

Why use force on peaceful political programme?

Police should refine its method of crowd management

WE wonder if the clash between the police and BNP supporters in front of the Jatiya Press Club on Saturday could have been avoided; or was it inevitable. As it is, holding of opposition programmes has become increasingly difficult by the day. It is disturbing to see almost every time that whenever a meeting is organised by an opposition political party, the BNP in particular, or a rally held by a private organisation ventilating its grievances or demanding some action from the administration, it meets the predictable inevitability. Either that event is not allowed to be held or disrupted by the police on some flimsy ground. The government's much vaunted claim of the onward march of democracy flies in the face of such hard, and sometimes ham handed, action by the police. BNP's meeting to protest government's mulling revocation of late President Zia's gallantry award, regrettably, met the same fate as its previous meetings.

Reportedly, the assembly, which was held opposite the Press Club, a common venue for such meets, was peaceful. According to the police, the melee started when the organisers were asked to vacate one side of the road to allow traffic to pass through which, according to the police, was not complied with and thus the police baton charged on the assembly.

We believe, and have been calling on all concerned to accept our position, that no political assembly or rally of any kind, and by any entity, should be held in such locations that disrupts the normal flow of traffic, or causes inconvenience to the public. But such disruption of traffic as yesterday's was not new. Nonetheless, looking at TV footage, one is constrained to suggest that the use of force by the police was grossly disproportionate. We believe that the police needs to refine and rewrite its crowd control method. It should realise that we are not living in the colonial or Pakistan period, where the public had been looked upon inimically. It's not so any more. Political programmes may be anti-government, which is not illegal, and not anti-state. And the police should understand that it is as important to know when to withhold precipitate action as it's to engage in it.

We need a safe and efficient public transport system

Too many motorcycles on roads are bad for road safety

THE government has recently reduced the registration fee for motorcycles to half, which is concerning because it means more and more people will be encouraged to buy motorcycles rather than using public transports. While reducing the fee was a long-time demand of the motorcycle makers, Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, a passengers' welfare organisation, has always been advocating for reducing the number of motorcycles on roads terming it more "accident-prone". They also urged the government not to allow operations of higher engine capacity motorbikes as they are more vulnerable to accidents.

Already, we have a high number of motorcycles on our roads. According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, of the 44 lakh registered vehicles in the country, 31 lakh are motorcycles. Besides, there are three to four lakh unregistered bikes operating on our roads. And among all the bikers, only 18 lakh have valid driving licenses. Naturally, the unregistered motorcycles and unlicensed drivers are causing more road accidents than any other transport. The Samity estimates that motorcycles were involved in 24.8 percent of road crashes last year. A 2018 survey by Nirapad Sarak Chai (Nischa) also found the growing number of motorcycles to be the main reason for the increasing number of road accidents.

Therefore, we think, instead of allowing more motorcycles on our roads, the government should focus on establishing a safe and efficient public transport system. In its absence, people are looking for an easy and cheap way to commute, and bikes are becoming their number one choice. We urge the authorities to bring quality public transport on our roads, fix the fares rationally and introduce a monthly payment system for the drivers and transport workers, which will definitely help reduce the rising number of road accidents. At the same time, the authorities must ensure that motorcyclists abide by the traffic rules—carry valid driving licenses, wear helmets, maintain speed limits, etc. Most importantly, there should be at least some control over the registration of new motorcycles since more motorcycles will surely bring more chaos on our roads, as transport experts believe.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Preserving natural gas

The importance of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) in the daily lives of Bangladeshi citizens cannot be overstated. Almost all of us know that LPG is not inexhaustible, yet we continue to waste valuable natural gas every day. Some even waste LPG by keeping the stove burning to keep the house warm during the winter. In many houses people constantly waste LPG by keeping the stove burning so as not to light a matchstick.

Apart from this, we are constantly wasting gas in other ways, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly. We waste tens of thousands of takas worth of LPG for a matchbox worth about Tk 2-5, and this is not acceptable. We should all stop this practice.

Arnob, Dhaka

An impressive start to Covid vaccination in Bangladesh



FAHMIDA KHATUN

ALONG with several other countries, vaccination against Covid has been rolled out in Bangladesh. Before the arrival of the vaccine, there were anxieties among people for several reasons. On the one hand, there are people who are eager to take the vaccine to remain safe from the pandemic. So, their worries include when will their turn come and whether they will get the opportunity at all.

Another group of people are sceptical on the efficacy and side effects of the vaccine. They doubt the authenticity of the vaccine and are unsure about the observation of vaccine protocols by hospitals. The mistrust and confusion among people were reflected in the low registration for vaccination in the first few days. These concerns also led the government to reduce the number of doses to be administered among people. Earlier, the government planned to inoculate 6 million people in the first month. It has now been reduced to 3.5 million doses. Also, vaccination is now open for people above 40 years old which was initially 55 years.

However, within a few days, the number of vaccine registration increased significantly. Initially, the government had allowed spot registration to help those who cannot register online. The hospitals had to stop this due to the increased pressure. Also, some of the hospitals in Dhaka are now full and not accepting registration.

The vaccination programme conducted so far has enhanced the image of the government dramatically. When the pandemic broke out in early March 2020, the health ministry was heavily criticised for its insensitivity and inefficiency in managing the pandemic. The inherent weaknesses of the overall healthcare system became more evident. This was manifested not only through the lack of preparedness in managing so many patients with limited facilities, but also through corruption and lack of governance in the health sector even at a time when people were dying due to the pandemic. The pandemic also reminded of the need to invest more on the health sector since there were so few hospital beds, emergency rooms, equipment, doctors and nurses to take care of so many Covid patients. So, investment is needed not only on building hospitals

and purchasing equipment but also on human capital to improve the quality of healthcare.

As opposed to the experience of Covid patient management, particularly in the beginning, the experience of the ongoing vaccine operation so far has been impressive for which the government deserves compliments.

Before I myself took the vaccine, friends and relatives were all full of praise on the smoothness in the vaccine process at government hospitals where they had registered. I felt encouraged to register myself quickly. To begin with, the online registration process is so simple and user friendly that one can complete the process within a few minutes. After the registration one has to wait for the date of vaccination which is notified through mobile message. Lucky enough, I got the notice on the day within half an hour to

go for vaccination the following day at my chosen centre—the National Institute of Neurosciences and Hospital. On my arrival at the vaccination centre, I got my shot within half an hour. Health workers and volunteers are extremely efficient and caring. Doctors, including the senior ones were around and interacting with people who were waiting to take the shot. There were important people and high officials who turned up for vaccination. There were common people too. But health workers and volunteers

were equally warm and sincere to all. I consider doctors, nurses and health workers the greatest service providers to humanity. My respect for them is always the highest among all professions. During the pandemic my regard for them has gone up further. Risking their own lives, they have been providing health care to Covid patients and in most cases with limited facilities and support. With them, the contribution of all other frontline workers has also been critical throughout the pandemic.

After the vaccine, I returned home with a sense of pride and hope. I feel proud that Bangladesh could prepare itself so quickly and so well to administer the vaccine. This has proved once again that if the government is committed to implement a good programme, it can do so. I am hopeful because, there are talented and dedicated people in the



Officials put a box of the coronavirus vaccine doses inside an ice lined refrigerator at the civil surgeon's office in Barishal city.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

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take quite some time though. As the vaccination programme has now been initiated outside the capital, one would expect that similar efficiency will be maintained at the district and upazilla levels also.

Once the vaccination is completed, there will be some respite among people. This will increase mobility and help the economy to recover faster. However, as many experts have mentioned, vaccination may not end the crisis immediately. It is still uncertain how much protection vaccines can provide to human beings from the pandemic. One does not know yet how long Covid-related health protocols have to be followed. Therefore, while the vaccination programme is implemented, awareness building among people will have to continue.

Finally, the pandemic has once again reiterated the role of a government. Across the world, governments have come forward to reduce the impact of the pandemic and ensure access to essential services. From stimulus packages to vaccination—everything has to be provided by the government during a massive crisis like the Covid pandemic. Hence, it is important how this role is played by the political leadership. Bangladesh's Covid vaccination programme can become a model for other countries if the government continues to be organised and thoughtful in delivering the vaccine till the end.

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Amid industry upheaval, Bangladesh is a safe pair of hands



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

HIGH streets around the world are changing rapidly. The coronavirus pandemic has led to a great many store closures and seen more and more businesses shift online in our major export markets. These changes look like they will be permanent, as it is simply more profitable for brands to avoid the costly outlay of paying rent on physical stores. In fact, in future, there is talk that major brands may have just a few "flagship" stories as a showcase for their products—with the rest of their business going online.

There are major implications here for garment manufacturers. More than ever, production hubs need to adapt and evolve to remain relevant for brands and to be able to service their ever-changing requirements.

Bangladesh must not be a passive bystander, like a rabbit caught in the headlights, amid this shifting environment. We must embrace the changes which are taking place, and with this in mind, I offer five suggestions on how the Bangladeshi RMG sector can improve its offering to brands.

Number one is speed. As indicated, brands are wanting shorter runs, but they want them faster. This focus on rapid

changeovers is a particular hallmark of the online fashion market, where the emphasis is on the continued updating of styles and lines. For evidence, one only needs to visit the website of an online business such as Asos, where the sheer wealth and breadth of offering and the way things are updated at such a rapid rate is something to behold. Consider also, here, Boohoo. This British business now produces a lot of its clothing in the

neglected. Thankfully, Bangladesh went through a massive investment process to make its factories safer for workers. This is a continuous process of improvement but, at the present time, we can say with confidence that ours is the safest major garment manufacturing country in the world. That's a huge sell to brands.

The third sell for brands is recycling and circularity. It was announced recently that dozens of RMG factories in



Brands know what they are getting when they come to Bangladesh: good quality goods and highly competitive prices, working with knowledgeable, seasoned manufacturers.

UK, to be closer to market and provide it with speed and agility. This is what we are competing with in Bangladesh, therefore, everyone along the value chain need to be on board, whether that be logistics, infrastructure, factory layout and so on.

Number two is safety. One of the strengths of Bangladesh's RMG industry is that it is now acknowledged as among the safest in the world after the work of the Bangladesh Accord and US-based Alliance in improving factory safety. As an industry we can still use this as a selling tool with our brand partners. Just recently we saw a factory disaster in Morocco, and we continue to see other incidents in sourcing hubs such as India and Pakistan. Ours is an industry where health and safety was for far too long

Bangladesh will take part in a new circular fashion partnership, a cross-sectorial project led by Global Fashion Agenda, with partners Reverse Resources, BGMEA and P4G.

We need more initiatives like this. Recycling and circularity is the future for our industry. Brands love it and will always want to be involved in projects which promote the circular economy. Often it is difficult for brands to find the right industrial partners for this kind of work, so Bangladesh needs to make itself a one-stop-shop—a place where brands can go to establish turnkey solutions to meet their circularity objectives.

The above brings us onto point number four which is sustainable production. Let us not wait for brands

to nudge and push us on sustainability issues. Instead, why can't we take the lead ourselves as individual factory owners and as an industry collectively? We must stop seeing sustainability as a "cost" and a headache and instead start seeing it as a prerequisite for doing business with large, blue chip retail brands. That is the stark commercial reality we are facing right now, in common with our competitors. We can all complain about the costs of investment (which I know can be onerous) but these issues are not going to go away. As an industry, we all have to bite the bullet and make the necessary investments in factory and technological upgrading, in renewable energy and so on. The "return" on this investment will be the continued business of brands in a world where issues such as carbon emissions are becoming more and more prominent in purchasing decisions.

The final selling tool for brands I would propose right now is Bangladesh as a safe pair of hands. Who would have thought one might ever be able to say that about Bangladesh and its RMG sector? In fact, we have had a very stable period in the years since Rana Plaza, which was such a huge wake up call for all of us.

Industrial relations are not perfect, but they are far less volatile than in other competitor garment hubs. We have not had the "forced/prison" labour issues witnessed in China during the past 12 months (which the US has responded to by placing sanctions on products facing Chinese cotton). We do not have the political upheaval we are seeing in Myanmar and, to a lesser extent, Ethiopia. In fact, of all the sourcing hubs, I would say Bangladesh has been the most stable over the past five years (with the exception of the unforeseen event of Covid-19, a pandemic which has impacted us all in different ways).

In short, brands know what they are getting when they come to Bangladesh: good quality goods and highly competitive prices, working with knowledgeable, seasoned manufacturers. In an uncertain world and these unprecedented times in which we are living, it's impossible to put a price on this kind of stability and familiarity.

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