

Drug trade continues unabated

The police must step up their efforts

LARGE volumes of yaba have been pouring into the country via Teknaf, and the anti-narcotics drive in that area is said to have lost its teeth since the death of Maj (ret'd) Sinha in police firing on July 31. Seizures of the pink pills declined by almost half in the months of August and September compared to that in the two months before the Sinha killing. According to a report in this daily, this slump is a combined result of police transfers—an entire batch of Cox's Bazar district police, including the superintendent of police, was replaced—and frustrations in the local police force for "taking the blame".

While the anonymous police officials who spoke to *The Daily Star* are right to point out that many members of other forces and agencies dealing with narcotics in Teknaf have also made financial gains from the illegal trade, it is not possible to brush aside the floodgate of allegations against the police force that have surfaced in the wake of the Sinha killing either. The frustrations felt by subordinate officers, while they may be genuine, seem like little cause for failing to do their duty—the volume of the drug trade is currently so high that yaba prices have dropped significantly, not just in Teknaf and surrounding areas, but in the capital as well.

It is of great concern when the local police, who have in the past been behind the seizures of large consignments of yaba in Cox's Bazar and Chattogram, fail to recover any drugs in August and September, when in the same period, Rab officials are able to discover and confiscate significant consignments of yaba in the same areas. In fact, the DS report detailed that no policemen were even seen at the four entry checkpoints in Chattogram city for around 20 days from August 1, and that no anti-drugs activities by police were noticed in Cox's Bazaar since August. What does this say about the sincerity of our police officials, and how will this indifferent attitude help to salvage the bad reputation that the police have earned after the extrajudicial killing of Sinha?

Our police force must remember that their responsibility is to serve the people of Bangladesh, not to serve their own interests. We urge them to not shun their responsibilities, since confiscating drugs at the point of entry are a crucial part of stopping this trade. At the same time, the government also must take a more holistic approach to the scourge of drugs in Bangladesh, and ensure that the trade of drugs, and the finance behind it, are cut off at the source.

NRCC should take the lead in saving our rivers

It should coordinate and monitor the actions taken by other agencies concerned

IT is most unfortunate that different powerful quarters, including politicians and lawmakers, have been continuously grabbing our rivers and waterbodies despite several directives given by the High Court and demand by environmentalists as well as the common people of the country to save them. Reportedly, a bridge was built on Dhaleshwari river in Savar recently which is harming the river, as huge sediments are accumulating on both sides of the riverbank because of road construction on both sides of the bridge. This has also created scope for land grabbing by unscrupulous people. On December 1, *The Daily Star* reported how a ruling party MP filled up more than 54 acres from the Buriganga river and wetland to construct a power plant and a private economic zone in Basila, creating obstacles to the water flow of the river, which is a clear violation of the Water Act. A probe led by the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) revealed these illegal activities. The commission's chairman also said recently that no structure can be set up on land along rivers and if anyone tries to harm the rivers, they will take strict action.

While it is reassuring to see the NRCC's determination in saving our rivers from powerful grabbers, the fact is that the commission alone cannot do it if other government agencies do not take responsibility and play their part. All the government agencies concerned, including the BIWTA and Bangladesh Water Development Board, should work together and the NRCC should take the lead role in coordinating and monitoring their work. The commission should not only make recommendations but should also have the power to take action against the grabbers. Moreover, they should demarcate all our rivers with help from other authorities concerned.

In 2009, the High Court gave a landmark verdict and put in details the measures that should be taken to recover our ailing rivers from land grabbers and save them from pollution. It gave directives to measure the river areas based on the Cadastral Survey (CS) record. In 2019, the High Court declared the National River Conservation Commission the legal guardian of all the rivers of the country and ordered the government to amend the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) law and incorporate stringent provisions for imprisonment and hefty fines for the offence of river grabbing and to effectively empower the NRCC. Sadly, we are yet to implement the court directives in this regard.

Nevertheless, we believe that with proper plans and policies in place and coordination from all the authorities concerned, the NRCC can, in fact, play the role of the guardian of our rivers and save them from grabbers and polluters.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

'People should judge our ability not disability'

Monsur Ahmed Chowdhury, *Founder Trustee, Impact Foundation Bangladesh, and Member, Executive Board, Disability Council International, talks to The Daily Star's Naznin Tithi about how to ensure an inclusive environment and society for persons with disabilities.*

What are the major challenges that persons with disabilities have to commonly face in our society? Have we made any progress over the years in ensuring their rights and entitlements?

Persons with disabilities still face serious discrimination in all spheres of their lives despite the fact that we have laws to protect their rights. The major challenges that they face can be broadly categorised as: lack of access to education, healthcare services and public transport and lack of opportunity for employment. Besides, there are many social challenges that they face.

In terms of ensuring the educational rights of the students with disabilities, the attitude of the school authorities is still not very positive. For instance, when students with disabilities want to take admission in a regular school, the school authorities do not really encourage them, rather they cite many problems to discourage them. Often, guardians of other students do not want their children to attend schools with students who have any disability.

Access to public transport is also a big challenge for persons with disabilities. There is very limited scope for, say, wheelchair users to travel comfortably by bus, train or water transport. Although a visually-impaired person can travel by a bus or train, the drivers and helpers are not well trained or conversant to deal with them.

The same thing happens when someone with a disability goes to a hospital to seek treatment. There is no separate counter or desk to attend to a disabled patient in most hospitals. It is still very difficult for a vision or hearing-impaired patient to communicate with the attending nurses or doctors.

However, there have been some developments in creating employment opportunities for people with disabilities. For example, Bangladesh Business and Disability Network (BBDN) under Bangladesh Employers Federation had arranged job fairs in Dhaka, Sylhet and Chittagong for people with disabilities before the pandemic. Many job seekers who attended the fairs got jobs in garments and other industries under the initiative. However, many of them already lost their jobs amid the pandemic. I think, we have to motivate the employers and those working in the HR departments of big companies to promote inclusion of physically and mentally challenged persons at workplaces.

We have many policy frameworks to ensure an inclusive environment for the persons with disabilities. Are these policies really helping them to get their



Monsur Ahmed Chowdhury.

rights ensured? What is the situation on the ground?

Yes, we have ample laws to ensure the rights of people with disabilities. Unfortunately, most of them remain on paper only. Bangladesh has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and also enacted Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013. But there is a serious lack of initiative for implementation of the Act. The Act has provisions for two national level committees—the coordination committee, which is headed by the social welfare minister and the executive committee, headed by the secretary of the ministry of social welfare. Under the Act, there are a large number of districts, upazilas as well as municipal committees. But due to a lack of budgetary allocation as well as a lack of manpower at the field level, most of these committees do not even meet once a year at the national or at the field level. The national committees are responsible for coordinating and monitoring different action plans and programmes concerning persons with disabilities of different ministries and government agencies. However, there are also exceptions. For instance, the government's ICT division has taken an initiative for training persons with disabilities on ICT as well as employing

them within their division through the Bangladesh Computer Council.

What should be our approach in ensuring that persons with disabilities are not left behind, which is the commitment of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030?

Apart from legal provisions, to ensure equal opportunities and rights for persons with disabilities, there must be strong commitment by the political leadership and policymakers. In addition, there must be adequate financial allocation in our national budget to enable every ministry or division to initiate inclusive programmes for them in the annual development plan. It may be mentioned here that a national action plan in this regard (in line with the spirit and principles of SDGs, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013) was approved by the government last year, which should now be implemented.

Can children with disabilities go to the same schools with other children?

Children with disabilities are legally allowed to attend the same school with the regular students at the primary, secondary, higher secondary and at the university level in Bangladesh. The problem is the attitude of the educational institutions—

whether they are ready to accept a disabled student. Furthermore, in some institutions, there may be problem of accessibility in terms of using the classroom or toilet. It may be mentioned here that because of the personal commitment of our prime minister, the visually impaired students in all classes, from pre-primary to class 9, are getting brail books from National Curriculum and Textbook Board every year, starting from 2017. However, there is very limited scope for education for hearing-impaired students or students with other disabilities at the secondary level. It is also highly appreciable that the government is supporting all students with disabilities from primary to the university level with a monthly stipend to partly support their educational expenses.

Would you please share with us how you have learned to live with the particular type of disability that you have?

I lost my sight at a very young age but learned to live with my disability as I got tremendous encouragement and support from my late parents, members of the family, teachers as well as my friends while I studied in Dhaka college from 1966 to 1968 and in Dhaka University from 1968 to 1974. It should be mentioned here that I have carried forward my activities with confidence, commitment and professionalism. I have been working to promote, protect and support persons with disabilities for more than four decades at home and at the international level. I faced challenges, barriers and sometimes rude and harsh attitude by people who failed to understand the difficulties that I went through. People should judge our ability, not disability.

Tell us about your experience of working with people with disabilities in the remote areas.

My experience in dealing with persons with disabilities in rural Bangladesh is very rewarding. They are very keen to live with dignity and self-respect. But it is most difficult to live a life with dignity if there is no support from the family and community. The ignorance, indifferent attitude, negative reaction from parents, social stigma, etc., are, in my consideration, the major barriers for a person with disability to develop with confidence. It is also sad to observe that sometimes family members deprive the disabled member of the family from their legal right of inheritance of property, assets, etc. Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable and deprived of their due share of property. This must change.

What JPG's Child Survival Revolution can teach us about dealing with Covid-19

SHARMIN AHMED

We seem to know more about the bad things and people in the world than we do the good. Perhaps there are too many bad things and people. But it is in times like this that it is all the more important to remember people like James P Grant (JPG) and his "child survival revolution (CSR)" that probably saved more lives than were destroyed by Hitler, Mao, and Stalin combined.

James P Grant as the executive director of Unicef from 1979 to 1995 almost single-handedly launched the child survival revolution promoting vaccinations and diarrhoea treatments across the world. The significance of his approach was not in any ground-breaking invention but in his leadership; in mobilising people, resources, and leaders and to bring about positive change in the world for children to survive. Here's how he did it and how we can apply them actionably in these times:

i) Synergy: Grant grasped early on that it was the synergy that came through a package of interventions that would allow children to survive. So CSR was the concept of GOBI which later became GOBI-FFF:

G for growth monitoring to detect undernutrition in small children.

O for oral rehydration therapy [ORT] to treat childhood diarrhoea.

B to encourage breastfeeding.

F for immunisation against the six basic childhood diseases; tuberculosis, polio, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, and measles.

And three Fs: food supplements, family planning and female education.

In this pandemic, the discovery of a vaccine alone will not solve the problem, the collective effort in promoting hygiene practices that ensures limited scope of transmission of diseases must take centre stage in the world. Teaching people how to wash their hands should be revisited and re-taught to people all over the world, preventing the spread of communicable

diseases by isolating when ill, social distancing in public spaces and wearing masks should become the focus for prevention not only during non-holiday seasons as done by advanced economies like UK, USA and many European nations.

ii) United under a common goal: Recognising that only supporting some countries would not produce the result needed, JPG drove the United Nations "World Summit for Children" held in the UN Headquarters in September 1990. It then had the largest-ever gathering of heads of state and government to commit to a set of goals to improve the well-being of children worldwide by the year 2000. It was the first time a UN conference had set a broad agenda for a wide range of goals in health, education, nutrition and human rights.

In recent times WHO director-general, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, "no one is safe until everyone is safe" is a similar call for united efforts which can work if we keep in mind it worked with CSR. So instead of Vaccine Nationalism going for or "vaccine multilateralism—protecting at-risk populations in all countries and keeping economies working" as the focus. A popular home-grown collaborative effort is Dr Younus' pledge declaring the "Covid-19 vaccine to be a common good" to ensure that it will be available once discovered, to everyone even those who cannot afford it.

iii) Credible Leadership: JPG utilised his position at the helm of a powerful institution to get other leaders and institution onboard the CSR, he worked with dictators and rebel leaders. Unicef, at the time having won the Nobel Peace Prize, was uncomfortable to collaborate with corrupt and insensitive regimes to promote immunisation of children. One of his colleague Peter Adamson wrote, "we worried about the lending of UNICEF's good name to corrupt and inhuman regimes. But Jim's answer was always the same. 'We don't like the President, so the kids don't get immunised?' 'You want

to wait to launch the campaign until all governments are respectable?"

The UN and all other world leaders; people and institutions, are failing this test of leadership putting themselves first and picking sides from like-minded or allied leaders in the midst of pandemic is only creating division and confusion among the masses. In 1975 WHO and Unicef agreed on the procurement and distribution of ORS regardless of patent age. A combined effort would make for a better campaign.

iv) Finding new ways to work together: JPG convinced rebels, religious leaders in El Salvador to halt civil war; agreeing to "Days of Tranquillity" so that children could get their immunisation vaccines, adopted later by Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Congo. He convinced countries to put their money and skin in the game, through "Corridors of Peace", facilitating humanitarian supplies to reach war ravaged Iraq, Uganda and Sudan. Better still, he convinced Islamic leaders in Egypt to recommend and commit to promoting education of girls.

The world today is divided and there are many reasons today multi-lateral organisations like the UN and even collaborative nations like the EU to become protectionist and selfish. Multi-laterals must not shy away from engaging because of conflicting values and reluctance but insist on bringing conflicting nations together. If institutions using these types of methods can work with conflicting nations to ensure that solutions to the pandemic is provided apolitically, then we can make a lot of progress, especially given the multiple ways going on in the world at the moment.

v) Social Mobilisation: To bring change at a population level it is necessary to get everyone involved. Everywhere he went, JPG called for "social mobilisation" enlisting every possible outreach resource in society—the teachers, religious leaders, the media, the business community, the army, the police force, the NGOs,

the youth movements, the women's organisations and the community groups.

Healthcare systems that need immediate attention with not just regulatory policies, but funds resources and commitments must have these social supports. Both the public and private healthcare system must be revamped to work towards preventive measures that can be adopted by people so that they do not have to heavily rely on limited hospitals and medicines for survival.

vi) Consistent-efforts: JPG was always ready to pitch for the CSR, he carried with him a sachet of iodine salt or saline whichever one was needed to be discussed and he never shied away from creating a platform to pitch his ideas backing them with hard facts.

We must all consistently promote and demonstrate preventive measures such as hand washing and wearing of masks and keeping our environment clean. Political propaganda cannot deter scientific facts and that is what we should continue to promote. Many economies are opening up; they are trying to "go back" to normal but we need to move forward and not backward.

vii) Time bound specific action: JPG in 1994 called for a major global push to achieve 80 percent oral rehydration therapy (ORT) use rates against diarrhoea by the end of 1995. He was not willing to wait and he was not willing to take no for an answer, by means of a collaborative, focused effort to make sure low-cost techniques like immunisation and ORT was available to almost every child in every developing country.

We have long discussed the arrival of the 4th Industrial Revolution, that of the Internet of Things (IoT), but adoption of modern technology has not happened at the same pace and many economies have been left out. In the times of Covid, we must ensure the use of technology involving everyone.

Sharmin Ahmed is consultant at IFC.