes find it difficult to invest in these countries, so we need to improve the enabling policies and governance to attract long term global capital to continue to build on the level of investment in national economies.

and what prevented the journalists from speaking with them? Also relevant is the question of whether this would give a signal to the Burmese, and also the world, that Bangladesh is beginning to accept the Rohingya as *fait accompli* by building permanent structures for them.

It is regrettable that the project was conceived and executed in haste without engaging important stakeholders who are rendering services for the protection of the refugees. Before carrying out any relocations, the call for a comprehensive technical and protection assessment to evaluate the safety and sustainability of life on Bhashan Char is a reasonable one. In line with its earlier commitment, the government must ensure that relocation will be voluntary and refugees will enjoy access to basic rights, services and livelihood opportunities.

One wonders if the placement of more than 300 refugees in May as the first residents of the island, mostly women and children who were intercepted and rescued on their way to Malaysia, was a prudent one. The persistent refusal of the authorities to grant UN access to these vulnerable and traumatised survivors to assess their protection and humanitarian situation only generates negative publicity. The claims by the inmates of sexual abuse and extortion (while effecting money transfer by relatives) that have been highlighted by international media and rights organisations need to be thoroughly and impartially investigated and acted upon. These, coupled with the insensitive (if not reckless) comments of some state functionaries that the refugees will be forced to relocate, and the suggestion that all imprisoned Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar can be granted bail on condition that they agree to go Bhashan Char, only present it as a penal facility, thereby bolster the perception that life on the Char may not be quite bearable.

There is a need for the emergence of an organically grown leadership at different tiers. A long standing demand of refugees and rights activists has been ensuring the participation of the community in making decisions that affect them. A recently released Amnesty International report "Let us speak for our rights" deftly argues that instituting such an arrangement would not only help in making the right decisions; it will ensure openness, accountability and transparency.

The protracted nature of the Rohingya presence in Bangladesh demands innovative and sensitive policy responses. Jettisoning its earlier approach, Bangladeshi authorities have responded to the felt needs of the refugees and acknowledged the importance of education and skill training. It has lifted the blanket ban on internet coverage. It has acted decisively to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. It is trying its best to bring the sharply deteriorating law and order situation in Teknaf under control.

At a time when Burma is under global scrutiny from international accountability mechanisms, policymakers in Dhaka should ensure that the focus remains on the perpetrators of genocide. They should act prudently and refrain from taking any actions that may amount to the proverbial "shooting yourself in the foot".

C R Abrar is an academic with an interest in migration and rights issues.