

Govt's Covid-19 vaccine project must succeed

It is a huge endeavour

WE welcome the government's plan to inoculate nearly 14 crore people in phases against Covid-19 under a Tk 6,786 crore pandemic preparedness project. The budget includes Tk 1,175 crore for COVAX vaccines purchased at subsidised prices; Tk 2,262 crore for direct purchase from COVAX or other sources; Tk 68 crore as shipping cost; Tk 384 crore for vaccine transport and operational expenses; and Tk 346 crore for vaccine preservation, cold chain, and supply chain management. Aside from procuring, preserving, and distributing the vaccines, the other major project functions include installing modern microbiology laboratories alongside PCR machines at 27 medical colleges and hospitals in the country—alongside other initiatives that are badly needed to boost our already strained healthcare sector.

So far, we are reassured by the plan. But given the huge logistical challenges of the initiative, we must warn against mismanagement. On many occasions in the past when dealing with such big projects—not that any other can be compared with this one, given the gravity of the crisis brought about by the pandemic—we had failed to rise to the occasion. We hope this time the government will do a good job and take all the necessary steps for the project to succeed.

But in order for that to happen, the government must guard against corruption, misappropriation and adulteration at every step. We cannot afford for any of the vaccines to disappear and then reappear in the black market, nor for it to be unavailable to those that it is intended for. Those who are at greater risk such as essential workers and the elderly should be given priority. The initiative must be transparent and needs to have good monitoring. Any form of corruption will not only harm the project itself, but also our national interest. Therefore, it is vital for the government to ensure that it is capable of absorbing the vast challenges that are no doubt associated with this massive undertaking.

Investigate the irregularities in Kushtia Medical College and Hospital project

Follow the PM's directives

WE appreciate the prime minister's direction to the authorities concerned to investigate the delay and cost hike in the Kushtia Medical College and Hospital construction project and take departmental action against those responsible. It is indeed frustrating for both the government and the public to see how many such development projects, which could make a huge difference to the people, get unnecessarily delayed with their costs escalating due to inefficiency or irregularities.

According to a report, eight years after getting the government's approval to set up the medical college and hospital, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), the project's implementing agency, could not make much progress in completing it. Although the project, which started in January 2012, was supposed to be complete by December 2014, only 34 percent of the work was completed till December 2019. Meanwhile, the cost of the project more than doubled by the end of 2019. Now the DGHS has again sought approval for a hike in project cost as well as an extension of the deadline.

There were various kinds of irregularities in the project from the very beginning. Reportedly, no feasibility study was carried out before it was approved. There were allegations of using bamboo and wood instead of steel for constructing one of the buildings. The death of a worker was also reported after a portion of an under-construction building collapsed on him. Although the medical college has been admitting 50 students every year since 2012, its academic activities are being held in other buildings without any medical equipment.

When time and cost overruns in development projects caused by corruption have become almost a norm in the country, the prime minister's directives to investigate the anomalies in this particular project is appreciable. We hope this will give a signal to other project authorities that should also implement their projects in time and without increasing the project cost. If corruption and irregularities in our development projects can be checked through proper monitoring by the government, a huge amount of public money can be saved. To do that, those who are found to be involved in irregularities must be held accountable.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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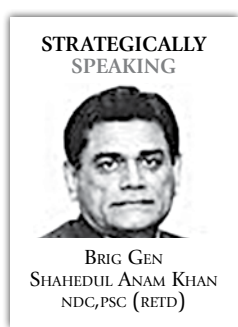
Proper vaccination strategy vital

Once the vaccine becomes available in Bangladesh, the highest priority for the government will be vaccinating front-line health workers and the most vulnerable segments of the population, such as the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions. It worries me that politicians, government officials or others with influence over the vaccine distribution process might try to abuse the vaccines for their own benefit. It's also possible that corrupt officials could allow the vaccines to be sold on the black market.

Therefore, I urge the government to take steps to prevent any such mishap by developing a digital platform to record every step of the immunisation process using national ID cards. That way, the outcome of the vaccination programme will be easier to monitor and it will help prevent any misappropriation.

Sharif Ahmed, by email

Bangladesh-India border relations fifty years on



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING
BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDG, PSC (RETD)

TWO important

Bangladesh-India meetings at the national level took place in the last month of 2020. The first of the two, a virtual summit of the two prime ministers held

on December 17, was preceded by the grim news of the death of yet another Bangladeshi killed in BSF firing on the border. Although we are used to getting such sad news, the latest killing, coming as it did on the eve of the virtual summit, assumed an enhanced poignancy.

A week after that, another Bangladeshi was shot dead by the Indian BSF along the Mymensingh border while the director general of BGB was being welcomed in Guwahati on December 22, where he had gone to attend one of the half-yearly DG-level meetings of the heads of border forces. The top agenda point, as usual, was the issue of border killings. And one can assume that nothing could be more frustrating for the DG-BGB than to be greeted by the news of the killing. It was an irony and one can guess that those who generally dismiss these killings as unfortunate or as acts in self-defence, and describe the victims as miscreants, can apply the template explanation (which we shall deal later in this piece) to describe the circumstances of the death of the latest victim of BSF firing—the total number of which stands at around 48 in 2020. According to the commanding officer of the BGB battalion responsible for that area, “the incident might have happened when the man was attempting to go across the border”. This statement conveys much more than the 15 words the sentence is composed of. I shall dwell more on this subsequently.

Like a few other important issues of consequence to Bangladesh, it's time for India to deliver on the oft-repeated and even more oft-broken assurances of zero killing on the border. The positive point—if killings ever can have a positive aspect—is that ours is no longer the most dangerous international border in the world that it was a decade ago, when

the BSF came under the scrutiny of the Human Rights Watch which used the appellation “trigger happy” in respect of its members. Although it is true that fewer Bangladeshis are falling victim to the BSF bullets now, the figure of 48 victims is a statistic that cannot but provoke the shortest question in English vocabulary: WHY? When the level of mutual understanding at government level between the two countries has never been better, the WHY assumes even more

little of comprehension—that the commanding officer was not entirely sure of the circumstances of the killing, and that the victim had not actually crossed the border. Thus the only rational conclusion is that he was shot dead inside Bangladesh territory. I believe this merits an answer.

This also begs the question: What does the BGB do to restrain those “attempting to cross” the border? Can the BGB really get away with saying that

wash either. One acts in self-defence after being attacked or anticipating an attack. One has not been offered any credible evidence by the BSF to validate their argument. Let me use the statement of the DG-BSF to counter his point. This is what he was quoted as saying at the end of the recently concluded DG-level meeting in Guwahati: “BSF personnel fire with non-lethal weapons only in self-defence when they are surrounded by large numbers of miscreants armed with ‘dah’ (cleaver-shaped knife), sticks, etc. and their lives are endangered.” So, if there are a large number of people surrounding them, how come only a single person is killed? What happens to the rest who are armed with knives threatening the safety of the well-armed BSF personnel? Was Zahid armed? (Zahid fell to BSF bullets on December 16 last year) Our foreign minister should seek answers to these questions instead of accepting such statements at face value.

India does not see these as killings—these are “deaths”, according to the Indian BSF commanders. As we had commented on this very issue nearly a decade ago, semantics cannot screen the reality nor can that bring the dead to life. It only adds to the agony of the victims, almost all of whom belong to the border areas. And whatever explanations, justifications, reasoning, or validations are offered for these killings, they cannot help prevent a negative mind-set developing in the minds of the people. Bangladesh-India border is not quite like other international borders. It is unique in many ways, and managing it requires much more than following slavishly the template orders and standard operating procedures (SOPs). I believe the border fence is the villain of the piece. Most of the Bangladeshis living in the border areas mistake the fence for the border and approach the fence without realising that it is actually approximately 137 metres inside the Indian territory, with certain exceptions. The border is “alive” and demands a more humane approach by the border guards. Let not the BSF commitment of zero border killing be, as a recent report in this paper so aptly headlined, a promise tangled up in barbed wire.

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pertinence. One of the assurances we are constantly given is that the BSF would no longer use lethal weapons, i.e. no metal bullets but rubber ones instead. We had been given to understand that rubber bullets don't kill. Given the sad statistics mentioned above, either the BSF have not lived up to their assurances, or rubber bullets do kill.

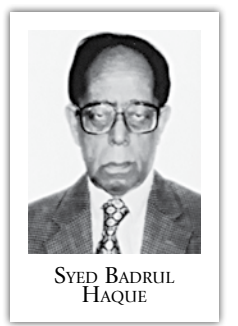
It would appear that the border killings have been taken as a fait accompli. My view has been reinforced by comments emanating from both sides, issued after formal meetings at different levels of command of the two border forces, and after every killing of a Bangladeshi on the borders.

Let us take, for example, the BGB's comment explaining the killing of a Bangladeshi on December 22, that “the incident might have happened when the man was attempting to go across the border”. The sentence conveys to me—and I'm sure to everyone with the

the victims crossed over illegally or were trying to cross, without exposing its own lax oversight of the border? The other explanation could be that some border guard members turn a blind eye to such illegal movements. The second question is, if the victim had indeed crossed the border as the BGB claims he did, how could he—or for that matter, the so-called miscreants and smugglers or the five-six lakh cattle heads (this figure is according to the DG of BSF carried in the Economic Times of July 13, 2018) that cross into Bangladesh annually—manage to cross the 30-foot-high double concertina wire fence? Even Sergey Bubka would not be able to vault over that fence even if he had an afterburner attached to his behind. Also the keys to the gates are with the BSF!

One also notices a tendency of the BSF to paint everyone killed in their firing as criminals, and every act of firing as acts in self-defence. But that doesn't

Beyond the Blame Game



SYED BADRUL HAQUE

A MIDST the relentless continuum of the coronavirus crisis, our lives have become constrained by the realities of the pandemic. But it has also given us the opportunity to broach issues that had long

been sidelined as politically inconvenient or as matters of fringe debates, rarely mentioned in national discourse without any in-depth discussion. They get lost in collective amnesia in the labyrinth of immediate “visible” issues, but at a price of national perspective. This apathy illustrates an ongoing pattern of trivialising matters of national significance across the political spectrum. There are a few such concepts that warrant re-examination as they are crucial for strengthening our social fabric.

In 1972, at the behest of Bangabandhu, the constitution drafting committee headed by Dr Kamal Hossain in their wisdom provided for Ombudsman in article 77 of the constitution as the watchdog against any abuse of citizens' rights from governmental power. This was, however, not to suggest a reduction of power or authority of the administration. The Ombudsman might have seemed nebulous to many at the time of writing the constitution, but as time wore on, its urgency was felt more acutely as our society began to slip into corruption, poor governance and human rights violations on a continuous basis. The inordinate delay—for nearly half a century—in mandating an Ombudsman by the parliament morphed into a general scepticism about its relevance in our civic life. Yet it is never too late to get it off the drawing board and examine the efficacy of the system once it becomes a reality. At the end of the day, it rests with the parliament to remove ambiguity, if any, about article 77 and clear the uncertainty that citizens had to endure over the decades.

November 4—the date for the adoption of our constitution—marks an important watershed for the Bengali nation. But this date is conspicuously missing in the array of designated national dates even when we are on the threshold of celebrating the golden jubilee of our independence. It is disturbing to find this date disappear from our consciousness and ignore it as it goes unnoticed, uncelebrated. This date underlines our commitment to republicanism and resonates ever-increasingly against the backdrop of widening divide in our national politics. And reflecting on it might provide a useful

perspective on the principles that made us who we are today. However much it is apolitical and neutral, we patently failed to dedicate this date as Constitution Day because of our inadequacy to comprehend the significance of the day in our civic life, and to accord it a national status (as in other countries).

Admittedly, our civil society has not evolved yet to automatically discourage any move to overthrow a constitutional government elected under a democratic dispensation. Because of this innate weakness, our civil society had to weather a spell of extra-constitutional ambition, albeit intermittently, in the space of nearly 50 years of our nationhood. More than a cathartic relief, constitutional rule, however, proved its resilience following its triumphant return and flourished on the basis of people's consent. Should

On a broader perspective, the day's consciousness, constructed on a strong basis of constitutional values, should inspire the civil society not to bow to those who reject freedom and democracy. Back in 1985, I had a chance to witness a Constitution Day parade on a Manhattan street in New York City on my way to the Central Park. As the contingent of young people in colourful uniforms paraded the street, the spectators enthusiastically cheered them on. It was an eye-filling spectacle. As is obvious, the event celebrated in commemoration of the Constitution Day left a message for their nation.

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ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

our lawmakers dedicate this day as a statement of the enduring values, it certainly would be a befitting tribute to our loyalty to constitutionalism. Away from expediency or novelty, the day so dedicated is destined to serve as a worthy reminder to the ruling party of the parameters of power within which they are to operate and the government is to run with due regard to such limitations as imposed by the constitution. In a landscape like ours, where constitution-awareness is wafer-thin with an immature political democracy, the day, in its exclusivity, should be an occasion to inform the citizens of the supremacy of the constitution in regard to their governance along with rights and obligations to the state.

national issues dividing the nation into two distinct worlds. More often than not, we forget to realise that party politics and national consensus are two different things. No doubt this numbing scenario strains a nation already buffeted by multiple grave challenges. Attempts to resolve the issue by outsiders failed in the past as both the contending parties remained stubbornly rigid on their respective stand.

Importantly, any solution by outsiders has a sense of impermanence, carries little conviction with the political parties and fails ultimately. It happened with both the mediators, Sir Ninian, Commonwealth Secretary-General, and Fernandez Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, who came to mediate

when both the parties were in power in the mid-90s and end of 2013 respectively. They returned empty-handed. The term “consensus” has now been reduced to such insignificance that, despite some feeble outcries, it has become a taboo in our political parlance. Our mind-set that contributed to sustain this toxic situation, nursed over decades, continues to plague the nation with no sign of abatement. This deepening crisis or inadequacy in our body politic exposes structural weaknesses within the broader political system. We need to transform the landscape of devaluation and prejudices and go beyond the stale rhetoric and shadowy conspiracy theories.

The issue is multi-dimensional, much beyond the notional-social parameters, and calls for more introspection, much more nourishment, and a wider and deeper understanding than we have seen before. There is, however, no single solution for this attitudinal behaviour that dogs our quest for national consensus. Sir Winston Churchill once famously said: “Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.” It would be indulgent to blame either of our parties as they were the products of the same socio-political environment. We need to shun this blame culture that distorts our political landscape. To bring the matter into perspective, I am, however, drawn to the gesture shown by Joe Biden, the US president-elect, to his arch-rival Donald Trump. In his campaign trail, Joe Biden had refrained from attacking Donald Trump and prayed for his early recovery from illness.

At home, the traditionally winning candidate chooses to be more triumphalist than gracious in his electoral victory. The defeated candidate too is averse to congratulating the winning candidate. It's a faultline in our culture—a culture circumscribed by certain traditions and inhibitions—and not an individual's fault. Voices in defence of moderation are rarely heard even when that is how most ordinary people instinctively live. We must realise that our future is a shared one, and consensus at the national level is the only way forward. How soon we can break free of this syndrome should be a measure of our maturity as a nation.

Presently, as the nation celebrates the historic Mujib birth centenary, we may reflect on the momentous unity accomplished by Bangabandhu during the war of liberation. At this emblematic moment, when divisiveness at the national level stares at our face, we need to make a collective endeavour again to overcome the barrier of disunity in our national interest.

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