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Existing cold chain not enough for Covid-19 vaccines

A robust network required for preserving vaccines scientifically and their efficient delivery

AFTER the government recently signed a trilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Serum Institute of India and Bangladesh's Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd to get three crore doses of Covid-19 vaccines from Serum—which will be collected and transported by Beximco to the storage facilities under the health directorate's EPI—the challenges Bangladesh would face in scientifically preserving and delivering the vaccines with its existing cold chain network have come under the spotlight. According to the deal, the three crore Covishield doses will be delivered in phases, with 50 lakh doses every month.

Although we have a very good network of EPI (Expanded Programme on Immunisation) which is capable of keeping life-saving drugs at temperatures as low as minus 20 degrees Celsius, it is basically used for vaccination of children and has a capacity of storing, transporting and distributing around 1.5 crore doses at a time, according to government officials. So experts believe, with the existing facilities, it will be really difficult to store and deliver such a large volume of Covid-19 vaccines within a short time since those will need to be kept within the WHO-recommended temperature ranges, from the point of manufacture to the point of administration. Sadly, for us, the main challenge will be to efficiently deliver the vaccines to the health centres across the country.

We understand that the government is thinking of purchasing vaccines that can be managed with its existing capacity, as upgrading the present system will be very expensive. As we know, different vaccines require different temperatures, cold chain facilities and handling procedures. While the vaccine being developed by Pfizer requires a storage temperature of minus 80 degrees Celsius, the one being developed by Moderna was initially stored at minus 70 degrees Celsius (although now the company plans to ship the shots at minus 20). And the Covishield vaccines that Bangladesh will purchase are supposed to be stored at 2-8 degrees Celsius. But since no vaccine candidate has been approved by the WHO as yet, its administrative protocol and logistics are still unknown to us. If it turns out that the approved vaccines need to be stored at much colder temperature, we will have no alternative but to upgrade the system.

Therefore, it will be a mistake to completely rely on our existing cold chain for storing, transporting and distributing the Covid-19 vaccines. Although the government should have thought about it in advance, there's still time. The government should now focus on upgrading the existing vaccine cold chain network so that after procurement, vaccines can be transported to the remote parts of the country and administered rapidly at the right temperature.

School threatened over Victory Day cultural event

We cannot allow such extremist ideologies to create fear in the country

WITH the Victory Day in less than a month, organisations and individuals across the country are gearing up to celebrate a day of great pride for this nation, made even more special on this occasion by Mujib Borsho and the fact that we will be stepping into our 50th year as independent Bangladesh. Against this backdrop, it is extremely distressing to see that after all these years, there are still certain groups that cannot partake in the joy and pride we feel in our liberation, and are using prejudiced beliefs as an excuse to oppose everything that we as a nation stand for.

This became apparent in a report published in this daily yesterday, which detailed how a school in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat area had suspended all rehearsals for its Victory Day cultural programmes after receiving a letter demanding a halt to such activities as Islam does not support it. The letter was sent by a group calling themselves Bangladesh Islamic Shachetan Dal on November 4, in which they said they are ready to "sacrifice their lives for Allah". According to the general diary filed by the headmaster in this regard, three villagers also personally went to the school on November 6 and demanded a stop to the rehearsals.

There is no need for us to get into the misguided interpretations that twist a peaceful religion into hateful ideas that are on a direct collision course with cultural spaces and practices. We are, however, extremely concerned, not only because we are seeing a rise in such violent and extremist ideas—cricketer Shakib Al Hasan, for example, recently received death threats for attending a puja celebration in Kolkata—but also because of the fear that those on the receiving end of such threats are suffering. Why did the Ghoraghat school have to suspend its rehearsals? Why did the law enforcement agencies not take adequate steps to protect the children and give their guardians the confidence to continue with their cultural activities? What message does this send to minority communities and cultural practitioners across the country when such threats, instead of being dealt with as crimes, are given in to, thus validating their illiberal demands and achieving their ends? How will we inculcate the values and spirit of our Liberation struggle in young people if they are being undermined by extremist forces?

We urge the authorities to look into such incidents with the utmost seriousness and take immediate steps to apprehend the people behind the threats. This week, the prime minister's ICT advisor and CRI chairperson, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, said that Bangladesh can never budge from its founding principle of secularism. We hope this is truly the stance of everyone in government, and that all involved authorities will play their part in rooting out all extremist misinterpretations of faith which have no place in a liberal and democratic society.

Land grab and resistance in the Chimbuk hills



C R ABRAR

THE Mro community of the Chimbuk hills is passing days in great uncertainty. The hills around them are being cut, trees are being felled, and water sources are being disrupted taking a huge toll on this otherwise sedate region. Over the last few months, the people of Chimbuk hills have seen engineers and contractors being ferried in impressive SUVs to measure the site and plan construction of state-of-the-art structures, noisy trucks bringing in construction materials, while workers are shoving in pillars piercing the Mother Earth.

All these portend a calamity for the local Mro people. They are deeply concerned that not only would this "development" initiative take a severe toll on their lifestyle and livelihoods, it would also harm the flora and fauna and thereby the ecological balance of this pristine expanse, one of the very few that exist in the country.

It is interesting to note that in Bangladesh's 50 years of existence, this community which did not have the fortune to host a junior high or even a primary school to educate its children is now being thrust down with a mega project of a 5-star hotel and an amusement park. Fear is pervasive that Mro households in Karpupara, Dolapara and Evapara will face eviction; others in close vicinity in Markinpara, Longbaitanpara, Riamaneipara and Menringpara are also likely to meet the same fate in the not-so-distant future.

The news of the onset of the tide of "development" sweeping the Chimbuk range caught its residents by surprise. So far, they believed that as members of a bona fide indigenous community, they were protected by a number of national and international laws, regulations, protocols, declarations and customs. On October 8, they appealed for redress to the highest executive of the state through the District Commissioner without success. As the construction process gained traction on the ground involving tractors, diggers, lorries and other heavy equipment, the Mro people, finding no other recourse, began to organise to protect their rights and entitlements that are guaranteed by the Constitution and laws as well as international treaties that Bangladesh is party to.

It has been estimated that between 800 and 1,000 acres of land will be adversely impacted by the project involving a hotel, amusement park and artificial lake. Twelve hills will be connected with cable cars. Water, power and other utility services for the facilities, including the residential quarters of the staff members, would require construction of a network of buildings, roads, drainage and sewage system.

All these structures will be constructed on a land that hosts dwellings of hundreds of Mro families, forest, streams and fountains, orchards, temples, sacred cremation grounds, holy stones, revered hills, and the like that are integral to the identity of the Mro. Already, the noted Natibong hill has been re-christened with a Bangla name. Initially, it will lead to displacement of at least 115 families of four villages, and 10,000 more Mros of adjoining villages are likely to be affected. The livelihoods of most members of the community dependent on *jhum* cultivation will be severely impacted. Mango, pineapple and papaya orchards will suffer due to diversion of the natural flow of streams. Along with harming the ecological balance, the project will impede the movement of people that is

essential to pursue livelihoods and social and cultural interactions.

News reports inform that security forces have taken lease of 20 acres of land from the Bandarban District Hill Council (BDHC). The head of BDHC admitted that a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for lease of land was signed, but the land is yet to be transferred as the approval of the government was pending. He was unable to say under what authority the construction activities have commenced (Deutsche Welle, 13/11/2020). An arrangement has been worked out between the Sikder Group-owned R&R Holdings Ltd. and the Army Welfare Trust for a thirty-five-year lease on a profit-sharing basis. Refuting the claims of land grabbing, R&R Holdings informed that the BHDC has an eight-percent ownership of the project (DS, 8/11/2020). The group further said that a further 10 acres have been added to the original lease of 20 acres. The concerned Brigade Commander of Bangladesh Army assured that, if the need arises, shops and houses will be built for the affected Mro people.

Like their counterparts in other hill

while Article 23A obligates the state "to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sectors and communities." It is worth noting that the progressive Articles 18A and 23A were inserted into the Constitution by the 15th Amendment in 2011 under the Awami League government.

The Hill District Council Act precludes BHDC authorities from transferring ownership of land to other parties without the expressed consent of the people and recommendation of the concerned *mauza* headmen. Therefore, any arrangement drawn by parties in breach of the provision makes the instrument void under the law. Under the CHT Land Commission Act, the Commission is solely responsible for adjudicating on land disputes. Thus far, the failure of the government to frame the Rules of Business of the Commission has precluded it from functioning effectively. The project also violates the 1997 CHT agreement that explicitly prohibits building of any commercial facility that impairs the interests of the indigenous

the restrictions imposed on their free movement in the Chimbuk hills due to cordoning off larger areas than the area under lease by security forces. They have also claimed that they have been subjected to threats and intimidation.

On November 13, the community organised a human chain and rally in Cheragi Hill. The unique protest was a cultural showdown. Instead of chanting slogans, the beat of drums and sound of traditional *phlong* flute reverberated through the hills, perhaps echoing the pang of the Mro's hearts for the land—a critical element of their identity—they are about to lose. Community members of all ages participated in the event. Mothers made sure that their children join the protest to stake a claim on what is theirs.

This move of according priority to profit over people and using common resources for private gain in violation of the law has triggered disapproval of the mainstream Bangladesh community. The Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples, the International CHT Commission, the Adibashi Forum, Jatiya Mukti Council and many other



Members of several organisations in Chattogram city staged a demonstration protesting against the construction of a five-star hotel in Chimbuk hills in Bandarban, on November 13, 2020.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

communities, Mros were also adversely affected by the past development projects of the state and were deprived of fair compensation. In the recent past, they lost 11 acres of land acquired for a firing range. Large segments were acquired for rubber plantations in Nilgiri. In several cases, parcels of land that were taken remained unutilised. Although some plots were released for non-utilisation through the intervention of a local MP, those were re-allotted to others instead of being handed over to the original owners.

Analysts have raised some pertinent issues. Fundamental among those is that the project violates the Constitution of the republic, provisions of CHT Regulations 1900 (reinstated by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court on November 22, 2016), Bandarban Hill Council Act 1989, Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Commission Act 2001, and many established protocols and traditions.

Article 18A of Bangladesh Constitution commits the state "to protect and improve the environment and to preserve and safeguard the natural resources, bio-diversity, wetlands, forests and wild life for the present and future citizens." Article 23 obliges the state "to adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the people,"

people.

Another gaping hole of the lease transfer mechanism is its failure to secure the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of the Mro people impacted by the project. FPIC is an emerging standard in engaging with indigenous peoples and is becoming part of customary international law. The UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) asserts that it is the duty of the state to obtain FPIC of indigenous peoples to effectively determine the outcome of decision-making that affects them. FPIC is a standard protected by international human rights law. "Anybody with property understands that you can't just take the property without consent, unless there's some over-arching governmental purpose," observes James Anaya, the UN Special Rapporteur on Rights of Indigenous Peoples. He further notes, "Because of this special significance of lands and resources to the cultural survival of indigenous peoples... it would have to meet a very, very high burden of justification." Surely, leasing of land for construction of a hotel and an amusement park does not meet the criteria of "very, very high burden of justification."

The Mro community has protested

public platforms have condemned the commercialisation of the Chimbuk hills and demanded immediate cessation of "developmental" activities. They also stated that through its involvement with this controversial project, the concerned security force is tarnishing its own image. Perhaps the political leadership should reassess if publicly-funded state institutions should at all be involved in commercial enterprises that may bear the risk of compromising their professionalism.

The failure of the government to uphold the constitutional rights of the Mro people has been palpable. Article 11 of the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957 of the ILO (C-107) obliges the state to recognise the "right of ownership, collective or individual, of the members of the populations concerned over the lands which these populations traditionally occupy." Bangladesh ratified the convention in 1972, when the Father of the Nation was at the helm. Rescinding the imprudent decision to lease out the land of the indigenous people for private gain will surely be an apt tribute of the government in his birth centenary.

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US RE-ENTRY INTO PARIS CLIMATE AGREEMENT Transition to renewable energy must start now

MOSTOFA SARWAR

THE difficulties associated with the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources such as solar and wind were touched upon in the last US presidential debate, bringing the contentious topic to the forefront again. Hopefully, it's not too late.

Both petroleum and natural gas reserves will be depleted in approximately 50 years at the current rate of production and consumption. This is a formidable challenge to humanity. Even if new reservoirs are found—which I can attest is an increasingly difficult and elusive prospect after a career of studying and developing ways to find them—these non-renewable resources will inevitably run out. It takes millions of years for geological and geochemical processes to generate natural gas or petroleum.

Based on the consumption rates alone, there simply must be a transition to renewable energy sources for the survival of the United States and the world. The true urgency of this transition becomes clearer when we consider the adverse impact of fossil fuel use on global

warming, and the effects associated with any attendant climate change, including rising sea levels, eroding coastlines, and intensified natural disasters—drought, forest fires, catastrophic flooding.

Sea level is already rising. If this continues at the current accelerated rate, vast low-lying areas of Bangladesh and other countries of the world would be uninhabitable, causing economic and ecological catastrophe of gargantuan proportions. In 30 years, Bangladesh will lose approximately one-tenth of its land and fifteen million people will be displaced. Social unrest, political upheavals, wars, famine, plague, and unimaginable sufferings would be unleashed on Bangladesh and other vulnerable countries. The desperate population would be forced to migrate to higher ground. Nobody would be spared from the collateral damage and destruction. The entire humanity would descend to a horrible dystopia.

Not everyone is burying their heads in the sand. The US domestic and international private sector has made noteworthy progress in developing electric vehicles. And while the US government

has sadly reduced financial incentives for renewable energy and relaxed carbon emission standards over the last few years, we've noticed the opposite from many other governments of the world.

In several countries, we've seen notable progress towards increased reliance on renewable energy sources such as hydrothermal, nuclear, wind, and solar for electric power generation. Unfortunately, the United States is behind the pack. Bold implementation of a visionary plan, obviously, requires leadership and endurance to face short-term financial pains for survival and the greater good in the future.

Nobody disagrees that the transition from fossil fuels will be a Herculean task. We use about two-thirds of our fossil fuel production for transportation, and one-fourth in industrial applications, such as the production of plastics. How would we replace that? How would we handle the retraining and placement of millions of workers unemployed from shrinking oil, gas, and petrochemical industries, and their associated manufacturing and service sectors?

Finding solutions to these problems

will be formidable. But there are no alternatives. We will run out of fossil fuels; we will have to transition eventually whether we like it or not.

We can't wait for divine or extraterrestrial intervention to magically transform non-renewable hydrocarbon into a renewable resource. To save the planet, the transition must start now, with all hands on deck. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris won the 2020 US presidential election. President-elect Biden on January 20, 2021—the day of his inauguration—will rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement by an executive order. The main goal of this agreement is to lower the carbon emission by reducing the use of fossil fuels, which will slow down global warming.

A year of dark winter, unleashed by the US withdrawal notification on November 4, 2019, would be replaced by hope and optimism for the entire humanity with the US re-entering the Paris Climate Agreement.

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