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Rich countries buying up most Covid-19 vaccines

What about poor countries' equal access to vaccines?

WE are concerned at the way rich countries are buying up the vast majority of the world's Covid-19 vaccines. While the rich countries, with 14 percent of the world's population, have secured 53 percent of the most promising vaccines, nine out of 10 people in 70 low-income countries are unlikely to be vaccinated for Covid-19 next year, according to an alliance of international campaigners. Unfortunately, the poor countries have already been enduring inadequate access to coronavirus testing and treatment facilities, and now they may also face discrimination in getting vaccines.

While high-risk groups in Britain received the first shots of the vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech on Tuesday, most people in 67 low- and lower-middle-income countries, including Bhutan, Ethiopia and Haiti, risk being left behind.

Amid this situation, we must be ready as a country to secure enough doses of vaccines for our people. As we know, the government has struck deals to buy 68 million doses of vaccines from Gavi under a global arrangement called COVAX and another 30 million doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine from the Serum Institute of India via Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd. According to sources at the Directorate General of Health Services, the first shipment of the doses from Gavi should reach here between February and June 2021, while vaccines from Serum may arrive by February 2021.

Now, the major challenges for the government would be to make sure the vaccines reach the country in time and are administered to the people properly. Unfortunately, the government is yet to publish its vaccine distribution plan which will decide who will be given priority in getting vaccinated. Moreover, we still have not arranged separate facilities to store the Covid-19 vaccines at the upazila level, without which people living in rural areas may not get the vaccines timely. Therefore, it is highly likely that poor people will face disparity in getting vaccinated if we do not have a proper action plan on distributing the vaccines.

While Bangladesh should increase its capacity to store and administer the vaccines properly, the government should also communicate with other countries for getting more vaccines for our people. The prime minister recently gave a proposal at the UN about transferring technology for local manufacturing of vaccines in developing countries, which should be considered seriously by the countries that have already developed the vaccines. If a positive decision is taken in this regard, Bangladesh can develop vaccines not only for its own people but can also provide vaccines to other countries. That way, Bangladesh can also help in efforts to remove the disparity to be faced by poor countries in getting vaccines.

BR is finally set to hire new staff

Why did the authorities take years to come to this decision?

AFTER a three-year hiatus, Bangladesh Railway (BR) is finally set to begin the process to hire 12,000-15,000 more employees over the next five years. This is indeed good news as BR has desperately been lacking manpower which, among other reasons, affected its delivery of vital services and even hampered regular train operations.

A total of 15,350 out of 40,275 existing posts remained vacant till June this year, which meant that the operation of more than 100 stations could not be resumed due to a lack of manpower. This begs the question: why did BR wait this long to decide to resume filling the vacancies—and it is important to mention that filling those vacancies will still take even more time—when it doesn't even have enough manpower to properly run day-to-day train operations? How is that fair to the people? And to what extent did it compromise train safety?

According to a report published by this newspaper around the time of the horrendous train accident in Brahmanbaria last November, the lack of manpower is one of the reasons why we have seen a spike in railway-related accidents in recent years. Which means that the apathy shown by the authorities over the last years in hiring new employees has even resulted in the loss of lives. That is a form of criminal negligence and is absolutely unacceptable. The fact that lives have been lost—and can still be if past patterns hold—means that the lack of urgency shown by the authorities simply cannot be brushed under the rug and forgotten anymore. Someone is responsible for this, and they must be held to account.

On the other hand, the authorities must also recruit the manpower that BR lacks to properly and safely run trains. Now that it has been decided that BR will recruit more staff, we hope that the actual recruitment does not drag on like its decision to do so did previously. We also hope that the recruitment process will be fair, transparent and competitive, and no corrupt practices will take place to either disrupt or undermine the process.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Woman harassed for smoking

Recently, there has been an uproar on social media after a young woman was harassed in a public spot for smoking. A video clip capturing the incident shows a man rudely and repeatedly asking the woman to put out her cigarette. Even though she pointed out that there were several men nearby who were also smoking, she was forced to leave the place. Someone in the crowd even had the audacity to say that such behaviour (women smoking) is a cause for rape! This shows how toxic masculinity has become deeply ingrained in our society. While smoking is certainly injurious to health, we must resist attempts to force women to conform to male expectations.

Iftekhar Ahmed Sakib, *Dhaka*

Five years since Paris Accord: Are we winning the race against climate change?

QUAMRUL HAIDER

TODAY marks the fifth anniversary of the Paris Accord hammered out by more than 190 countries at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP21). The core objective of the accord is to save humanity from the existential threat posed by climate change. To that end, the participating nations agreed to keep the increase in the average global temperature to 2 degrees Celsius while endeavouring to limit it to 1.5 degrees by the year 2100. Besides pledging to temper the rise in temperature, they agreed to restructure the global economy, phase out fossil fuels over the coming decades, switch to renewable sources of energy, embrace clean technology, and most importantly, reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050.

The accord gives every country the ability to set its own goals to confront the climate crisis, in line with their specific situation. Moreover, instead of demanding expeditious and deep cuts in fossil fuel usage, it allows parties to peak greenhouse gas emissions "as soon as possible" followed by a gradual decrease in order to reach the zero emissions goal. It is patently evident that such a vague timetable fits the interests of the major polluters, including the United States, China and India. Nevertheless, beginning this year, each nation is required to reassess its own reduction plans once every five years. However, there is no consequence or penalty if a country fails to reassess or falls short of the pledged reductions.

The accord also requires nations to address "loss and damage" caused by climate impacts. Since the wealthy, industrialised nations are largely responsible for the backlog of climate changing emissions lingering in the atmosphere, they should compensate poorer nations for unavoidable loss and damage. But even after COP25 held in Madrid last year, wealthy nations are playing Jekyll and Hyde roles—promising to cover losses while dragging their feet on providing new finance.

We are now a full five years into the Paris Accord which, according to the former US President Barack Obama, is supposed to make the "world safer and more secure, more prosperous and more free." Are we really on course to transform our planet into one as envisioned by Obama? Are we winning the race against climate change? Did we succeed in slowing down the carnage resulting from climate change? By all accounts, the accord did not make an iota of difference in decelerating the progression of our planet, and subsequently our civilisation, toward climatological meltdown. On the contrary, climate change and its deleterious effects are accelerating, with climate-related catastrophes piling up, year after year.

Our planet is now almost at the breaking point. The environmental changes sweeping across the world are occurring at a much quicker pace than five years ago. As the Earth warms, we are witnessing more cataclysmic wildfires turning forests into carbon dioxide emitters, not to mention calamitous floods inundating nearly half of countries like Bangladesh and Thailand. Persistent droughts, ferocious storms and an increase in extreme weather phenomena—derecho, microburst, bombogenesis, Frankenstorm and many more—are on the rise. The fingerprints of climate change since 2015 can also be seen in the exacerbation of internal and international migration patterns of climate refugees.

As the Earth warms, we are witnessing more calamitous floods inundating nearly half of countries like Bangladesh and Thailand. PHOTO: AFP

Scorching heat waves, of all places, in the Arctic region, are now more frequent and long-lasting. With only a few weeks left in this year, it is more likely than not that 2020 will be among the hottest years ever, even with the cooling effect of this year's La Niña. Seas are warming and rising faster, putting more coastal cities at risk of going under acidic water. Warmer waters are wreaking havoc on marine organisms forcing them to migrate away from their familiar habitats. Glaciers are melting at an alarming rate, thus disrupting availability of freshwater.

Climate-induced mayhem is taking a heavy toll on the Arctic region. The amount of Arctic sea ice whose whiteness normally acts as a natural reflector of heat back out of the atmosphere is dwindling so rapidly that the region may soon become ice-free. Loss of ice is also changing the Arctic terrain—making it greener and prettier, but at the expense of releasing copious amounts of carbon dioxide and methane trapped in the frozen soil, which in turn is making global warming even worse. Additionally, scientists have found evidence that frozen methane deposits in the Arctic Ocean, worrisomely called the "sleeping giant of the carbon cycle," are escaping into the atmosphere. In fact, northern landscapes are undergoing massive change, with potential ramifications not just for the Arctic itself, but the world as a whole.

Permafrost in cold climate countries is thawing at breakneck speed, releasing, just like Arctic ice, large amounts of long-stored carbon dioxide and methane. In addition, viruses and bacteria that had been buried under the permafrost for thousands of years are being released into the environment, posing health risks to humans and other forms of life. Also, deforestation of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil, a vital carbon sink that retards the momentum of global warming, has surged to its highest level since 2008.

As for peaking of emissions, there is a cavernous gap between the sharp cuts in emissions required to meet the goals of the Paris Accord and current projections. In a recent report, World Meteorological Organization (WMO), a specialised agency of the United Nations, states, "There is no sign of slowdown, let alone a decline, in greenhouse gases concentration in the atmosphere despite all the commitments under the Paris agreement." Rather, emissions from just about every country are still on the rise, thereby making it difficult to close the gap so as to achieve zero emissions by 2050.

The report further notes that even the coronavirus-related drop in emissions failed to make much of a dent in the amount of heat-trapping greenhouse gases accumulating in the atmosphere. Consequently, WMO warns that the world risks becoming an "uninhabitable hell" for millions unless we drastically cut emissions—by at least 7.2 percent every 10 years if we want to keep the rise in temperature to 1.5 degree. Otherwise, we will soon be north of 3 degrees.

The warning from WMO is corroborated by a study published last month in the British journal *Scientific Reports*, in which the authors assert that we have already passed the "point of no return for global warming." The only way we can stop the warming, the authors say, is by extracting "enormous amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere."

Notwithstanding the warning, Earth's average temperature already rose by roughly one degree since the advent of modern record keeping in 1880. The devastation caused by one degree rise clearly indicates that an additional 1.5–2 degrees rise before the end of this century will lock in the changes to the Earth's climate system that will be beyond our adaptive capacity.

Five years ago, the then UN chief lauded the Paris Accord as a landmark agreement, a potent message from world leaders who had finally decided to take on climate change in earnest. Five years later, in a complete about-face, the present UN chief, in a speech at Columbia University in New York, issued a searing indictment of our utter disregard for the pledges made in Paris. He said, "The state of the planet is broken. Humanity is waging a suicidal war on nature, facing new heights of global heating, new lows of ecological degradation...."

So much for the Paris Accord! No wonder environmentalists believe that the accord is meaningless, and with good reason. Indeed, the toothless, nonbinding, non-enforceable accord is an oversold empty promise—a gentleman's handshake applauding the imposition of a global climate regime on humankind that is harming the planet in the name of saving it.

Finally, world leaders should realise that fixing the climate is not about making pretty promises at grandiose conferences held at glamorous cities. And if we rely on grandstanding and farcical accords that give us false hopes, we will lose the race to keep our planet cool and inhabitable.

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NOTICE

The weekly column of Mahfuz Anam, Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*, couldn't be published today due to unavoidable reasons. It will be published on Sunday, December 13.

US elections survived a threat, but the future is bleak

ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

THE toxic political fallout of the recent presidential elections has truly tarnished America's reputation.

A month after the elections have been called in favour of his opponent, President-elect Joe Biden, the sitting president still refuses to concede. A clown car of Trump lawyers have filed a flurry of frivolous lawsuits that have been pretty much thrown out with disdain by the courts, sometimes by judges Trump himself appointed, often with scathing critiques from the bench. Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, two of Trump's lawyers, have invited ridicule with their outlandish claims which have collapsed in court.

President Donald Trump has taken the extraordinary, appalling step of requesting Republicans in state legislatures to deny the people's verdict. He has asked the Supreme Court to invalidate millions of votes from four battleground states.

Yet amid the debris of massive political mayhem, something important has not been given due credit. By and large, the US elections have been remarkably smooth. This would be a laudable achievement in any large country. In America, this is nothing short of a miracle.

For a country that prides itself on being one of the world's strongest bastions of democracy, its actual system of conducting elections is shockingly ramshackle. There is no nonpartisan overarching federal body of permanent bureaucrats that conducts elections. Instead, a crazy-quilt patchwork of countless counties run elections, supervised by state officials who are elected in partisan elections. Many poll workers are volunteers, and paid workers are poorly paid.

With the pandemic, this year brought some unique challenges.

"There was an acute shortage of poll workers. Yet the United States saw unprecedented turnout over the last few weeks," the national security blog Lawfare, which is associated with the Brookings Institution, remarked. "Many states handled voting by mail and early voting impressively and huge numbers of volunteers turned up to work the polls… And for all the president's griping about the counting of votes, it has been orderly and apparently without significant incident. The result was that, in the midst of a pandemic that has killed 230,000 Americans [until then], record numbers of Americans voted—and voted by mail—and those votes are almost all counted at this stage."

This year marked an unprecedented partisan Republican onslaught on US elections and officials. Unsubstantiated claims of fraud led to a bizarre, baseless "Stop the Steal" movement by hardcore Trump supporters. PHOTO: REUTERS/MARK MAKELA

This year marked an unprecedented, unprincipled partisan Republican onslaught on elections and officials. Unsubstantiated claims of massive fraud led to a bizarre, baseless "Stop the Steal" movement by hardcore Trump supporters who claim the elections were rigged. They are yet to provide any tangible evidence that will pass muster at any US court of law. That hasn't stopped them from creating a threatening, hostile atmosphere for election officials.

Trump has egged on these fevered supporters.

"I'm a proud Trump supporter," Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said at a news conference at the state Capitol. "Like other Republicans, I'm disappointed our candidate didn't win Georgia's electoral votes."

"Working as an engineer throughout my life, I live by the motto that numbers don't lie. As secretary of state, I believe that the numbers that we have presented today are correct. The numbers reflect the verdict of the people," he said on November 20.

Raffensperger has paid a stiff price. Protesters have showed up on his property and Trisha, his wife of 40 years, has received "sexualised threats" on her cell phone, according to Georgia election official Gabriel Sterling.

Yet something rare and remarkable has happened. It appears that the actual duty of ensuring a fair election is so deeply ingrained in the American consciousness that threats and intimidation failed to budge election officials, even when they were themselves Trump-supporting Republicans. Republican election officials have simply refused to accept outrageous demands of Trump supporters and gone about their job.

Meanwhile, Trump has met Republican leaders of Michigan's legislature and asked them to overturn the results in their state. He has made a similar request to Republican Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp and Pennsylvania House Speaker Bryan Cutler, a Republican. All three have declined, to their credit. These laudable instances of principle, it must be pointed out, stand in stark contrast with the complicity of a wide swath of the Republican Party.

"In a recent survey, an alarming 222 Republicans in the House and the Senate—88 percent—refused to acknowledge that Joe Biden won the presidency. Another two insisted Trump won," Zeynep Tufekci writes in *The Atlantic* magazine.

Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue are Republican candidates for runoff elections in Georgia in January which will decide control of the US Senate. Instead of supporting Raffensperger's principled stand, both shamelessly aped Trump and—I'm not making this up—called for Raffensperger's resignation.

So while this time around the American elections process survived the ultimate stress test, the political future of the nation is dark and murky.

"But ignoring a near catastrophe that was averted by the buffoonish, half-hearted efforts of its would-be perpetrator invites a real catastrophe brought on by someone more competent and ambitious," Tufekci warns in *The Atlantic*.

"President Trump … (is) establishing a playbook for stealing elections by mobilising executive, judicial, and legislative power to support the attempt. And worse, much worse, the playbook is being implicitly endorsed by the silence of some leading Republicans…

"We're being tested, and we're failing. The next attempt to steal an election may involve a closer election and smarter lawsuits... If most Republican officials are failing to police this ham-handed attempt at a power grab, how many would resist a smoother, less grossly embarrassing effort?"

Ashfaque Swapan, an Atlanta-based writer and editor, is contributing editor for Siliconeer, an online South Asian publication.