

HC's directives on expired drugs

A poor reflection on the capacity of health officials

THE High Court has rightly expressed concerns about the lack of oversight that emboldens pharmacies to sell expired drugs to unsuspecting patients. The High Court's observation was occasioned by a writ petition that cited reports, including one by *The Daily Star*, which revealed how widespread the practice of storing and selling expired medicines has become. And it's disturbing: according to the reports, the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP) found expired medicines in 93 percent of the pharmacies in Dhaka where it had conducted drives over the last six months. The disclosure is a sad commentary on the state of affairs in our health sector but what we find equally noteworthy is the fact that the High Court had to intervene in matters that should have been addressed—and resolved—through the regular channel. It reflects poorly on the capacity and even willingness of health officials to check irregularities as glaring and dangerous as the selling of date-expired drugs, which can have profound health risks.

We wonder why the health ministry failed to act of its own volition. The High Court's intervention, while reassuring from a citizen's perspective, is but a reflection of the failure of the administration to perform its duty. The health ministry should make it part of its oversight mechanism to regularly check the quality of medicines, and take legal action against the sellers and suppliers of expired or substandard medicines. This is an important public health issue and needs to be treated as such. As the High Court has directed, the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA), Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and the DNCRP should remain vigilant at all times against such practices. They must make it a priority to confiscate all expired drugs in the country and identify and bring to justice those benefiting from this heinous practice.

Maternal deaths from preventable conditions unacceptable

Make lifesaving drugs available at every govt. health complex

THAT 13 percent of all deaths of females aged between 15 and 49 occur due to childbirth-related complications, as found in a recent study, is shocking. The study by NIPORT also identified the two most common causes of maternal deaths: haemorrhage and eclampsia, which account for 55 percent of all maternal deaths. Such a high rate of maternal deaths from these two conditions is unacceptable, because these conditions can be treated with two simple injections: magnesium sulphate and ergometrine or oxytocin. Although these two injections should be provided by the authorities, sadly, 72 percent of government healthcare centres have no supply of these two vital injections, betraying the fact that maternal health remains neglected.

Meanwhile, the rate of unnecessary C-sections has also gone up, putting the lives of both the mothers and their babies at risk. Save the Children recently revealed that 77 percent of C-sections carried out across the country last year were medically unnecessary. Currently, the rate of C-section is more than 31 percent in the country which is way above the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommended range of 10-15 percent.

We feel that the issue of maternal health is not getting enough importance at the policy level. Otherwise, why can't the administration ensure the availability of two lifesaving drugs at every upazila hospital? The government needs to formulate proper guidelines to reduce the number of unnecessary C-sections. It should invest in training more skilled midwives who can deal with common maternal health-related issues and also support natural childbirth. The bottom line is that the administration must do everything in its capacity to reduce the maternal mortality rate in the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Saving the Sundarbans

From a report published in this newspaper on June 15, we learned that the World Heritage Centre of Unesco has decided to include the Sundarbans on the list of World Heritage in Danger. This decision was taken as the concerned authorities were worried about the mangrove forest—near which development projects including the much-talked-about Rampal power plant are being built.

When people learned about the government's plan, they protested in many ways: they staged sit-ins and arranged long marches calling for a halt to the construction of the power plant as they believe it would destroy the world's largest mangrove forest. But many of the protesters were harassed; they were charged with batons and tear gas and shells, which is a pity.

Although the government believes that such a construction project would not harm the biodiversity of the forest, Unesco and environmental groups believe otherwise. According to environmental impact assessments, the plant would require almost 13,000 tonnes of coal a day and would release an estimated 7.9 million tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year—which will severely damage the ecosystem. The mangrove forest is essential for protection from cyclones and other natural calamities. So, considering all this and more, the government must seriously think about alternative ways of implementing this project without bringing any harm to our treasured mangrove forest.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram



TASNEEM TAYEB

REFUGEE. Although the word is relatively new, appearing in the English language for the first time circa late 17th century, its story is as old as time itself. It is a story written large on page after page of human history—a dominant, ever-present leitmotif of our pre-history, a force that has fundamentally dictated our evolution as a species.

Today, in a world that is inhabited by considerably more souls and, therefore, able to offer considerably less space, this word is too often followed by another: crisis.

According to UNHCR's 2008 Global Trends report, the number of forcibly displaced people around the world in 2008 was 42 million, of whom 15.2 million were refugees. The number increased to 68.5 million in 2017, of whom nearly 25.4 million were refugees, more than half of whom were under the age of 18, according to the UNHCR 2017 Global Trends report. This means that over a span of nearly 10 years between 2008 and 2017, 10.2 million people had to flee their homeland because of war, violence, or, as we saw in the case of the Rohingyas, persecution.

Most of these refugees who were forced to escape oppressive regimes, failed states, economic collapses, and natural disasters seek shelter in neighbouring countries—mostly other low-income countries—creating immeasurable humanitarian, economic, political and social pressure on the host countries. According to data released by UNHCR in 2017, it is the developing regions that host 84 percent of the world's refugees.

Bangladesh too is facing many challenges in hosting over a million Rohingya refugees. More than half these refugees—around 723,000 according to UNHCR—fled to Bangladesh since August 2017 alone. They were lucky to escape persecution at the hands of the Myanmar military, since escalation of another bout of ethnic violence in August 2017. Although Bangladesh played an exemplary role in hosting such a large displaced population, the latter's protracted stay in the country and the looming uncertainty about their resettlement are adding further pressure on the country's economy. According to an UNHCR official, as of March 2019, Bangladesh has received only 14 percent of the USD 920 million, appealed through the third Joint Response Plan (JRP), needed to address the Rohingya crisis.

In addition to economic, social and political challenges, Bangladesh is facing major environmental threats as a result of hosting Rohingya refugees. According to a UNDP report, almost 4,300 acres of hills and forests were levelled in Ukhiya and Teknaf alone, to make room for temporary accommodation and for cooking fuel for the Rohingyas. Leaving

aside the threat this poses to the area's ecological balance, such indiscriminate deforestation and exfoliation also exponentially increase the risk of landslides, making the refugees more vulnerable to large-scale disasters.

According to a Reuters report, Colombian President Ivan Duque Marquez said in September 2018 that Venezuelan refugees cost his country nearly 0.5 percent of its gross domestic product per year. Colombia, which shares a 2,219km border with Venezuela, is one of the largest recipients of the three million Venezuelans who have fled their country in recent years in the wake of an economic collapse and escalation of political violence.

Turkey, hosting nearly four million refugees as of August 2018, has already spent USD 33 billion for Syrian refugees. The sheer scale of the migration of

report, between July 2018 and June 2019, at least 10,000 have been forcibly returned to Libya by Italy, while another 1,151, including children, died on the seas.

Macedonia has closed its borders to refugees from Afghanistan and is only allowing Syrian and Iraqi asylum-seekers to enter its territory. The country had in the past completely sealed off its border with Greece to bar displaced communities from crossing over to other Balkan countries through its territory.

Other European countries are facing immense pressure from their own citizens to limit the influx. For instance, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's government had to face people's wrath for its accommodative asylum and refugee policies. The results of the "Deutschlandtrend" poll conducted last year, commissioned by German broadcaster ARD, showed that 80 percent

refugees to flee their homelands. They do not answer the problems of exploitative regimes, terrorism, war, and economic collapse.

People living in stable, developed economies hardly ever seek refuge elsewhere. Looking at the 2017 demography of refugees, we can see that among the top five countries contributing to refugee crises are Syrian Arab Republic (6.3m), Afghanistan (2.6m), South Sudan (2.4m), Myanmar (1.2m) and Somalia (0.9m)—all low-income countries characterised by exploitative institutions and violence.

The Global Compact on Refugees, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 17, 2018, focuses on (among other things) the need to "support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity" of the refugees.



Rohingya refugee children fly improvised kites at the Kutupalong refugee camp near Cox's Bazar.

PHOTO: REUTERS/DAMIR SAGOLJ

refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries is adding more pressure to the already stressed economy of Turkey, which shoulders a big chunk of the expenditure on refugees. As a result, the country has had to impose more stringent border control measures. In 2018 alone, more than 430,000 refugees were prevented from entering the country, according to a report published by Xinhuanet.

Turkey, however, is not the only country to have tightened its policies. Some European countries have imposed arbitrary border control measures—often leaving refugees stranded on the seas or under the open sky to fend for themselves without recourse or resource.

Italy, for instance, closed its ports to refugees last year, turning away thousands. According to a Doctors Without Borders

of the German population responded by saying that they were "somewhat" or "completely" dissatisfied with the performance of the government. Amidst increasing pressure, the German chancellor had to tighten border control measures. Merkel's popularity also took a dive due to internal tensions simmering over asylum and refugee issues.

While international bodies like UNHCR, Oxfam International, WarChild International, along with many developed countries, donor agencies, and international NGOs scramble desperately to provide the humanitarian support that the refugees so badly need, the global community must ask itself: is enough being done?

Humanitarian aid, logistical support and funds to shelter the refugees are essentially stopgap measures which do not address the root causes that push

According to a UNHCR report titled "From Commitment to Action: Highlights of Progress Towards Comprehensive Refugee Responses Since the Adoption of the New York Declaration," "there have been some promising developments that hold the promise of future success in this area [Objective Four: Supporting conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity]," which includes supporting conditions in Somalia so that the Somalis can go back to their own land and reiteration of determination to address root causes of refugee situations.

Tenuous progress, but we must take our wins where we can.

Tasneem Tayeb works for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is @TayebTasneem.

How to measure progress in e-governance



ROHAN SAMARAJIVA

IT is customary to assess aspects of the performance of a country using composite indices such as the Ease of Doing Business Index or the Network Readiness Index. For government

services, the indicator of choice is the e-Government Development Index (EGDI), published every two years by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Partly because of the complexity of the methodology, whereby the weights for different elements change with every iteration, and partly because some governments have begun to game the system, the rankings fluctuate significantly. Nepal, which ranked 150th in 2008, fell as far back as to the 165th spot by 2014. It came in at 117th in the most recent ranking of 2018. Bangladesh's worst performance was in 2012 (150th). Its best performance was in the most recent ranking (115th).

Sri Lanka is still the leader in the region, but barely. After a significant advance in 2014, it is now just two spots ahead of India. Bangladesh has been improving since 2014, advancing 27 spots in 10 years. However, Nepal, which was eight places behind Bangladesh in 2008, was only two spots behind in 2018.

Absolute scores can increase, but ranks can go down. Ranks can increase, but another country can still overtake because it is doing even better.

Many countries such as those in the comparison set above are primarily focused on making government accessible

to citizens on the web. There seems to be a simpler way of assessing the efficacy of these efforts. How many Internet users in a country access government websites?

According to a recent nationwide sample survey by LIRNEasia of the populations in the 15-65 age group in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, 30-31 percent of all Internet users in India and Sri Lanka access government information online, the highest percentage among

perspective is why Bangladeshis, who have the means and the ability because they already are Internet users, still do not access government information online. Among those who do not access government websites, 71 percent say they do not know how to. Sixteen percent say they know how to access websites, but do not know where to go. The remainder, 13 percent, say they know how to access the information but see no value in it.

Almost one in 12 not knowing where



SOURCE: WWW.ROMANIA-INSIDER.COM

the six countries. In the low-performing countries as indicated by the UN index, 10-13 percent of Internet users access government information online, except for the anomalous case of Pakistan where 26 percent of Internet users claim to have accessed government information. Except for the Pakistan anomaly, the simple indicator and the complex one tell the same tale.

What is interesting from a policy

to go is quite puzzling because of the existence of the government information portal, www.bangladesh.gov.bd. Convincing the 13 percent that there is real value in government information provided online should not be too difficult. The effort could actually yield larger benefits in terms of improving the quality and usability of the thousands of services currently offered by the government. Reducing the percentage

that says they do not know how to access government information is challenging, especially because they already know how to use the Internet.

In contrast, only 42 percent of Sri Lankan Internet users who do not access government services online say they do not know how to. Among the non-users, 30 percent know how, but see no value. Almost the same percentage, 28 percent, have trouble locating government information online. Sri Lanka does not have a government portal like Bangladesh. With some kind of aggregator or portal, that number may be reduced. As in Bangladesh, enhancing the value of online services and convincing the non-users can yield broad benefits.

Most users appear to be in the first stage of e-governance. Very clearly, Bangladesh and its peers have much to do in the e-governance space. Surveys such as those conducted by LIRNEasia provide actionable insights on what to do to increase the number of citizens benefiting from e-government services. This is a much more productive way to improve performance in the e-Government Development Index than the appointment of committees to game the process.

The UN index is available online at <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2018>. The LIRNEasia findings can be accessed at <https://lirneasia.net/2019/05/afteraccess-ict-access-and-use-in-sri-lanka-and-the-global-south-presentation/>.

Professor Rohan Samarajiva is chair of the ICT Agency, the apex body for ICT within the government of Sri Lanka, and founding chair of LIRNEasia, a think tank active across emerging economies in South and South East Asia. He served as director general of the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka.