

PM's proposal for equitable access to vaccines commendable

The world should make united effort to ensure this

We commend the three-point proposal placed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the 31st special session of the United Nations General Assembly. The proposal includes ensuring universal and equitable access to quality Covid-19 vaccine, transferring technology to developing countries to manufacture it locally, and providing them with financial assistance to face challenges in the wake of the pandemic. Pointing out that the 2030 development agenda recognised the fundamental role of Universal Health Coverage for achieving the SDGs guided by the principle of equity, the PM said that when it comes to access to vaccines, no one should be left behind.

As Bangladesh along with other countries of the world have been waiting to get Covid-19 vaccines, a US public health expert recently said that the vast majority of people in Bangladesh and other parts of the world would have to wait longer than expected due to limited global capacity of vaccine production. The current world population is around 7.8 billion and over 15 billion doses of vaccines are needed to address it globally. However, only 7 percent people of the world will be covered in the first six months considering the production capacity of three promising vaccines, according to the US expert. This is worrying news for us because already at least 6,748 people have lost their lives to the virus and hundreds are getting infected every day.

In this context, the PM's proposal that the developed countries should commit to transferring technology for the local manufacturing of vaccines in developing countries using IP rights waiver under the TRIPS Agreement should be given heed to. If we cannot get the vaccines from other countries within a short time, we should have the ability to produce them on our own. Thus such technology transfer can save thousands of lives.

Our pharmaceutical companies have a good reputation for producing quality life-saving medicines and delivering them to many countries of the world. And we believe, we can also produce our own vaccines. But for that, we need to increase our capacity first. Here we need the help of the developed countries. Only strong global commitment and collaboration can provide vaccines equitably around the world. And we hope to see that being the case.

A woman burnt to death by her husband Society must recognise domestic violence as a punishable crime

It is yet another horror story in the grotesquely high number of women dying at the hands of their husbands after being tortured mercilessly. This time it was 25-year-old Hira Begum from Jashor's Abhaynagar upazilla, the wife of Billal Sardar who poured petrol all over her body and set her ablaze. She died on the way to Dhaka Medical College. The reason for this barbaric act? She had refused to go to India with her husband—he had been trying to "convince" her to go for a long time. Part of that "convincing" was inhuman torture that culminated in the dastardly act of setting her on fire and killing her.

We do not need to know what Hira Begum's reasons were for not complying with her husband and why she was subjected to such brutality. What is evident is that despite all the hard work of human rights activists to end domestic violence, which has resulted in a law to be enacted, on the ground, such laws have practically no effect. The Domestic Violence Prevention Act 2010 was enacted 10 years ago but is just in paper only as very few women have had the courage to file cases against their husbands while most women are completely oblivious of its existence. Thus the statistics, while bone chilling in their implication, do not surprise us anymore—Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)'s survey from April to September this year found 37,512 cases of domestic abuse from selected locations. Their survey also found a sharp increase in domestic violence during this pandemic as lockdown forced women to be with their assailants—their husbands, for longer periods of time.

So while we cry ourselves hoarse for a stop to such brutality on women by their partners that rob them of their health, wellbeing and often their lives, husbands beating their wives is still not considered a crime. This is where there must be massive awareness and intervention from the leaders of society. The government has a huge responsibility to stop this pervasive crime by initiating campaigns to declare domestic violence and all other kinds of violence against women and girls as heinous crimes, sensitise the police, local government leaders as well as religious leaders to condemn such violence and be on the side of the survivors, not the perpetrators; reform the legal system and provide protection or shelter to survivors so that women can escape their tormentors and get legal redress for the violence they are subjected to.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka becoming a drug trafficking route

According to this paper, investigations by the Department of Narcotics Control found that at least 600 kg of amphetamine powder was smuggled out of Bangladesh using courier services after its arrival from India via the Benapole border—a trade worth around Tk 600 crore. It was discovered after September 9 when around 12 kg of amphetamine powder was seized from the cargo village area of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

The security at our airports and the involvement of courier companies should be investigated. Drugs continue to ruin lives at an unprecedented rate. The government must ensure our borders remain secure from this illegal trade.

Zubair Hossain, Chattogram

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EDITORIAL

The 'dalals': How essential are they?

Are bribes an economic and administrative lubricant?

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE other day I was chatting with Abu, a long-time friend of mine who has been living in Bangladesh for the last one year. As a dual citizen of the United States and Bangladesh he was considering getting a "No Visa Required" (NVR) visa stamp for Bangladesh. However, he was debating whether to go to the passport and visa office in person to submit the application or send in a proxy. Being the courageous soul that he is, against the advice of his well-wishers he wanted to get the job done in person (as well as to get a taste of our bureaucracy). He proceeded to the government office with his nephew and stood before the responsible official, expecting it to be a 30-minute chore. The scenario he had in mind was the following: Step 1. He would present the paperwork to the officer with the required fees and make a point or two in favour of his case. Step 2. The officer would take a cursory look at his documents, take it under advisement, and ask him to come back within a day or two. Step 3. He would go back or have his nephew go back to collect his US passport and bring it back to him with the NVR stamp.

Unfortunately, the aforementioned scenario did not work out along the tracks I outlined above or as he had expected. The moment he entered the responsible official's studio, he noticed that there was a slight irritation visible on the latter's face. He turned the passport over a few times ostensibly to check the authenticity of the passport and started leafing through the pages. Abu is very well-travelled and before he went to Bangladesh late last year for some family and business matters, he crisscrossed the globe going from Latin America to the US and then to Southeast Asia. Accordingly, he had pages after pages of visa stamps, airport seals, entry and exit attestations. Abu stared on nonchalantly as the clock ticked, not paying attention to the glances exchanged between the officer and another person sitting there. Eventually, the other person spoke up and with a little bit of frustration in his voice said to Abu, "Sir, why did you have to take all the trouble to come here in person? If you had just sent your assistant, this matter could have been taken care of within a day", and pointed to his nephew who sat there with a worried look on his face. Abu did not have a clue what was going on until the officer finally said, "Everything seems to be in order." Abu finally breathed a

sigh of relief. But his throat went dry in a minute when the officer added the sequel. "Well, you see. Your case requires further evaluation, and it might take a bit more time since we are swamped with cases like this. Leave this with me and we'll contact you. What's the best number to reach you?"

Before Abu could answer, the fourth person in the room said to him, "Sir, no worries. Let us go outside and straighten out the matter. It can be arranged." Taking a hint, Abu and his nephew thanked the officer and soon found themselves discussing the fees that could expedite the matter. "Sir, bujheni to, boro shahebra kaaj kulaiya utthe parche na" (translation: As you understand sir, the officers have a heavy load and are having a hard time keeping pace with the cases"). Fortunately, Abu took the hint

it for police clearance!", he said with a tinge of irony and sarcasm in his voice.

I must admit that I was not too surprised by Abu's account of the bureaucratic shenanigans and the role of the middleman in the system. I have myself faced similar situations in government offices in Dhaka, but also when I was travelling out of Dhaka and had to get visas from the US or Indian Embassies in Dhaka. The lines were long and a little extra cash saved you time and energy on a hot or rainy day when you might have to stand for hours just to get a "serial number". In recent years, every time I was in Dhaka and wanted to pay my mother's Municipal Tax or electric bills, I always kept extra cash in hand, just in case I needed to grease some palms. After my mother passed away, we had to go through a similar process of

in the pan? Also, what is the percentage of development resources that is being pilfered away like this? How do the poor who have no resources suffer from this practice of "taking a cut" or rent-seeking? Do they also have to pay the flat fee or are they left by the wayside?

For an economist, the important question is, as we try to promote Bangladesh as a business-friendly country and attract foreign businesses to relocate here, what has been the experience of the expatriates or a prospective investor exploring the business environment nowadays? If Abu, who has travelled to over 80 countries during his career as an international bureaucrat and speaks Bangla fluently, was totally flabbergasted by the degree of red-tape, extortion, and bribery prevalent today in December 2020, what does that tell the rest of the



and paid an agent to get the job done for a "flat fee".

Later Abu learned that if he had stayed out of the scene, the NVR process could have gone much faster. Since visa agents know the ropes, he was advised that in future, he should let an agent, a middleman or a "dalal" handle these matters since they know the officials and for a flat fee easily navigate through the "labyrinth of officialdom" (Abu's words). "No hassle. No questions need to be asked or answered", Abu emphasised to me. He heeded the advice the next time and for a matter that needed a customs office clearance, he let the agents handle the job on his behalf for a flat fee.

"Hey, what is an extra 50 dollars or so when you can rest in peace and get an expedited resolution. I would rather have my passport back in my hands today rather than worry about its whereabouts for weeks while they 'evaluate' and send

hand-wringing and cash dole-outs to get the "mutation" and other issues relating to her apartment resolved. I keep on hoping that things would get better with time and economic development. After all, many other countries went through a similar process and there is a negative correlation between bribery and extortion and per capita income.

It was always true that a certain percentage of any contract would go to the government officials, the bankers, autonomous bodies, etc. There was a story circulating many years ago, during the Ershad-era, about the entire budget for a bridge over a canal being pocketed by the C&B, PWD, Union Parishad leaders and local political groups. I was hoping that such cases or jokes have now become out-of-fashion.

The question we ask is: Are incidents such as the one my friend described to me happening very often or is it a flash

world about us?

Years ago, a scholar commented in a Harvard Business Review paper on China, "Sure, labour is inexpensive in China, but what about dealing with government bureaucracies or resolving long-distance logistics breakdowns? We can't begin to see all the hidden costs." President Xi, after he came to power in 2012, launched a strong anti-corruption campaign "targeting officials in the party including both high-ranking officials ("tigers") and low-level bureaucrats ("flies")." For Bangladesh, we need to ask how much longer are we going to countenance the "facilitation payments" that we are forced to make for government services and put up with the "hidden cost" for doing business in Bangladesh?

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Make school calendar child and learning friendly



MANZOOR AHMED

IS there a good reason why the school year should begin in the first month of the Christian calendar other than that this is how it was done in the colonial era? In India, school calendar is a state (provincial)

and stormy days of the year. The large number of days devoted to public national examinations held at the end of grade 5, 8, 10 and 12, which disrupt school routine for all students, not just the examinees, also reduces time for instruction.

The average daily maximum temperature in Dhaka in the months from October to March is between 25-32 degrees Celsius, whereas it is between 32-34 degrees Celsius for the months of April to September. The average number of

matter, but the year mostly begins in June.

In the large majority of countries in the northern hemisphere, the school year begins in the month of September. Regular school activities end at the end of May or in June when the summer break begins.

In UK, when primary schooling was made compulsory in 1880, the school calendar was set around the farming season. It was a matter of getting parents to send their children to school; there was no hope of getting the children to school in the summer, when their help was needed most in the field or to look after their siblings when the parents were in the field. The same reason applied in Europe and North America.

In Bangladesh, though children's help at home or in the field is a consideration, it is no longer seasonal on a nationwide basis. A more pertinent concern is the annual climate pattern that may affect children's attendance in school.

At present, it is expected that about two hundred days of teaching should occur during the school year with days off for the weekly holidays and other holidays during the year. Sheikh Shahbaz Riad, a professor at Dhaka Teachers' Training College, studied the present time used in schools and published a reform proposal in 2017. The proposal seems not to have received the attention of policymakers.

Riad examined the temperature and rainfall pattern and concluded that optimal use is not made for instruction of the more temperate and less rainy

days between October and April is 0 to 8 days in a month, whereas it is 15 to 21 days between May to September (www.climateonetavel.com).

In the current school calendar, annual exams (other than public exams) and winding up the year occupy November and December. Admissions and starting the new year distract students and teachers from regular instruction in January and February. Full attention to instruction is neglected during the best part of the year, conducive for school attendance from a climate point of view.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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Checking the examination schedule of a recent year, Riad reported that the total number of days for these examinations added up to 129 days (8 days for PECE and equivalent, 17 days for JSC and equivalent, 30 days for SSC/Dakhil, and a staggering 74 days for HSC/Fazil.)

Present school vacations interspersed throughout the year, and the long Ramadan holidays, tied to the cyclical lunar calendar, undermines the regularity of the school calendar. There is a good educational justification for continuity

2022) provides for 185 school days with 5 school days in a week. It also helpfully proposes that public exams for grade 5 and 8 will end and the first public exam will be at the end of grade 10. Moreover, the total number of days spent in public exams will be cut to 5 days for each by limiting these exams to a few key subjects. School level assessment is envisaged for the other subjects. School's annual and term exams also will be shortened and continuing formative assessment of students will be emphasised as part of the instruction.

Whether the school week should be 5 days need further consideration, given that many schools are run on double shifts, limiting the duration of the school day. The new curriculum time-table appears not to allow sufficient time for co-curricular activities or give due importance to these as essential elements of the school experience and means of achieving the broader curriculum objectives. The sixth day or two half days of the week may be devoted specifically to regular co-curricular learning activities.

The proposed assessment reforms, if implemented properly, will lead to improved teaching and learning. In the spirit of reforms, it is the right time to rethink the school calendar and make it more child- and learning-friendly.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to shutting down of schools for most of 2020. The school may reopen in the new year, but with modified school routine and perhaps partial or alternate day attendance. There will be a huge task of recouping the learning loss of almost a whole year and adjusting the school year. Taking advantage of the necessity, the 2021 school year may be shortened to January to August (without any prolonged break in 2021) and the 2021-22 academic year may begin on September 15. This would be a fitting change in school education in the 50th year of independent Bangladesh.

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