

The vaccine will work if everyone gets it

Ministers, freedom fighters and others receiving the first shot is encouraging

WE welcome the initiative by ministers, freedom fighters, bureaucrats and eminent citizens to join the inoculation campaign and receive the first shots of the Covid-19 vaccine, which will no doubt encourage all citizens to take the vaccine. Despite the government's commendable efforts to bring the vaccine to the country and make it available through an online registration app, the response from the public has been lukewarm, forcing the government to reduce its target of vaccinating 60 lakh people to 35 lakh people in the first month. Negative propaganda regarding the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine disseminated through social media has been a major reason why people are reluctant to get the vaccine. Added to that is a lack of awareness regarding the importance of taking the vaccine and how to go about getting registered for it.

The initiative taken will no doubt help to dispel much of the fears people have regarding the vaccine. That the Health Minister himself took the vaccine is definitely an encouraging move. Chief Justice, Home Minister, Education Minister, Agriculture Minister, Fisheries and Livestock Minister, Science and Technology Minister and State Minister for Public Administration have all been vaccinated at different centres in Dhaka. Even Gonoshstha Kendra founder Dr Zafurullah Chowdhury, also a freedom fighter, has advocated for the vaccine.

Apart from these endorsements, it is important to have nationwide campaigns to explain why it is crucial for all citizens to get vaccinated. This has to be done with the help of doctors who can debunk some of the myths surrounding the vaccine that are making the rounds. So far, most people who have received the jab have experienced mild symptoms, with a few having slightly more severe symptoms such as shivers and fever but which were mitigated within a few days. It is believed that having a fever actually means that the vaccine is working to create antibodies against the virus. People have to also be told that getting the booster shot is very important to maintain the efficacy of the vaccine and that the regular health guidelines of wearing masks, washing hands and social distancing have to be carried on.

The reasons for retaining these health guidelines are that no vaccine is 100 percent effective against infections, and it is still uncertain whether taking the vaccine prevents others from being infected. Studies are ongoing to unravel these mysteries. Meanwhile, what we do know is that there are large sections of the population who are not vaccinated, so they are vulnerable to the virus and many of them are asymptomatic carriers. Considering the devastating death toll worldwide and that the virus can mutate over time, it is absolutely crucial that the entire nation is inoculated as quickly as possible. Bangladesh is well known for its various immunisation programmes in the past. It is time to use the same efficiency of creating awareness, and distributing and administering the vaccine, so that everyone has access to it.

Revamp the Akhaura-Sylhet railway line speedily

There have been too many accidents on this zone to brook delay

THE Akhaura-Sylhet railway line draws our attention because a good number of rail accidents have occurred here recently. According to a report published in this paper on February 7, with the derailment of a freight train carrying diesel, which derailed near Gutigaon village in Fenchuganj of Sylhet on February 5, the number of accidents involving fuel-laden wagons derailed on this section in the past five months alone stands at five. Reportedly, many accidents go unreported. Needless to say, these have incurred heavy damages to the entire system, not to speak of the disruption in train schedules.

There must be something fundamentally wrong with this sector if train accidents occur so frequently. And not unnaturally so, since this railway line is more than a hundred years old. And it is not as if the authorities are not aware of the problems, or the danger spots have not been identified. Regrettably, the repair works have been merely piecemeal, rather than a comprehensive overhaul of the entire sector. What we fail to understand is why the overhauling work of the sector has not commenced as yet. The plan has been in the works since 2015, we understand, when the conversion project of the sector was taken up. The necessary fund has been approved by the National Board of Revenue nearly a year ago, but reportedly, the cost is being reappraised by the Prime Minister's Office.

It would be fair to say that the condition of the railway track on the Akhaura-Sylhet segment of the Eastern Railway is emblematic of the condition of the railway tracks all over the country. According to Bangladesh Railway's annual report, 91 train accidents, including 78 derailments, took place in the country in the fiscal 2018-19, incurring an estimated loss of Tk 5,696 crore. Although the data on the current year is not available, according to a report jointly prepared by two rights groups, at least 113 people were killed and 15 others injured in 105 railway accidents between January 1 and June 30, 2020. The statistics are grim enough to launch a revamp of the entire railway system in the country. What was one of the safest and most comfortable mode of travel in the country is no longer so. The reasons are not far to seek. We would like to see the railways restored to its old form, and soon.

Myanmar's military arrests the civilian government—and democracy

JONATHAN T CHOW and LEIF-ERIC EASLEY

IN the early hours of February 1, the day Myanmar's newly elected parliamentarians were to take their seats, the armed forces arrested senior members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), including State Counselor and NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar President Win Myint. The military declared a state of emergency, announcing it will govern the country for one year, after which it promises fresh elections. Understanding this political crisis requires unpacking the role of the military in Myanmar's beleaguered democratisation, the calculus of Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, and a geopolitical context dominated by China.

The military claimed that the November 8, 2020 general election—in which the NLD won 396 of 476 contested seats in the bicameral parliament, while the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won only 33 seats—should have been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Military leaders alleged massive fraud, although international and domestic election observers have thus far found no such evidence. Meetings between the military and the NLD collapsed after Suu Kyi reportedly rejected all of the military's demands, which included postponing parliament, abolishing the election commission, and recounting the votes from the November election with military supervision. While the military's actions appear indefensible, it also appears that Suu Kyi overestimated her ability to wield another electoral mandate.

The collapse of the power-sharing arrangement between the armed forces and civilian government fits a troubled historical pattern. Myanmar's military-authored 2008 constitution enshrined provisions that enabled the armed forces to step back from absolute power in 2011 without fear of reprisal but left Myanmar's civilian government weak and especially vulnerable to a coup d'état. In 2020, the NLD proposed dozens of constitutional amendments aimed at curtailing the military's influence by reducing its guaranteed allotment of parliamentary seats to below 25 percent, lowering the over-75 percent threshold to pass constitutional amendments (which effectively grants the military a veto), and transferring control of the armed forces from the top general to the president. The military vetoed all amendments that would have reduced its political power and regarded the NLD's efforts as a direct threat to its privileged position.

Min Aung Hlaing's political calculus is also important for understanding the takeover. His second five-year term as commander-in-chief was expected to end upon reaching the mandatory retirement age of 65 in July 2021. Had the USDP and its allies won at least a third

of the contested parliamentary seats in the November election, they could have elected him president with the aid of the unelected military parliamentarians. This would have enabled him to designate his successor with the approval of the military-dominated National Defense and Security Council, a function he could not constitutionally perform as commander-in-chief. After the NLD's landslide victory, claiming electoral fraud and seizing power may be what Min Aung Hlaing regarded as his last opportunity to ensure military guidance of Myanmar's "disciplined" democratisation while protecting the economic gains of his cronies and avoiding prosecution. Given Suu Kyi's age and lack of a political heir apparent, the military

The military also faces a domestic population that overwhelmingly supports the NLD and is likely furious that hard-won, albeit partial, democratisation has been so abruptly halted. Furthermore, the military's disrespect for domestic institutions has implications for the tortuous peace process with armed ethnic groups in Myanmar's borderlands. Groups that negotiated ceasefires with the central government may increasingly doubt Naypyidaw's intentions for peace and inclusive development, raising the danger of further cycles of violence. With less legitimacy and capacity than when they previously ruled the country, military leaders appear to be acting in self-interest rather than the national interest.

previous military regime in exchange for access to natural resources and extensive political influence, generating concerns in Myanmar that the country was becoming dangerously overdependent on China. Political reforms enabled Naypyidaw to reduce that dependence, but as international opprobrium mounted over the Rakhine crisis, China continued to defend Myanmar against human rights criticisms at the United Nations while pouring investment into the country and supporting the peace process with ethnic armed groups. As Myanmar has moved further into Beijing's orbit, it is again becoming vulnerable to overreliance on China, and Chinese diplomatic leverage. The return to military rule will accelerate this process at a time of heightened tension in both Sino-US and Sino-Indian relations.

Yet, Myanmar's political volatility also threatens China's interests in a stable environment for its infrastructure projects and strategy for accessing the Indian Ocean. On January 12—less than three weeks before the military takeover—Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Myanmar to discuss cooperation on a wide range of issues with Suu Kyi, Win Myint, and Min Aung Hlaing. That the takeover happened despite Beijing's extensive investment suggests that greater stability might have been achieved by collaboratively promoting good governance in Myanmar.

Myanmar has confronted colonialism, inter-communal violence, military dictatorship, and civil war. Securing stability requires tolerance across political fault lines, rule of law, and respect for the expressed will of the people. Myanmar's military subverting democratic processes bodes ill for human rights and geopolitical stability. The crisis poses an early test of President Biden's vision for a coalition of democracies, but it also highlights the need for regional powers to rise to the challenge. Both Seoul and Tokyo regard Myanmar and Southeast Asia as important elements of "new southern strategies" to economically diversify away from China. As key US allies and leading Asian democracies, South Korea and Japan should join willing ASEAN partners in issuing a statement demanding the release of civilian leaders, immediate access to Myanmar by international observers, and a commitment from the military to reverse its seizure of power. As China will likely block action by the UN Security Council (it has already blocked a statement condemning the military coup), coordination among regional stakeholders and global democracies will be critical to an international response that places the people of Myanmar, and their self-determination and prosperity, at its centre.

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People of Myanmar living in Thailand hold pictures of Myanmar military Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing during a protest in front of the Myanmar embassy, in Bangkok, Thailand.

PHOTO: SAKCHAI LALIT/AP

may be looking to hold power until it can shape a more compliant civilian government.

International reaction to the military takeover has ranged from measured calls for dialogue and stability from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to protests and condemnation. On January 29, three days after the armed forces publicly refused to rule out a coup, a group of Myanmar-based diplomatic missions representing Western countries issued a rare joint statement opposing any attempt to alter the electoral outcome. After the takeover, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken demanded that "[t]he military must reverse these actions immediately." President Joe Biden threatened new sanctions. The military, not known for its economic competence, must now contend with capital flight from what was Southeast Asia's fastest growing economy in 2016, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. All of this will likely set Myanmar's economy back years.

Diplomatically, Myanmar has risked returning to pariahdom because of military atrocities against Rohingya Muslim ethnic minorities in Rakhine State. Since 2017, over 750,000 Rohingyas have fled to refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh. Aung San Suu Kyi's outspoken defence of the armed forces despite international condemnation and her refusal to disavow anti-Rohingya hate speech severely tarnished her global reputation as a Nobel-winning champion of democracy and alienated international supporters. Suu Kyi may have calculated that doubling down on nationalism would protect her from being outflanked by the military and Buddhist extremists, allowing her to secure a larger electoral victory and ultimately strengthen civilian rule by amending the constitution. That gamble appears to have failed spectacularly.

Unlike many of Myanmar's diplomatic partners, China has avoided criticising its "friendly neighbour." Beijing provided economic and diplomatic lifelines to the

Unnecessary C-Sections: A major public health issue in Bangladesh



MOHAMMAD ALI

CAESAREAN section (C-section) is a surgical procedure used to deliver a baby by cutting an opening in the mother's abdomen. It was developed as a way to enable a safe birth when complications in

the pregnancy threatened harm for either the mother or the baby.

I did not think a lot about C-sections until I moved to Sweden, where I learned that unnecessary C-section is now a major public health problem. My interest in this issue further increased when I started working in a Swedish University Hospital. I noticed that about 10-12 children are born at this university hospital per day, but C-section is rarely performed. The health team work hard to enable normal delivery. However, nowadays C-section seems to have become the routine method for birth in private hospitals in Bangladesh.

From 2008 to 2016, C-sections increased from four percent to 31 percent. In 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated: "... caesarean section rates higher than 10 percent were not associated with reductions in maternal and newborn mortality rates." It seems clear that an enormous number of surgeries in Bangladesh are being performed on mothers without any medical necessity. Data from Save the Children Bangladesh shows that nationally, about 820,512 C-sections were performed in 2016, and 571,872 of them were unnecessary. Moreover, the report shows about 80 percent of births in private hospitals are now happening through surgery.

Why is this happening? Throughout history, women have waited until their bodies decided when they were ready to give birth and how long the birth process would last. Why are mothers now choosing surgery rather than natural delivery, in such overwhelming numbers? We know surgical removal of the baby allows birth to be completed on a convenient schedule, rather than the unpredictable timetable of nature. We also find the rise of an idea that

the C-section is somehow "better" than a natural delivery. There certainly appears to be some pressure from the health sector related to these attitudes. Some women who choose natural births in hospitals report being verbally abused during their labour for not having the surgery.

Unfortunately the greater convenience of C-sections is not the only part of the story. Like any surgery, C-sections are associated with severe complications for women and their babies. The most

felt. Nothing hurt, but I felt it. I got very nervous when I heard I was bleeding a lot, and the blood pressure was going down."

Her doctor told her husband to find blood for her as quickly as possible. But it was very difficult for him to manage blood or find someone who can donate blood. The clinic could not supply any blood for her because they did not have this facility, as it was a very small private clinic in her upazila. It was a horrible experience for Sima; she could have died, but luckily,



PHOTO: COLLECTED

common complications for women are infections, fever, abnormal bleeding, muscular pain, headaches, and the risks of anaesthesia complications. A C-section also increases the risk of very serious complications in the next pregnancy, including the possibility of being unable to have children in the future.

Very recently, I met a Bangladeshi woman, Sima, 34 years old, who shared her experience. It was her first pregnancy and she often heard from her private doctor that "the C-section is better because a woman will feel nothing until when the baby is pulled out and then she feels a hard pressure." She made her decision to go for the C-section without any medical reasons. Describing her experience, she said "I felt something all the time during the operation. I could not understand what I

she survived. Many women, like Sima, experience such complications from C-sections that are medically necessary, but such incidents often remain unreported.

Apart from the medical complications, C-sections have severe impacts on women's finances. In 2018, Bangladeshi parents paid Tk 4,071,031,200 (USD 48 million) in out-of-pocket expenses for medically unnecessary C-sections, an average of Tk 51,905 (USD 612) per case, according to Save the Children Bangladesh. The average cost of a C-section was Tk 40,000 (USD 472), while the cost of a normal delivery was Tk 3,565 (USD 42).

My experience in Sweden has further helped me to understand the severity of the complications related to unnecessary C-sections. Sweden has long been known as a country with a liberal society, where

every individual has equal opportunities to practice their rights. For instance, a woman has the inviolable right to make autonomous decisions about her own sexual and reproductive health. However, many states in Sweden do not permit access to C-sections without valid reasons. Such a decision is a huge step for a liberal society. According to Elisabeth Storck Lindholm, maternal health chief physician in Stockholm state in Sweden, "The fact that one thinks that a caesarean section seems to be an easy way out is not reason enough to be allowed to do so. It is a large abdominal operation with a risk of complications such as bleeding and blood clots."

Overall, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in the millennium development goals, particularly in the area of maternal health. The maternal mortality rate declined from 574 (per 100,000) in 1990/91 to 143 in 2015. The proportion of births attended to by skilled health professionals increased from five percent in 1990/91, to 50 percent in 2015, and antenatal care coverage (at least four visits) increased to a similar level. However, the number of unnecessary C-sections continues to rise rapidly and remains a major public health problem. It is argued that women experience some complications during normal delivery, but studies have confirmed that C-sections have a much higher rate of complications than a normal delivery.

The Government of Bangladesh has committed to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, where maternal health has been prioritised, in Goal Three, which aims to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services and education, and reduce maternal mortality ratios to less than 70 per 100,000 live births. Hopefully, the government will give the highest level of priority to maternal health, particularly to reduce the incidence of unnecessary C-sections in Bangladesh. At the same, it is equally important to make this life saving operation accessible for the women who need it.

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