Intellectual property cause of death, genocide

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REFUSAL to temporarily suspend several World Trade Organization (WTO) intellectual property (IP) provisions to enable much faster and broader progress in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic should be grounds for International Criminal Court prosecution for genocide. Making life-saving vaccines, medicines and equipment available, freely or affordably, has been crucial for containing the spread of many infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV-AIDS, polio and smallpox.

Jonas Salk, who developed the polio vaccine, insisted that it remain patent free. Asked who owned the patent 65 years ago, he replied, "The people I would say. There is no patent. You might as well ask, could you patent the sun?"

Intellectual property induced scarcity

However, cross-border enforcement of intellectual property rights (IPRs) is relatively recent. The 1994 WTO Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) greatly strengthened and extended IP transnationally. IPRs have effectively denied access to patented formulas and processes except to the highest bidders.

Recognising the extent of the pandemic threat, vaccine developers expect to be very profitable, thanks to national and transnational IP laws. Thus, IP has distorted research priorities and discouraged cooperation and knowledge sharing, so essential to progress.

As Covid-19 infections and deaths continue to rise alarmingly, rich countries are falling out among themselves, fighting for access to vaccine supplies, as IP profits take precedence over lives and livelihoods.

"Vaccine nationalism" involves cut-throat contests responding to scarcity due to limited output. Facing vaccine wars, multilateral arrangements, such as Covax, have not adequately addressed current challenges.

Vaccine nationalism has also meant that among the rich, the powerful—Trump's US—came first. Consequently, most developing countries and most of their people will have to wait longer than necessary for vaccines, while the powerful and better off secure prior access, regardless of need or urgency.

Lethal combination

This lethal combination of IP and vaccine warfare is responsible for more avoidable losses of both lives and livelihoods. Developing nations, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, have been left far behind, even in most programmes for Covid-19 prevention, containment, treatment and vaccination.

The deadly duo are unnecessarily delaying the end of the pandemic, causing avoidable infections, deaths and related setbacks. World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General (DG) Tedros warns "the world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure… the price of this failure will be paid with lives and livelihoods in the world's poorest countries".

He advises that "the international community cannot allow a handful of companies to dictate the terms or the timeframe for ending the pandemic"; "vaccine nationalism combined with a restrictive approach to vaccine production is in fact more likely to prolong the pandemic…tantamount to medical malpractice on a global scale".

While over 39 million vaccine doses had been given in 49 richer countries, only 25 doses had reached one poor country! At current rates, more than 85 poor countries will not have significant access before the end of 2023! In 70 lower income countries, only one in 10 will be vaccinated.

Of the 7.2 billion confirmed sales of Covid-19 vaccine doses, 4.2 billion have gone to the wealthiest nations. With only 16 percent of the world's population, high income countries have secured 60 percent of available doses. Meanwhile, the African Union has only procured 670 million for the continent's 1.3 billion people.

Public health exception

Following strong advocacy led by South African President Mandela, a 2001 WTO Declaration on TRIPS and Public Health affirmed countries' right to protect public health by enabling access to medicines, even without a health emergency.

Although TRIPS now allows such government public health efforts, developing countries remain constrained by compulsory licensing's complex rules, procedures and conditions. Threats and inducements by transnational corporations and their governments limit its use.

Hence, use of compulsory licensing by developing countries has been largely limited to several more independent middle-income countries and HIV/AIDS medicines.

At current rates, more than 85 poor countries will not have significant access to Covid-19 vaccines before the end of 2023.

PHOTO: REUTERS

TRIPS waiver

The TRIPS waiver proposal to the WTO—led by South Africa and India—seeks temporary suspension of several TRIPS provisions to greatly scale up production of and access to Covid-19 vaccines, medicines and equipment to contain the contagion.

The US administration, the European Union (EU) and their allies have so far blocked the waiver proposal, although its measures are allowed by their own national laws. Some rich countries even increased such provisions with the pandemic.

South African TRIPS negotiator Mustaqeem Da Gama has debunked the waiver opponents' claim that even if "approved tomorrow, there are no companies in the developing world that can produce any number of products relevant to Covid-19, including mRNA vaccines".

In fact, the Serum Institute of India is acknowledged as the only facility in the world with the mass vaccine production capacity to rapidly greatly scale up output. Furthermore, 72 of the 154 vaccines "pre-qualified" by the WHO are already being manufactured in developing countries.

Such production in developing countries is subject to very restrictive IP regulations and licensing agreements with stringent conditions. Hence, existing capacity in India, China, Brazil, Cuba, Thailand, Senegal and Indonesia, among others, remains underutilised, primarily due to such legal barriers.

IP main barrier

Despite growing support for the waiver, the proposal was rejected by the TRIPS Council on February 4. The EU insists that IP will "ensure the publication and dissemination of research results, when otherwise they will remain secret".

But everyone knows the IP system discourages, rather than encourages cooperation and sharing, both essential for accelerating progress. Although IP requires sharing research results, no vaccine developer has done so yet. Nonetheless, waiver opponents insist the system is working well.

Rich countries opposing the waiver have quietly, even secretly bought up vaccines. Even as the EU has lost vaccine wars despite furthering pharmaceutical company interests, it has claimed the moral high ground as a major Covax donor. The recent EU export authorisation scheme, restricting exports, is bound to trigger retaliatory restrictions by others.

Incredibly, rich countries opposed to the TRIPS waiver proposal, particularly the EU, now want WTO members to instead accept its trade and health initiative for further trade liberalisation and removal of export restrictions—to address a problem of its own making!

Biden can still lead

The Biden administration has shown renewed commitment to multilateralism by rejoining the WHO, but still needs to offer leadership beyond funding the ineffective Covax scheme and lifting Trump's embargo on exports of vaccines, vital medicines and equipment.

One "people's vaccine" proposal involves sharing research results in return for public financing. This can affordably, quickly and greatly scale up generic production, enabling "vaccines for all" in the world at little additional cost.

As rich country governments have already spent to accelerate vaccine development, they can make this happen. As vaccine developers do not expect to profit much from the poor, this will benefit many at little added expense.

Depriving and delaying vaccines for those with less means has to be seen for what it is. Such avoidable behaviour is, frankly, nothing less than genocidal, for causing many people to die needlessly for IP profit.

At the forthcoming February 23 TRIPS Council meeting, US President Biden can secure consensus support for the waiver proposal, thus providing the Rooseveltian leadership internationally that he seems to be emulating in the US.

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought in 2007. Anis Chowdhury is adjunct professor at Western Sydney University and the University of New South Wales, Australia. He held senior United Nations positions in New York and Bangkok.

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Corporations should be at the forefront of fighting inequality

ISMAIL ALI

VACCINES might ultimately save us from the coronavirus, but the damage that it left behind will last for generations. Worldwide, poverty has increased for the first time since 1998. The World Bank predicts that the pandemic will increase the number of extreme poor—living on less than USD 1.90 a day—by up to 150 million. The number of people experiencing crisis level hunger would rise to 270 million by the end of 2021, an increase of 82 percent in a year, according to the UN World Food Program.

Although it is too soon to see the full picture, most initial studies indicate that the pandemic has worsened one of today's great scourges: inequality. According to a newly published Oxfam report, the pandemic has hurt people living in poverty far more than the rich Globally, billionaires' wealth increased by a staggering USD 3.9 trillion between March 18 and December 31, 2020. Yet, millions of low-paid employees like domestic workers, street vendors, taxi drivers, retail and construction workers have lost their jobs.

Moreover, with unprecedented support from governments, stock markets have been booming, driving up billionaires' wealth, while the real economy faces one of the deepest recessions in a century. Even in the UK, thousands of small businesses are either struggling to survive or have been closed permanently.

This exposes a collective frailty and the inability of our deeply unequal economy to work for all. When the pandemic hit, billions of people did not have any resources or support to weather the economic and social storm that it created. Over three billion people did not have access to healthcare, three-quarters of workers had no access to social protection like unemployment benefits, and in low- and lower-middle income countries over half of workers were in working poverty.

The best efforts of governments, multilateral institutions, and non-governmental organisations are undoubtedly helpful for fighting inequality. However, corporations need to be in the lead. There are many pressing societal issues where important decisions can't be made by presidents and prime ministers, but by corporate chief executives.

Therefore, some scholars emphasise that multinational corporations (MNCs) are among the most powerful transnational actors to address this problem. 79,000 MNCs and its 790,000 affiliates control our economic system. Given the amount of their resources and operational efficiencies, they have the power to significantly improve the lot of the poor by stimulating economic development in the world's poorest countries.

In their book, "The role of business in fostering peaceful societies", Fort and Schipani argue that MNCs that promote economic development and build a sense of community both within the company and in their local areas make a great contribution to building a more harmonious culture. Likewise, my dissertation, explores a Switzerland based MNC's significant contribution in reducing inequality in Moga (Punjab-India) by providing jobs and buying milk from hundreds of thousands of farmers in the region.

It is true that Transnational Corporations (TNCs) cannot provide a complete solution for inequality. But if they behave responsibly towards the society from which they generate profit, they can make meaningful contributions in a number of ways.

First, many empirical studies provide evidence that TNCs pay higher wages than locally owned companies which is an important criteria for reducing the wage gap.

Second, by paying higher taxes, corporations are at the forefront of governments' initiatives that alleviate the gap between the rich and the poor. Although George Osborne, former British finance minister, was unable to force Facebook, Google, and Starbucks to pay fair taxes, Unilever is one of the highest tax payers in Bangladesh, employing 10,000 people including those working in the supply chains.

Third, when a country opens-up to international trade, competition between TNCs increase significantly which helps reduce prices. This in turn increases the buying power of those in the lower income segment.

Fourth, informal economic activity still commands large parts of developing countries' economies which in fact cost those who are poor the most. This is due to rent seeking and unnecessary involvement of middleman in the process of buying products and services. Corporations are increasingly discovering ways to eliminate this leakage, thus improving the purchasing power of the poor.

Fifth, the poor suffer not only from low incomes but a disparity in purchasing power compared to the rich. They pay more for comparable products, even for essentials such as water. My article, "The inextricable links between water scarcity and poverty", published in this newspaper explained how the poor living in Dharavi (Mumbai), the world's largest slum, pay a higher price for meeting their everyday water necessity compared to the rich living nearby Warden Road. MNCs penetration in the area empowers the poor by providing choices of buying water from various sources.

To create a more equal and sustainable economy that benefits all, not just the privileged few, businesses should be redesigned to prioritise society, rather than ever greater pay-outs to rich shareholders. Corporations have a duty not only to address any adverse impacts of their activities, but also to move towards business models that are sustainable and inclusive.

Antonio Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations, writing for *The Economist*, urged governments to ensure that the private sector takes its responsibility towards putting people and the planet at the centre of their business models and encourage green economy that generates three times more jobs than investments in fossil fuels. A recent review of global polling data collected by the New York University also reveals that the pandemic has changed people's priorities.

A society can't exist peacefully if there is high inequality. It is in the self-interest of the governments' elite to create a more equal and sustainable world by putting pressure on MNCs to invest in healthcare, education, and other public services. As the Oxfam report insists, extreme inequality and poverty are not inevitable when governments choose to make taxes fairer, invest in public services and ensure fair wages for everyone.

Ismail Ali is a London based freelance journalist.

Office of the Rangpur City Corporation

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শেখ হাসিনার মূলমন্ত্র

Memo No. 46.18.0000.500.09.001.21-255 Date: 11/02/2021

Invitation for Tenders (Works)

e-Tender Notice No. 08/2020-2021

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (http://www.eprocure.gov.bd) for the procurement of following works, tender are given below.

Sl. No.	Package No.	Description	Tender last selling (date & time)	Tender closing & opening (date & time)
1.	ICGP B2 RpCC-27 (Tender ID: 544323)	a) Maintenance of road, Poultry Firm More to Station Road. W-27 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+880) & Link 01 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+330). b) Rehabilitation of road, post office to Muslim Para. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+370). c) Construction of RCC U drain & RCC road at Banani Para from H/O of Munnaf to H/O Mamun. w-27 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+125) & Link 01 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+035). d) Construction of RCC road from Babupara Rail Gate to Helal Press via Aziz Councilor. w-27, 28 (Ch. 000-500m). e) Rehabilitation of road Tazhat School Para. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+400) & Link 01 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+310), Link 02 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+150), Link 03 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+100), f) Rehabilitation of road from Abdus Salam More to Courtpara Mosque. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+450). g) Rehabilitation of road RK Road to Farmgate. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+380), h) Maintenance of road, Dimla Kali Monir & Link. W-28, 29 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 2+160). i) Rehabilitation and widening of Taltoa Masjid to RK Road. W-29 (Ch. 000-450m). j) Construction of RCC top slab Mahigonj Rothbair to Mahigonj Graveyard Road. (Remaining work) w-29 (Ch. 000-620m). k) Construction of RCC road starting from Goshibari Road up to Rothbari Road. w-29 (Ch. 000-700). l) Construction of RCC road starting from Dewantoli Road up to Kashoytoli Road. w-29 (Ch. 000-500m). m) Rehabilitation of road from Roghur Bazar to Dewantuli Road (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 2+000). n) Maintenance of Mahigonj Boro Madrasha Road. W-29 (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+160).	14/03/2021 (16:00)	15/03/2021 (12:00)
2.	ICGP B2 RpCC-32 (Tender ID: 544324)	a) Maintenance of road from Kopat Bridge to Former Councilor house (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+900). b) Maintenance of road from Sataronji via Badargonj road (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+350). c) Widening of Road from Lalkuti Moor to Checkpost (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+380). d) Maintenance of road from Shop of Azam to Baniapara (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+960). e) Maintenance of road from Khalifatari Madrasa to Shah Alam's house. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+830). f) Maintenance of road from Parbatipur Moor to Sultan Moor (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+250). g) Rehabilitation & Maintenance Road from Motiner More to 2 No. Checkpost (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 1+260). h) Rehabilitation & Maintenance Road from 2 No. Checkpost to Rampura Bottola More & Link Road. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 1+450). i) Rehabilitation & Maintenance Road from Katkipara to R.K. Road. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+250). j) Rehabilitation & Maintenance Road from Chorakbari to Bodorgonj Road byline. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+650). k) Rehabilitation & Maintenance Road from DC More to Keranipara Chourasta via Bodorganj Road. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 2+500). m) Rehabilitation & Maintenance Road from Sodapir Majar to Nilkontho Mosque via Dhap Chikli Vata via Medical More. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 2+000). n) Rehabilitation & Maintenance Road from Uttam School to Baniapara via Antordighi. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 2+550). o) Rehabilitation & Maintenance Road from Radhaballav Bangladesh Bank More to Bangladesh Betar. (Ch. 0+00 to Ch. 0+550).	14/03/2021 (16:00)	15/03/2021 (12:00)

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. Interested person/firm can see details in the website: http://www.eprocure.gov.bd.

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