

Free Covid-19 vaccines for first three crore recipients

Ensure strict monitoring in allocation and distribution

IT is a highly welfare-oriented and beneficial move by the government to provide the first three crore doses of Covid-19 vaccine free of cost. The issue has been in the works for some time and it was in early November that the government signed a trilateral MOU for procuring three crore doses. The government should be complimented for this decision. However, in this regard, we would like to put forward a few suggestions for the government’s consideration.

The vaccine should pass all necessary tests for administration on humans. And the timing of procurement is of the essence since we are in the throes of a second wave of the pandemic with the total number of affected people rising every day. We would hope that the trials would overcome the snags being encountered now. We would also like to recall the assurances of the administration that everyone in Bangladesh would be provided with the vaccine free once it is made available. We are sure that the government would push the prime minister’s call to the international community that countries like Bangladeshi should be given the vaccine free of cost. We recall the Health Services Division secretary’s comment in July that Bangladesh would be among the first to get any Covid-19 vaccine developed in any country across the world, and that countries with a per capita income of less than 4,000 dollars would get the vaccine free of cost. Bangladesh falls in that category.

What is also important is to immediately prepare the priority list of people who should be vaccinated against the virus. We shall leave it to the administration to determine who those will be, but would hope that the vulnerability factor would predominate all other considerations. It is also important to exercise honest and strict monitoring. Given our experience of misuse, pilferage and stealing of government grants of cash and kind even during the pandemic, we cannot but be wary of such dishonest conduct being replicated in the future, in case of vaccine distribution. Not only should the list of free recipients be doubly verified, the task of distributing and administering the vaccine should also be entrusted with agencies in which the public have faith.

World AIDS Day reminds us that the virus is still here

Preventive measures, treatment and education must go on simultaneously

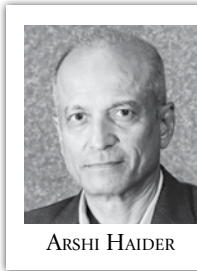
THE World AIDS Day, observed on December 1, is a reminder to all countries that we must not forget about this infectious disease even when we are desperately fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, the pandemic has actually worsened the plight of HIV positive patients who are more vulnerable to Covid-19 and also have had to face disruptions in their regular medication, which can have devastating consequences. While the infection rate in Bangladesh is much lower than that of many other countries, thanks to timely interventions by the government and NGOs, there are still around 13,000 HIV patients living in the country, according to national and international organisations. Of the total number, 6,606 have so far been brought under treatment. Last October, according to the National AIDS/STD Control Programme (NASP) data, the total number of HIV cases was 7,374; out of them, 1,242 people died.

These numbers are not insignificant and the pandemic has made HIV positive individuals even more vulnerable. A report in this paper has revealed the plight of sex workers who are HIV positive, who have not been able to get their medicine from government clinics that offer it for free. Sex workers are a high-risk group to contract HIV which may later develop into AIDS if left untreated. Their clients, too, are in the at-risk group which may extend to their wives/partners and future children. Drug users who share needles are also another at-risk group. Thus the possibility of the spread of the disease is always there.

It is commendable that the government has, through the Department of Health, been providing free medicine to AIDS patients since 2012 and conducting social healthcare activities to prevent AIDS. The ARV drugs are free and distributed at six major hospitals around the country, including Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) and Infectious Diseases Hospitals (IDH) in Dhaka. In addition, there are drop-in centres (DIC) that do HIV screenings, methadone and Antiretroviral (ARV) distribution as well as provide education on prevention and treatment of the disease. During the pandemic, however, many of these DICs have been temporarily closed, depriving HIV positive individuals of these vital services. Hopefully, those will be reopened soon.

While uninterrupted drug distribution and other services are essential, creating widespread awareness among the public about AIDS is also crucial. This includes letting people, especially young people, know how they can prevent getting infected as well as efforts to sensitise our society to treat HIV positive individuals with compassion and dignity and not with derision and hate. The government and all sections of society should work together to disseminate information on AIDS and help to treat and rehabilitate those who are HIV positive. We may be among the lucky nations to have lower numbers of HIV positive cases but we must never become complacent about it and keep on working towards attaining a zero number of new cases.

Making sense of the proposed new building rules



ARSHI HAIDER

THE new Dhaka Structural Plan (DSP) has been proposed with a vision of “making Dhaka a liveable, functional and resilient metropolis respecting local socio-cultural fabric and environmental sustainability.”

Very nice! But the question is, how are we going to achieve this and what are the ramifications of the proposed strategy?

One may recall that Rajuk took up the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) project in 2004 and completed it in 2010. The primary objective of DAP was to implement zoning rules within the Rajuk area. The biggest failure of the existing DAP has been in its enforcement. There have been rampant violations of the zoning laws and Rajuk has been a silent spectator of this debacle. The fact is, Rajuk does not have the manpower or the infrastructure or the political clout to enforce rules.

The proposed building rules aim to reduce the built-up density of Dhaka. The Dhaka Metropolitan Region has a density of 245 people per hectare, which is indeed high. However, Cairo

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has a population density of 320 people per hectare and Mumbai has about the same too. The point is, it is unrealistic to compare our population density with that of cities such as New York or London. Dhaka is the metropolis of a country whose economy is growing at more than 8 percent per annum. This means there is a huge migration of people from all over the country to Dhaka. I agree that the quality of life in Dhaka leaves much to be

about the maximum ground coverage. If the proposed height restriction is implemented with the existing ground coverage rules, the interest of inhabitants in the city may be seriously jeopardised.

Apart from devaluing the most valuable asset of so many citizens, the vagary of the new rules puts the entire real estate development industry into a tailspin. What if we sign a new deal based on the present allowable built-up area



Our authorities need to focus on the real reasons why our city is gradually becoming uninhabitable. FILE PHOTO: DS

desired, but I do not agree with the knee-jerk proposal presently on the table which aims to make Dhaka more liveable by changing the building construction rules.

From the newspaper reports we gather that there will be new height restrictions on the buildings being constructed in the city’s central area. Building heights will be limited from 4 to 7 stories depending on the area. In 2008, we adopted the “Floor Area Ratio” (FAR) concept for determining the built-up area and thus the height of the building. FAR is the most commonly used metric by town planners everywhere for controlling the built-up area. Therefore, if the authorities wish to reduce the built-up area density of the city, all they have to do is to change the permissible FAR. There is no need for irrelevant metrics like the maximum permissible height of the building. While it is being proposed that the maximum permissible height of the buildings in different parts of the city will be between 4-7 stories, no clear indication is given

and then the new rule suddenly comes into force and the new built-up area no longer makes the project viable? This may well lead to litigation between the developer and the landowner. With all this uncertainty, many developers have put a pause on signing new deals till the situation is clear. What damage is this doing to the economy? The real estate industry contributes about 15 percent to the GDP of the country. For every month lost in this uncertainty, the country’s economy is suffering a body blow.

Our authorities need to focus on the real reasons why our city is gradually becoming uninhabitable. The problem is not with the current building construction rules—it’s in the failure of Rajuk in enforcing the rules. There is scant respect for zoning laws. Industries are operating in zones shown as urban residential. Schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, hotels and restaurants are operating with impunity without approval in the residential zones. Land grabbers are

What can we expect from the new US climate czar?



SALEEMUL HUQ

PRESIDENT-ELECT Joe Biden of the United States of America recently announced his national security and foreign policy team including a significant new position of a “climate envoy” who would sit on the National Security Council, choosing former Senator John Kerry for that position. So what does this appointment mean for the US and the world and how are we to prepare to deal with him going forward?

The first thing to note is that John Kerry, as President Obama’s Secretary of State during the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21), held in Paris in December 2015, was a key architect of the path-breaking Paris Agreement that came out of the conference. He was a strong supporter of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) which was advocating for the long temperature goal to be set at 1.5 degrees rather than 2 degrees Centigrade. The CVF, under the leadership of then President Aquino of the Philippines, made a major diplomatic effort to get countries to agree to change the long-term temperature goal from 2 to 1.5 degrees Centigrade against a lot of opposition not just from the developed countries but also big developing countries such as China and India. During the two weeks of COP21, we were able to persuade every other country to agree to support our goal, and the turning point was when John Kerry joined us under the High Ambition Coalition of countries midway through COP21.

Since Donald Trump became president and withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement, Kerry has continued to work on promoting action to tackle climate change in the US and was part of the coalition of mayors and governors of States who had declared that they would comply with the Agreement even if their own federal government had withdrawn.

As President-elect Biden has already declared that one of the first actions he would take when he is sworn in on January 20, 2021 would be to rejoin the Paris Agreement, it means the US will now support global efforts to tackle climate change along with other countries. However, the situation in 2020 is much worse than what it was in 2015, and much of that is due to the

inaction of the US under Trump and his administration which had been trying to support coal and other fossil fuel companies to continue to extract and sell their polluting products. Hence, the US has a lot of catching up to do and has no time to waste.

The most immediate task—which comes even before Biden gets sworn in as president—is for all countries to submit their respective new and updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), where they are supposed to enhance their level of mitigation of greenhouse gases. These NDCs are due for submission by December 31, and even though the Biden presidency does not officially begin before then, his team must indicate their plans by then.

As many of us may be aware, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh in her capacity as leader of the CVF declared

the United Kingdom in November 2021, is as decisive as the one in Paris was five years ago. This will require the US to join forces with China and the UK to persuade all countries to enhance their mitigation pledges in line with the 1.5-degree target.

The good news is that Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the UK has already called Biden to congratulate him on his victory and they discussed how they can work together to make COP26 a major turning point in global action to tackle climate change.

However, there is another aspect of the climate change issue that is very different five years apart—the recognition of 2020 as the tipping-point year when the planet has crossed into a climate-changed world. This means that instead of pointing out that this year has been the hottest on record, we will have to note that this may be the coolest year in decades to



John Kerry, who will serve as a climate envoy of the US and sit on the National Security Council under the Joe Biden presidency. PHOTO: REUTERS

a campaign for all countries to submit their NDCs by midnight on December 31—called #MidnightClimateSurvival—and already, over 150 countries have done so. This is a good sign. The US must also promise to submit their NDC by that time.

The next opportunity for the US under Biden and Kerry will be to ensure that the upcoming COP26, to be hosted by

come and we now have to deal with the negative impacts of human-induced climate change as the global atmospheric temperature has already gone above one degree Centigrade since the Industrial Revolution.

This means that loss and damage which is now attributable to climate change has become a reality around the world—from super-wildfires in California

constantly filling up water bodies under the nose of the regulators. Rivers, which are the lifeline of our city and indeed the country, are being killed by the dumping of industrial waste. We do not have safe drinking water. The process of garbage collection and recycling is a mess. The roads in most parts of the city are dilapidated. Traffic control is a shamble with pollution-spewing vehicles plying our roads. In comparison to the suffering of the citizens due to the mismanagement of the city, the population density of buildings constructed within the ambit of the existing building rules is totally inconsequential.

We have a free market economy. Private-sector residential development happens because there is a need for housing. If this development is curtailed, where will people find housing? The logic that curtailed development in the central city will push people to the outskirts does not hold water. The fact is that unlike the developed countries, where suburban living is common, the road and transport infrastructure of Dhaka is totally inadequate to support a large number of people traveling to the city centre every day from the suburbs to earn their livelihoods. Even today, the cost of residential accommodation in Savar and Gazipur is much lower than in the city centre. Why then are people not settling in these suburbs and commuting to work in the city centre?

The present line of thinking of our town planners is dangerous. Not only will it fail to create new developments in the suburbs because of the lack of an efficient transport infrastructure, it will also curtail the real estate development industry. It will also cause acute housing shortage in the city while devaluing the prized asset of many inhabitants. Such major decisions should not be taken without consulting the important stakeholders. The Institute of Architects has already voiced its concerns about the proposed plan. I am sure that the association of real estate developers (REHAB) will also have objections to this short-sighted proposal. An error of judgement on such an important matter can have very serious consequences on the future of the city that we love so much.

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and Australia to super-cyclones in Bay of Bengal and Pacific Ocean as well as a record number of hurricanes in the Caribbean Sea. Therefore, it is going to be extremely important for COP26 to come up with a process to recognise the reality of loss and damage and the importance of rich countries providing funding support for the vulnerable developing countries beyond insurance. It is important to point out that “loss and damage” from climate change is a separate issue from “adaptation and resilience”, as was agreed in Article 8 of the Paris Agreement in 2015. Hence, the attempt by some developed countries to mix up the two will not fly.

So it will be important for Kerry to change his attitude on loss and damage from 2015, when he insisted on adding text that denied the discussion of liability and compensation from climate change when they agreed to allow Article 8 on Loss and Damage. Going into COP26, it does not necessarily require liability and compensation to be invoked as long as the developed countries agree to find innovative funding for loss and damage beyond insurance, perhaps as a solidarity fund which would be different from funding for adaptation.

Finally, it is important that Bangladesh, as the leader of the CVF, reaches out to both the US and the UK to try to come up with a solution to this contentious issue even if it is at the level of a political agreement rather than a COP decision text, which would require consensus from all countries.

With goodwill on all sides, it should be possible to solve this issue in the run-up to COP26 next November, but it will not be easy.

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