

Covid-19 vaccine pilot to begin

The challenge is to successfully launch the mass inoculation programme

So it begins finally. If everything goes as planned, the prime minister will today inaugurate a pilot run for the rollout of Covishield—the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine purchased from the Serum Institute of India—setting the stage for the nationwide vaccination campaign scheduled to begin on February 7. Five public hospitals in Dhaka have been selected to initially administer the vaccine among selected volunteers. A visit by *The Daily Star* to three of these hospitals has revealed various levels of preparations, and the authorities are confident they can pull it off without any hindrance. Despite the logistical challenges likely to be encountered in mass-level delivery and administration over the coming weeks, this moment is one of joy and celebration. After nearly a year of suffering, the vaccine is finally here and ready for rollout, for which the government deserves kudos, especially given how quickly it has been able to secure delivery of the vaccine doses.

So far, the government has secured 70 lakh Covishield doses, after the arrival of 20 lakh doses as a gift from India and subsequently, 50 lakh government-purchased ones. More will follow in the coming months. However, as the experiences of countries that have already launched mass inoculation programmes show, it is one thing to receive vaccine doses, and another to deliver and administer them successfully. We know how even developed countries have been struggling to reach the vaccine to segments of populations most in need of it. A successful campaign requires strong governance and a well-thought-out vaccination policy armed with proper delivery, storage, identification and administration mechanisms. Bangladesh will struggle on all these fronts, if its past record of Covid-19 response is any indication, but even if it somehow manages to accomplish these tasks, it may not be enough to curb or slow the transmission of the virus with its limited supply of vaccines. According to health experts, any immunisation programme may not work unless a minimum of 70 percent of the population has acquired immunity, which is a tall order for a country of over 160 million.

So the coming of the vaccine, something we looked forward to for so long, should not distract us from the formidable challenges that lie ahead. We have often commented on the inadequacy of the government's Covid-19 response, but with vaccines finally in our midst and the virus still showing no signs of letting up, the government must do better. The way we see it, three of the most important challenges now are to purchase enough vaccines for the whole population, properly identify at-risk groups, and administer the vaccines successfully while ensuring that the follow-up dose will be available at the right time. Nothing less than a concerted effort guided by a clear vision will be enough.

Chattogram City Corporation elections

Is the Election Commission in control?

CHATTOTGRAM happens to be the second largest city in the country and not everything is going well in terms of the peaceful, fair and transparent conduct of elections. Violence and inter-party clashes have marked the electioneering period since January 12, and the BNP-backed mayoral candidate's electoral campaigns have come under attack on two occasions since electioneering resumed. Party offices have been vandalised, allegedly by supporters of the opposing party, and rebel candidates have been attacked too. So far, two people have been killed. Serious apprehensions have been expressed by various citizens' groups regarding the conduct of the polls.

It is sad but true that what we have witnessed in the port city has not been any different from what we have seen take place in other areas of the country during the recent local elections. Despite assurances from relevant agencies, people have been killed, and politicking by other candidates has been made difficult by supporters of the ruling party candidates. In short, the level playing field that all participants demand and which the Election Commission (EC) promises to deliver is never delivered.

In the case of the port city polls, there are mixed reports about the effectiveness and the manner of addressing the various complaints filed by the candidates. Reportedly, nearly half the complaints lodged by mayor and councillor candidates have not been addressed by the EC. On the other hand, police personnel engaged by the Election Commission did not find proof of any wrongdoings regarding most of the complaints that have been addressed so far.

What was the logic behind lodging these FIRs by the EC, we wonder? We believe the EC and the magistrates under it are empowered to penalise violations of the code of conduct. Lodging FIRs don't resolve the issue in hand. It would help if the EC adjudicated on such issues that have direct bearings on the conduct of the elections. We feel that the EC is in effect passing the buck by lodging FIRs instead of doing what it is empowered to do. Has the EC been able to provide a level playing field? We wonder!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reopening schools

Since March last year, all educational institutions have been shut due to the pandemic. Finally, there is a ray of hope as the government has decided to reopen schools in phases on a limited scale, prioritising SSC and HSC students. However, while students must get back to class, maintaining health guidelines to ensure safety is of utmost importance. Masks and physical distancing must be mandatory, as well as proper handwashing facilities and regularly sanitised toilets. As most people tend to disregard precautionary rules in public places, constant supervision is also a must.

Sarwar Hossain, Chattogram

Will vaccine nationalism lead to the exclusion of Rohingya refugees?



MD SAIMUM REZA TALUKDER

THE World Health

Organization (WHO) has adopted "leaving no one behind" and "equitable access to vaccines" as the basic principles for Covid-19

vaccination around the world. GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, has also set up "equitable and sustainable use of vaccines" and "leaving no one behind" as the core of their high-level strategy for worldwide immunisation. All these strategies are in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. However, global vaccination is not just a mere strategy or goal. This relates to the right to healthcare, which is an integral part of the right to life and must be ensured irrespective of nationality, religion, race, creed or culture.

According to a report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around 79.5 million people had been forced worldwide from their homes due to persecution, conflict and human rights violations as of mid-2020. That number includes 29.6 million refugees, 4.2 million asylum seekers and 45.7 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Around 34 million of this 79.5 million are children. Unfortunately, it is not clear who will ensure the Covid-19 vaccination of all these people. According to UNHCR in January 2021, "around 90 countries are currently developing national Covid-19 vaccination strategies and 51—or 57 per cent—have included refugees in their vaccination plans". This trend reminds us that most of the UN member states are ignoring, if not denying, the responsibility to "respect", "protect" and "promote" human rights principles as per the UN Charter towards refugees, IDPs and stateless people.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), "vaccine nationalism" has stood as a massive blow to the global vision for universal and equitable access to an affordable vaccine. Vaccine nationalism is when countries prioritise inoculating their own populations before others. Experts have already warned that this vaccine nationalism would prolong the Covid-19 pandemic by years. From the point of view of public health discourse, it is impossible to break or sustainably slow the transmission of the coronavirus unless a minimum of 70 percent of the population has acquired immunity. That is why the UNHCR believes that the exclusion of refugees, IDPs and stateless

people from vaccination plans carries the risk of ongoing transmission in these populations, with spillovers into the global population. HRW also thinks that opaque vaccine deals could undermine a global recovery from the pandemic.

It is to be mentioned that refugees, IDPs and stateless people are more vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic than others. According to UNHCR, more than 85 percent of refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, where health systems have often been overwhelmed, with limited capacity to manage persons with severe Covid-19 complications. UNHCR also stated that refugees, forcibly displaced and the stateless are often unable to practice social distancing due to overcrowded living arrangements, and with inadequate

Rohingya refugees were 310. The report also suggested that nine refugees had died from Covid-19.

While it is good news that the transmission of coronavirus in the refugee camps has been kept under control, we must also remember that it is almost impossible to maintain physical distance in such an extremely overcrowded place like the Rohingya refugee camps. According to HRW, the internet shutdown and mobile phone restrictions in the camps have hindered humanitarian aid groups' ability to provide emergency health services and rapidly coordinate essential preventive measures for the Covid-19 pandemic. We should not forget that as Myanmar does not recognise Rohingyas as its citizen, it has left them as stateless people and turned them into



An elderly Rohingya man carries his grandson in a refugee camp in Ukhiya, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: AP

access to information and health care services, they remain at a high risk of contracting the virus.

There are currently around 866,457 officially registered Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (although the Bangladesh government terms them as FDMN or Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals), living in just 26 square kilometres of land in Cox's Bazar, with poor access to clean water and other hygiene facilities. Other estimates suggest there are close to 1.1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. According to the Rohingya Crisis Situation Report 29 by WHO from October 2020, the total number of confirmed Covid-19 patients amongst

one of the most vulnerable populations in the world. The Rohingya face persistent public health risks, which are likely to be exacerbated by a pandemic. So far, there is no hope that Rohingya refugees would get Covid-19 vaccines from the Myanmar government. There are also no effective international efforts yet to pressurise Myanmar regarding vaccination of the Rohingyas. Nor have we seen any specific commitment from the international community regarding vaccination of the Rohingyas, although global immunisation should be the shared responsibility of all countries.

Bangladesh also has a responsibility towards Rohingya refugees because it

has pledged to respect international law and the principles enunciated in the UN Charter, according to Article 25 of its Constitution. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had outlined the Bangladesh Preparedness and Response Plan for Covid-19 in July 2020. Although this national strategy recognised Rohingya refugees as a vulnerable population at increased risk of the rapid spread of Covid-19, Bangladesh is yet to declare a probable vaccination strategy and allocation for Rohingyas. According to a report in this daily, the COVAX programme led by the WHO and GAVI is supposed to give Bangladesh vaccines for 34 million people within 2021. However, it is not clear whether the GAVI would request the Bangladesh government to include Rohingyas in this vaccination programme or not.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a public health emergency which requires emergency medical supplies, including emergency access to vaccine. In the case of Syed Saifuddin Kamal and BLAST vs Bangladesh and others [Emergency Medical Services Case], the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh opined that failure to provide emergency medical services is a serious violation of the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 27 (equality before law), Article 31 (protection of law) and Article 32 (right to life, liberty and security) of the Constitution. These constitutional safeguards should also be extended to Rohingya refugees by interpreting the "spirit of the law". Thus, vaccine nationalism must not prevail over equality, human dignity and social justice, which are the founding principles of Bangladesh.

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Joining the global race to resilience against climate change

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

IN order to reach the globally agreed atmospheric temperature target of staying below 1.5 Degrees Centigrade, all the countries in the world have embarked on a race to reach net zero emissions

of greenhouse gases as early as possible. For example, China has agreed to a target year of 2060, the European Union has chosen 2050 and we are waiting to see what year the new Biden administration will choose. However, it is interesting to note that California, which is the eighth biggest economy in the world, has chosen 2045 as its target year, so it is quite possible for President Biden to also choose that year. Finally, it is important to note that the nearly 50 developing countries in the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), currently led by Bangladesh, have decided to shift to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050, and Costa Rica has said it will achieve the target before 2030.

On the other side of the climate issue, namely adaptation and resilience, there has not been a similar, agreed long-term goal, and much progress has not been made in the way of setting one. That is until now, when the world is about to embark on a race to resilience that is being launched by the two Climate Champions, Nigel Topping from the United Kingdom and Gonzalo Munoz from Chile. The position of Climate Champions was created at the 25th Conference of Parties (COP25) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where each COP Presidency was allowed to choose its Climate Champion with a mandate to engage with non-state actors such as private companies, civil society, academia, media, youth and many others to promote the implementation of the goals agreed to in the Paris Agreement, reached at COP21 in 2015.

Gonzalo Munoz was appointed as Climate Champion by Chile, who had the Presidency for COP25, and Nigel Topping was appointed by the United Kingdom,

who has the Presidency for COP26 this year.

The two Climate Champions have had extensive consultations with many different groups around the world, and I was invited to organise a consultation for them last year with civil society actors in Bangladesh and South Asia, where they heard about the adverse impacts of climate change being felt by the people in our country and region.

The two Climate Champions have

regions, investors and civil society are acting fast to create a healthy, resilient, zero carbon future. By running these races together, we can ensure that all our communities don't just survive climate shocks and stresses, but thrive in spite of them.

The goal of the campaign is, by 2030, to catalyse action by non-state actors that builds the resilience of four billion people from groups and communities who are vulnerable to climate risks.

helps us understand and imagine transformative resilience. It will champion capacity building and local action as a core part of the race.

Bangladesh as the Chair of the CVF has a tremendous opportunity to be a leader in the race to resilience as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has already launched the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan, which aims for Bangladesh to reach climate resilience by 2030. This aim has already been adopted by the other CVF countries



PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

now come out with the Race to Resilience (R2R), which they have launched, inviting all countries and more importantly, all people, to adopt and implement.

In their statements, Nigel Topping said that the Race to Zero and Race to Resilience are two sides of the same coin, equally vital to realising the promise of the Paris Agreement. We need to run these races together, at the same time—and win them both—to create a healthy, resilient, zero carbon future. Gonzalo Munoz added that in the Race to Zero and now the Race to Resilience, businesses, cities,

Through a partnership of initiatives, the campaign will focus on helping frontline communities to build resilience and adapt to impacts of climate change, such as extreme heat, drought, flooding and sea-level rise. This includes transforming urban slums into healthy, clean and safe cities; equipping smallholder farmers to adapt and thrive; and protecting homes and businesses against climate shocks.

The Race to Resilience aims to share and celebrate knowledge, both ancient and modern, from all corners of the world. This includes knowledge that

as well.

The last and most important point to make about the race to resilience is that it is not just about leaving things to governments alone, but for every institution and indeed every single citizen of each country to take part in the race, in order to ensure that each country becomes climate resilient by 2030. Bangladesh can be one of the world leaders in this race to resilience.

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