

Covid-19 vaccination gathers momentum

Challenge is to take vaccine to the most at-risk groups

THE countrywide Covid-19 vaccination campaign launched on February 7 has had a promising first week as more people began to register for the vaccine. Till Thursday night, around 5.5 lakh people had been given the jabs while the number of those who registered online reached around 14 lakh. The first week's charts, both of registration and vaccination, show an upward trend, after an initially lukewarm response from the public. This has led the authorities to reconsider the vaccination target for the first month as well as allowing on-the-spot registration for senior citizens. Also, there have been no reports of anyone falling severely ill, requiring hospitalisation or dying of Covid-19 after vaccination. All this—along with the deft execution of plans and flexible decision-making in light of emerging situations—gives us a sense of confidence about the success of the campaign in the long run.

But any optimism at this stage should be cautious because of the long, arduous journey that lies ahead. After a good start, the challenge for any mass immunisation campaign is to keep up the momentum. This means, the public should be constantly motivated to get the vaccine, while the authorities have to ensure a steady supply of vaccines for them. Vaccinating a large number of the population is a daunting prospect indeed. There are huge logistical challenges associated with it. As the number of candidates for the vaccine grows, so will the need for more trained human resources, more vaccination centres and a more flexible registration process. The news that the rush for vaccine has resulted in many failing to find a date for taking the jabs even after they had received confirmation of their registration may be a sign of things to come. So the government must be careful to remove all barriers, technical or physical, to the registration process. At the same time, its existing system for test and treatment of Covid-19 must function as before, unhindered by the drive for vaccination.

The inoculation campaign has, once again, brought to the fore the importance of a digitised health sector. Digitisation of the healthcare delivery system, along with all vital sectors of public interest, is the need of the hour, and bridging the digital gap in the country should be at the top of the agenda for the policymakers. In the short term, however, the authorities must make sure that the digital gap, along with other problems associated with registration, doesn't come in the way of vaccinating the most at-risk groups of the population, especially those above 55 and with pre-existing medical conditions.

Mro communities' land being grabbed by rubber company

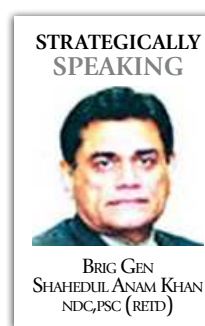
Govt must take steps to ensure indigenous people's right to their ancestral land

WE are shocked at the way the ancestral land of the indigenous communities in the hills and the plainlands are continuously being grabbed by powerful quarters for business purposes. Only three months ago, we came to know about a five-star hotel and amusement park being built in Bandarban's Chimbuk area evicting six Mro villages. Although the move was protested by the Mro community and various human rights organisations, the work of the project is still ongoing. And now we have learnt that a rubber company grabbed 200 acres of Mro people's jhum land in Bandarban's Lama upazila. As many as 65 families from three villages of the upazila became victims of this mindless grabbing and are now also worried about being evicted from their homes. According to the people of the community, they were not only threatened to be evicted but a false case was also filed against members of the community some years ago to grab their ancestral land.

Since the Mro communities' only source of livelihood is jhum cultivation, it has now become impossible for them to survive. They are so afraid of these grabbers that they have not dared to lodge any complaint to the police or file any case against them. And it is not that the land of the Mro communities have only been grabbed, other indigenous communities also lost their land to various private rubber plantation owners and horticulturists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts since 1997. The same thing also happened to the indigenous people of Madhupur and Dinajpur. How will these people survive if the state does not take any steps to address the issue? And who will protect these people when members of the law enforcing agencies also help the grabbers, as alleged by them?

What is even more frustrating is that indigenous people's land rights are not even protected by our constitution. So, one way of ensuring that they are not illegally evicted from their ancestral land is, by giving them the stewardship of their land, meaning that the people who have been living on this land for generations will remain the custodian of the land and collectively protect them, as experts working with indigenous people's rights have pointed out several times.

The state must ensure that the Mro people who have been living in the upazilas of Bandarban for generations are not driven off their land by powerful business entities. This rubber plantation project must be stopped at all costs and the Mro communities' land should be given back to them. Also, the construction of the five-star hotel in Bandarban's Chimbuk evicting six Mro villages must stop immediately. The UN human rights experts have recently expressed their concerns about constructing this tourist resort which "threatens to dispossess the indigenous Mro peoples of their traditional lands and cause serious environmental damage". We hope our government will pay heed to such concerns.



I believe that every statement of a prime minister contains substance and carries weight, more so when it has to do with politics and the opposition. Consequently, a recent statement of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina regarding the need for a strong and effective opposition to make democracy work for the people is too profound to be merely glossed over. This is what she said while addressing the inaugural ceremony of Programmes of Mujib Borsho on January 30. "For a democracy, a strong opposition party is a must as we want our democratic trend to continue". What she further said is equally important: "the present opposition parties in Parliament could not attain the confidence and trust of people at the desired level due to the lack of leadership". It cannot be lost on anyone that the state of the opposition describes the state of democracy in the country.

The PM's comments express clearly the current situation in so far as it relates to politics, parliament, democracy, opposition leadership and people's trust. It reveals the appalling deficit of democracy in the country in terms of the gaps in its principles and practice, between precepts and examples. The prime minister has struck the very root of the problem. It demands deep and serious examination into why the situation is what it is today. However, for any meaningful discourse on the state of democracy one should look at how and why democracy has come to such a state today in Bangladesh.

Politics and democracy in Bangladesh make a very interesting case study. If one takes the year 1972 as the datum year, the transformation of politics and the restyled form of democracy since then is as interesting as it is peculiar and unique. It is disappointing to see the current state of democracy in a nation whose *raison d'être* was the establishment of the democratic rights and freedom of the people.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh's history of parliamentary politics paints a gloomy picture of the growth, role and performance of the opposition in Bangladesh. Opposition was tolerated not for the sake of democracy per se, but because the ruling party felt that it was indispensable since their presence in whatever size and character would lend validity to the parliament and the regime.

The first parliament elected through the election of March 7, 1973 was dominated by the Awami League with 293 of the 300 seats. Of the rest seven, five went to "Independents". There was officially no opposition in the first parliament. It is a peculiarity of parliamentary democracy that the five independent members garnered fewer votes collectively nationwide than several other parties who got fewer seats or no seats at all with more votes. One could argue that in the nascent state, the opposition did not get enough time to organise. While it is true that the state was in the seminal stage of its birth, politics or democratic practices was not

new to the people of the newly-born state. Unfortunately, the first election was marred by irregularities and violence but for which, although the Awami League was riding the crest of popularity, the results might not have been so sweeping.

The very first blow to the growth of multiparty parliamentary democracy was dealt by the Fourth Constitutional Amendment which was introduced on January 25, 1975, as a one party presidential form of government curtailing fundamental rights, the powers of the parliament and the judiciary; the executive authority was vested in the hands of the president who would be assisted by a council of ministers, selected by him and responsible to him. The changes in the constitution were necessary to "bring about a democracy for the have-nots".

Bangabandhu's assassination and coming of the military into politics changed everything. Post-1975 witnessed a potpourri of democracy under military rule. The 1986

the parliament. There was massive crackdown on the opposition and violence preceding the elections. The estimate of participation of the voters was thought by some to be less than five percent. With the main opposition party BNP boycotting the poll, Ershad's JP was coerced to participate to accord validity to the elections. The manna from the ruling AL to JP was a few cabinet posts. What AL got in return was a pliant "opposition". In fact, the new arrangement was unique in parliamentary politics not only in Bangladesh but also in countries that have parliamentary democracy, where the party on the "other side of the aisle" is also represented on "this side of the aisle". The 2018 elections were no different. Both the tenth and eleventh parliamentary elections have lacked credibility, popular participation was prevented by dubious methods and active assistance from the agencies who are supposed to ensure free and fair voting. The sole purpose was to retain and perpetuate power. Although

betrayed by its effort to suppress dissent and criticism. The dreaded and despicable Digital Security Act, as is being applied today would offend Bangabandhu were he alive today as he always stressed on the need for a free press. The role of the fawning media today, with a few exceptions, suggests the fear induced-milieu that it is working in. A free media, in the absence of a credible opposition, is the only guarantee of checks and balance, but not so in Bangladesh. What is the ruling party unsure of? To be so when it claims the great strides that Bangladesh has made in various sectors, and really so, betrays its weakness. If the ruling party really wants credible opposition, why should it prevent a marginal political party to cancel its programme recently?

A pliant subservient parliamentary opposition cannot supplant real political opposition. Suppressing it does no favour to any of the stakeholders, least of all the ruling party. If the opposition in the parliament has not gained the trust of the



The Bangladesh parliament building.

PHOTO: MUFTY MUNIR/AFP

election under martial law, boycotted by the BNP, validated a military ruler as born again avatar of democracy. The third parliament was short-lived, and the fourth, under Ershad for the first time saw a pliant domesticated opposition under a quasi-democratic dispensation.

Post-1975 was an aberration till the fall of Ershad. Restoration of democracy in 1991 saw the presence of robust opposition in the parliament, till the seventh parliament. But a robust opposition did not necessarily make for a functional parliament. Regrettably, the size of the opposition started shrinking from 78 in the eighth parliament to 34 in the ninth. And there were good reasons for it.

The tenth and eleventh parliamentary elections were abnormalities one finds difficult to explain. In the January 2014 elections, half the seats were uncontested as a result of the opposition boycotting

the elections have been validated in the court of law, they remain questionable in the court of public opinion.

In the meanwhile the major opposition party outside the parliament has been pushed into a corner with the political space shrinking gradually. Holding political rallies and organising political meetings by the opposition is a rarity. The common illogical plea is that BNP will likely create a law and order problem, citing the disturbances of 2013 during the months preceding the tenth parliamentary elections. Therefore, it is cynicism at its height when Obaidul Quader taunts the BNP saying that he is still waiting for it to launch a political movement. When a political party cannot hold rallies even locally due to avoidable impediments imposed by the administration, such derisive comments reflect the ruling party's anxiety and moral weakness rather than anything else.

The ruling party's weakness is also

people, the same question may be put on the party in power? And an opposition that is psychologically a part of the ruling party cannot claim credibility from the public but scorn.

If the PM really means that "a strong opposition party is a must as we want our democratic trend to continue" then she must do more than express her wish. We would certainly not like to see the current "democratic trend to continue". Restrictions of freedom of speech should be removed; the EC should be freed of extraneous control, the agencies be made free of political influence and pressure. Leave the rest to the people by ensuring free and fair elections. May one make so bold as to suggest that the answer and the remedy for the ailment are in the prime minister's hands?

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Bangladesh can lead the call to end child labour in South Asia



IN 1998, when 14-year-old Khokon from Bangladesh led the Global March against Child Labour from the front, he became the face of the revolution to end child labour around the world, and the voice

of millions of his brothers and sisters across the world that remained unseen and voiceless. When Khokon, a former child labourer, marched on his single leg demonstrating the power of human resolve, the world followed. Twenty years on, as we mark 2021 as the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, it is only right that we begin with Bangladesh. The UN, while marking the year, called on the governments of the world to take real and urgent action to fulfil its promise to end child labour in all its forms by 2025. With the economic growth and success in achieving education parity that is increasingly making it a regional power, Bangladesh is well placed to lead the fight to end child labour in South Asia.

It cannot be denied that our challenges today are far greater than ever before. Covid-19 has exacerbated existing inequality, as already marginalised children are denied access to education and forced into child labour to compensate the loss of family income. This was further aggravated by the unequal response to the Covid crisis, as almost all of the USD 8 trillion



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Even the youngest ones are not spared from the hazards of child labour.

announced by global leaders for the crisis has been spent on the wealthiest, while those who needed support the most have received only 0.3 percent of the relief. Essentially, the most marginalised children and their families of the world have, yet again, been denied their fair share.

We cannot allow this to happen in the midst of a crisis that can push generations of children into lifelong slavery and exploitation. We cannot lose an entire generation to the effects of the pandemic and turn the clock back on the decades of progress made. It is incumbent upon us to demand justice for our children who are being left behind at this time of crisis. The Fair Share to End Child Labour Campaign, launched globally

last month alongside survivors, faith and business leaders, global students and trade unions and the heads of multilateral organisations such as ILO Director General Guy Ryder, OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría, WHO Secretary General Dr Tedros Gebreyesus and IPU Secretary General Martin Chungong. The campaign calls for a fair share of resources, policies and social protection for the poorest children of the world.

There is no voice stronger and louder than that of survivors and young people to bring about change. The campaign is demanding that child labour is debated in every major political fora throughout 2021 with survivors at the forefront giving direct testimony resulting in concrete action taken to eliminate child

labour once and for all. We are calling for national parliaments to mark the International Year for Elimination of Child Labour by holding a special session to discuss the issue of child labour and undertake tangible initiatives towards its eradication. I am proud that my sister Rasheda Choudhury is leading the campaign in Bangladesh, alongside other champions from the South Asia region, and is building a broad coalition across Bangladesh to champion this issue throughout 2021. Her decades of powerful leadership in the fight against child labour, especially for girls trapped in domestic labour, will be a driving force of the global campaign.

The call for fair share is a call for justice, and a call for equality. There could be many interpretations and reasons for the growing injustice, inequality, and miseries in the world. But the crux of the matter is that our children have been denied their fair share, and it is high time we change that. We know the problem, we know the solutions, and we are empowered with more technological prowess and wealth than ever before. All we need is the moral courage and political will to prioritise our children. As large-scale vaccination drives begin in Bangladesh and other parts of the world, we must not leave our children behind. If we ignore this today, several generations will bear the cost of our choices. As we heal from the effects of the pandemic, let us take our children with us.

Kailash Satyarthi is an internationally acclaimed child rights activist. His unrelenting efforts for restoring the rights of the most marginalised and exploited children in the world won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.