

PM takes strong stance against religious fanaticism

We hope the rest of the government will follow suit

WE applaud the prime minister's strong warning against religious fanatics in her Victory Day speech, in which she said the government would not allow anyone to create divisions and anarchy in the country over religion. She reiterated the convictions of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his commitment to communal harmony and a progressive and secular country that is free of hunger and poverty, reminding us all that we cannot allow certain quarters to use religion as a tool of politics.

This statement is all the more welcome because of its timing—it was less than three weeks ago that Hefazat chief Babunagari threatened to tear down sculptures all across the country and organised protests demanding that the government scrap plans for installing a sculpture of Bangabandhu in the capital. Since Babunagari's threats were made, an under-construction sculpture of Bangabandhu in Kushtia town was defaced, a bust of Liberation War martyr Madhusudan De at the University of Dhaka was damaged, and three idols were vandalised at a temple in Pabna. Under these circumstances, it is worrying that the home minister took such a conciliatory tone in subsequent talks with the leaders of these religious groups and that several top ministers of the government went out of their way to draw distinctions between sculptures and idols. If we are asking religious groups to not take offence at sculptures because they are not idols, does this not imply that there is something offensive about idols, which are important religious symbols to other faith communities, and also implicitly condone their destruction?

As the prime minister said so succinctly in her speech, everyone has the right to perform their own religious rituals, and if we allow the non-communal spirit of the Liberation War to fade away, we will be forgetting the debt of blood of the millions of martyrs. There would be no greater dishonour to our country, our martyrs and freedom fighters, and to the father of our nation. Bangladesh has come a long way in achieving its dream of becoming a self-reliant, prosperous and progressive nation. We hope everyone in government and every citizen of this country will play their part in taking this dream even further.

Protect indigenous people's land rights

Give them stewardship of the land they live on

IT is shocking to see how vulnerable the indigenous people of the hills and plainlands are to the greed of powerful business entities and politicians who regularly grab their ancestral land in the name of development and tourism. The most recent example of this is the decision to construct a five-star hotel and tourist spot in the Chimbuk area of Bandarban. If this hotel is built by encroaching around 800-1000 acres of land, six Mro villages will be destroyed which will leave around 10,000 farmers landless and unemployed. And not only in the hills, indigenous people of the plainlands also face similar threats of being evicted from their ancestral land. While the Modhupur Eco Park and Reserve limits the access of Garo, Koch and Barman ethnic groups to the lands they have traditionally used, the Barapukuria Coal Mine in Dinajpur affects the Santal and Munda. And the Sajek Tourism Complex in Baghaichari of Rangamati affects the Tripura, Lushai and Pankhua people.

Although such development projects forcefully drive away the indigenous people from their lands, no steps are visible from the state to protect their land rights. The government made a commitment to form a land commission for the indigenous people of the plainlands in 2008, but it has not been formed yet. Sadly, our constitution does not even protect the land rights of the indigenous people while it talks about protecting their culture and tradition. How will the state protect indigenous people's culture and tradition if it cannot protect their land rights as well as other basic rights? Speakers at a recent virtual seminar have recommended that in order to protect their land rights, indigenous people should be granted stewardship of the land they live on. The concept of stewardship is different from that of ownership. Stewardship means people will collectively take responsibility for the maintenance of the land and its biodiversity. Also, if people become custodians of the land that they have taken care of all the time, there will be no need to take it into state ownership, as people themselves will protect it. This will ensure that these indigenous communities can survive while the forests and other natural resources are safeguarded.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Address the plight of medical students

The education sector has been struggling to cope with the reality caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the educational institutions formulated plans for alternative evaluation of student performance through online platforms. However, the medical students have been caught up in a dilemma. Their examinations have been halted in the fear of students getting infected. However, no alternative mechanism has been developed to evaluate the students and start the classes of the next phase. So students are now staring into an uncertain future plagued by session jam. If this continues, the health sector will suffer due to a lack of skilled doctors. The relevant authorities should schedule the exams amidst the pandemic or chalk out a process which will benefit everyone.

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A CLOSER LOOK

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WITH the grim reaper back for the second wave of Covid-19, people around the world are desperately looking for a shield. Globally, there are various vaccine candidates—in various trial phases—making fast progress to win the battle against the virus. And then there are the governments that are trying to secure the best deals for vaccines to protect their people from the havoc wreaked by the ongoing global health emergency.

Bangladesh is also not behind in the race to secure a vaccine for its population of 164 million. According to DGHS sources, the country will receive 68 million doses of vaccine—for at least 20 percent of its population (34 million)—from Gavi under the COVAX Facility by 2021. In addition, in November, the country signed a tripartite agreement with the Serum Institute of India and Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd to get Covid-19 vaccines being developed by Oxford-AstraZeneca.

According to media reports, the country will procure 30 million vaccine doses from Serum in the first six months of Phase I, in batches of 5 million doses every month. Given that two doses will be required to immunise an individual, this delivery will enable immunisation of 15 million people. There, however, remain uncertainties regarding the cost of the Serum vaccine and the immunisation strategy.

First of all, during the signing of the agreement, it was said that Bangladesh will pay a price for the vaccine that is similar to what India will pay for. It has been recently reported that Bangladesh will be paying USD 30 million, or Tk 260 crore, more for the vaccine doses from Serum. To make the doses affordable for people in the low- and middle-income countries, AstraZeneca had in November sealed the price of the vaccine at USD 3. This was reported by AFP quoting Olivier Nataf, president of AstraZeneca France. Times of India and other Indian and international media outlets also confirmed that Serum's ceiling price is USD 3 for the 92 low- and middle-income countries where it will be supplying the vaccine. This will be done in partnership with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

However, it has been reported in local media that Bangladesh will be paying USD 4—USD 1 to Beximco Pharma as the carrying cost of the vaccine. New Age, a local daily, reported in detail on this in a report titled, "Bangladesh to pay Tk 260cr extra to buy Covid-19 vaccine from India", published on November 2, 2020. In response to queries regarding the USD 1 additional payment as a carrying cost, in a written statement, Rabbur Reza, Chief Operating Officer, Beximco Pharma,

mentioned, "The agreed price for supply to Government of Bangladesh is USD 4.0 per dose for Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine AZD1222. In case Serum supplies this vaccine to the Government of India at a lower price (less than USD 4.0 per dose), Serum shall match the same price for the supply to Government of Bangladesh. In summary, Serum's supply price for this vaccine will be the same for both the Indian and Bangladesh governments."

This, however, raises certain questions: why are we paying a USD 1 carrying cost for a USD 3 vaccine dose, that too for one that does not require the ultra-cold storage facility? And from a country that is right next door? We need to assess what other countries in similar geographical proximity with India are paying for carrying these vaccine doses and how much Bangladesh usually pays as the carrying cost of other vaccine doses. We need to study these factors and make the details clear to the public, because it

weeks or months.

A report published by this daily in November quoting "officials of the health directorate" suggested that from the vaccine doses to be received from Gavi, frontline healthcare workers are likely to be vaccinated first, followed by "frontline professionals such as members of law enforcement agencies and journalists, and people aged above 60 with comorbidity" in the second phase.

Another news outlet recently reported that a draft list prepared by the Covid-19 Vaccine Management Taskforce had identified ten groups and professionals who would be eligible to receive the first shots from the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine doses if approved by the government. The list was supposed to have been handed over to the Health Minister on December 13. This draft list includes private healthcare workers, government-sector healthcare workers, Bangladesh army frontline personnel,

conflicting information about Covid-19 immunisation making the rounds in media, there seems to be a lack of clarity in the immunisation strategy itself. All the government agencies involved in the Covid-19 immunisation programme need to come together and design a common, single plan of action detailing all the specifics—including names of individuals, along with their NID numbers (to avoid confusion), who would receive the vaccine shots first—in order to be able to fast-track effective immunisation. This is essential given that the country already had to face multiple challenges in distributing PPEs during the onset of the pandemic.

Once brought to Bangladesh, the vaccines would need adequate storage facilities. While the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine would not need 70-degree ultra-cold storage facilities, it would need the +2 to +8 degrees storage mechanism nonetheless. It is not clear if the country's existing vaccine storage facilities can support storing the vaccines that will arrive from both Gavi and Serum. According to Mushtaq Hussain, the government would need additional storage facilities for the vaccines, even if 2 or 3 percent of the total vaccines required are brought in at a time.

To cut it short, Bangladesh has a tough challenge ahead: designing a watertight Covid-19 immunisation plan and its effective implementation. It remains unclear exactly what the government plans to do with the vaccine doses when they arrive in the country. What we are learning from various news reports and comments of high-ups are bits and pieces of information that do not give a clear picture of our Covid-19 immunisation strategy. This certainly does not help public confidence.

The multiple questions regarding the procurement, planning and implementation of immunisation should be addressed by the government immediately. The people need to know why they are paying an extra dollar per vaccine dose from Serum, or when they would get the chance to get vaccinated. Given the country's history of struggles with corruption, the possibility of favouritism and nepotism in the administration of vaccine doses cannot be ruled out. Therefore, to enforce transparency, the government needs to prepare a foolproof end-to-end Covid-19 immunisation plan (starting from receipt of vaccine doses to their administration) and share the details with the public, especially since the vaccines are expected to arrive in the next couple of months. How many months the country would take to immunise the entire population also remains uncertain. We can only hope that the government and the concerned authorities will take coordinated steps and make it a point to be transparent in how they plan to handle the complex task of mass Covid-19 immunisation for the greater interest of the nation.

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Bangladesh signed a tripartite agreement with the Serum Institute of India and Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd under which it will procure 30 million vaccine doses being developed by Oxford-AstraZeneca.

PHOTO: AFP

is ultimately the public's money that is being used to pay for the vaccines.

And then there is the issue of preparedness for the immunisation programme. "We have prepared a draft Macro and Micro Plan for Covid-19 immunisation. The plan has been prepared by a joint cell under the Ministry of Health. The draft has been sent to PMO and WHO for review," said Mushtaq Hussain, adviser to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), who is also a former chief scientific officer of the institute. The said draft has been prepared by the Health Ministry Core Committee consisting of a technical advisory group, IEDCR, and other relevant stakeholder groups.

However, there have been many reports in the media quoting various relevant officials and authorities, circulating various information about how the vaccines will be administered: who will get them first, and in how many

police personnel, health management workers, public representatives—including MPs and chairpersons and members of upazila and union parishads—journalists and ministry officials, DCs and civil surgeons, among other groups. The list, however, does not mention names or details.

While it is evident from various news reports and also conversations with Mushtaq Hussain and Health Services Division Secretary Abdul Mannan that people working on the front lines will get the vaccines first, who would fall next in the category of vaccine recipients remain undefined. According to Mushtaq Hussain, people aged 60 and above, irrespective of where they reside, would get priority for vaccines. Abdul Mannan, however, suggested that immunisation would have a more city-centric approach in the initial phase because "coronavirus has not spread as rapidly in the rural areas."

With such confusing, often

Where is the \$100 billion to tackle climate change?



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

ON December 12, 2020, it was the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) of the United

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the occasion was marked by a Climate Ambition Summit hosted by Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom, who serves as the presidency of COP26 taking place in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021.

The leaders who were invited to speak at the summit had to present their new pledges for reducing greenhouse gas emissions which the Paris Agreement required to be submitted in the form of revised Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) by all countries by December 31, 2020. Many global leaders did indeed present their enhanced ambition plans for reducing emissions by taking mitigation actions, and the global temperature that will result is now closer to 2 degrees Centigrade rather than 3 degrees, which was where we were previously headed. This is a move in the right direction but still not enough as we want the goal to be 1.5 degrees Centigrade.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was invited to speak at the virtual summit representing both Bangladesh and the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which she now chairs, and she reiterated the actions that the vulnerable countries will be taking to reduce their own emissions of greenhouse gases even though we are but small emitters. Nevertheless, we are also taking actions and demanding that all countries make their NDC submissions by December 31.

However, while the emphasis of the summit and the pledges made were, quite rightly, on the need to enhance ambition to reduce emissions through mitigation, there is also another part of the Paris Agreement pledge which is supposed to be delivered by December 31—namely, the provision of raising USD 100 billion per year from 2020 onwards to help the developing countries tackle climate change through mitigation and

importance for the vulnerable developing countries like Bangladesh: the proportion of the total amount being allocated to support adaptation in the most vulnerable developing countries and how that money is channelled. So far, the UN's analysis shows that only 20 percent of the global funds are going towards adaptation, while 80 percent are going towards mitigation activities in the bigger developing countries.



The Climate Ambition Summit was held online on December 12, 2020.

PHOTO: IISD

adaptation. This particular pledge seems to be falling behind, and does not look like it will be reached by December 31.

In his speech, António Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations, called on all countries to declare a Climate Emergency, which Bangladesh has already done, and also called on the pledges for climate finance to support vulnerable developing countries to be delivered by the developed countries. The UN's own analysis has only been able to track less than USD 80 billion being promised by the end of 2020.

There is another issue, besides that of the USD 100 billion, which is of great

I would, therefore, like to pose some questions for the developed countries to address when they declare their pledges for their contribution towards that global goal of USD 100 billion going forward.

The first question is, how much of their own allocation is directed to adaptation and how much to mitigation? The demand from the developing countries is that the proportion should be 50/50.

The second question: how much of their contribution is being made as loans and how much as grants? The fact is, while mitigation actions can indeed generate a return by which loans

can be repaid, that is not true for most adaptation projects. Hence, funding for adaptation through loans is not just morally wrong but also impractical. Unfortunately, a recent analysis by Oxfam has shown a large proportion of loans being counted by the developed countries in their climate finance support.

The third question is, through which channels are the developed countries making their climate finance contributions? From our perspective, we prefer the acknowledged climate change funds created under the UNFCCC, such as the Adaptation Fund (AF), the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF), the Green Climate Fund (GCF), or the Global Environment Facility (GEF). Channeling funds through the developed countries' own development assistance agencies, such as USAID in US, FCDO in UK and others, is problematic as it mixes Official Development Assistance (ODA) with climate finance and ends up double-counting each dollar, euro or pound given as both ODA and climate finance—which should not be the case.

The fourth and final question is, how much of their allocation on adaptation is going to the most vulnerable developing countries, and how much of that is reaching the most vulnerable communities in those countries to support locally led adaptation initiatives?

Unfortunately, the studies done so far found it very difficult to trace this number and has only been able to find that less than 20 percent of the adaptation funding actually reached the most vulnerable communities in the developing countries.

Hence the demand for greater transparency of how much is being allocated for adaptation, through which channels, to which developing countries, and indeed most importantly, how much is aimed at locally led adaptation.

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