

Achieving the mass inoculation target

Success depends on door-to-door registration, bridging the rural-urban gap

WHILE as per the National Vaccine Deployment Plan, 70 lakh people should have been inoculated in the first month of the mass vaccination campaign that began on February 7, the government has achieved only 51.15 percent of the target, with 35.81 lakh people getting their first shot of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine as of March 4. There have been some gaps in the government's vaccine deployment plan, which is why the number of people getting registered for the vaccine is still not satisfactory. However, it is encouraging that Bangladesh's performance in the global context is good—it holds the 18th position among all countries, with 2.17 percent of its population immunised till March 4.

There have been some major limitations in the government's vaccination plan from the very beginning, as its inoculation programme started without conducting any major awareness campaigns. It took people quite some time to gain trust in the effectiveness of the vaccines. Now that the urban educated people from well-off backgrounds are registering for vaccinations online through the Surokha app, the urban poor are lagging far behind in the race. Needless to say, many people are finding the registration process quite difficult. Moreover, fear and superstition surrounding the vaccine are still pervasive among the urban poor and the rural people in general. In addition, the lower participation of women compared to men in the vaccination programme is a big issue that should be addressed by the authorities—of the 35.81 lakh people vaccinated till March 4, only 12,87,100 were women. Furthermore, while some districts of the country vaccinated quite a large number of their population, the performance of many other districts is still not satisfactory, which only reveals the inefficiency of some of the district authorities.

As we identify the reasons behind the slow pace of vaccination in the country, we hope that the government will consider these factors while working towards achieving its vaccination target. Since people living in urban areas responded more than those in rural areas, awareness needs to be raised amongst rural populations about the need to get vaccinated. The digital centres, set up by the Local Government Division in every union, should assist people in rural areas in registering for inoculation. Moreover, more vaccination centres should be set up in remote areas and online registration support should be taken to people's doorsteps, as suggested by health experts. Last but not the least, the authorities must address the huge gender gap that exists in the mass inoculation campaign to make the programme a success.

Another death at a shipbreaking yard

Dismally unsafe working conditions to blame

WE are appalled at the tragic and untimely death of a worker in one of Chattogram's shipbreaking yards. The foreman, Ripon Mia (37), died on the spot after iron sheets fell on him at Tasin Steel Shipbreaking Yard, a yard owned by a Chattogram-4 lawmaker.

Whenever a worker at a shipbreaking yard dies during duty—which happens far too frequently—the employers' first course of action is usually to try to evade responsibility and accountability. But while the owner of the yard in question had no qualms confirming the cause of Ripon's death, his disregard in saying that "sometimes incidents like this happen in spite of [owners'] efforts to save workers from accidents" is quite shocking. That the gruesome death of an employee (while he was on duty at midnight) should invoke such indifference is outrageous.

Besides incidents such as this, workers in the port city's shipbreaking yards are also injured or killed by inhaling toxic fumes, receiving burns, or even from explosions of oil tanks when working without proper (or any) safety gear on. Another example of how these workers' safety is not prioritised is that last year, the yards began reopening in April less than a month after they were shut down due to the coronavirus outbreak. Even then, there was not enough protective gear to protect the workers from the deadly virus.

In its guidelines for safety and health in shipbreaking in Asian countries, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) lists myriad safety precautions, including the wearing of appropriate PPE, which are hardly ever practiced in Chattogram's shipbreaking yards. Being in the informal sector, these yards are also not always subject to controls or inspections for proper health and safety measures. And with many of the workers being under the age of 18, these jobs would also violate the Minimum Age and Worst Forms of Child Labour Conventions of the ILO.

It is clear that Ripon's death is not an isolated event, and that it could well have occurred at any of the over 100 such shipbreaking yards in Chattogram, as none of them have ensured proper safety of their workers. Even more alarming is the non-existence of any action being taken against these yards. Although there were 181 such deaths between 2005 and 2017, and several more in the following years, not a single case has ever been filed against a yard owner in the history of this industry, according to the president of the Shipbreaking Trade Union Forum.

So who is to blame for these injuries and deaths? A letter from the Ministry of Industry (issued on December 30 last year) blames yard owners' apathy when it comes to ensuring a safe workplace for employees. But where can we find the empathy of the Ministry itself in mentioning that "accidents like this give a negative impression about the yards in the international arena" in the letter? Why is the perception of the international arena the only concern when we are discussing the safety of human lives?

While the owners of these yards are morally obligated to protect their employees from dangerous working conditions, we believe it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Industries (and others in charge) to make sure that visible and effective changes are made so that injuries and deaths at shipbreaking yards can be prevented.

The case for rescinding the Digital Security Act



C R ABRAR

THEY were both active, conscientious, thinking citizens. Both were passionate about social issues, and were gifted—one had a penchant for writing, the other for drawing cartoons. Both were tech-savvy and loved sharing

their views on social media, banding together to set up a digital platform proudly titled "I am Bangladeshi". Both were under the belief that as citizens of a democratic country, they were relatively free to express their views and had the protection of the constitution and the law. Unfortunately, as events would reveal, they were both sadly mistaken on that count. When the time came, the facade of protection crumbled. One had to pay the ultimate price, as his soul, yearning for freedom, sneaked out of the prison van; the other now languishes in severe bodily pain, mourning his comrade who promised him company to see the Everest after "they get out and get fit".

Within months of the infamous Kajol episode, the Mushtaq Ahmed and Kishore Kabir tragedies have unleashed citizens' fury against the Digital Security Act (DSA). Every freedom-loving citizen has rallied behind the call for rescinding the DSA. Termed as the "killer Act", "an archaic legislation" and "a medieval law", critics have argued that it cannot exist in a democratic polity as it blocks people's voices. The mixing of the concepts of "criticism of government" and "sedition", and interchangeable use of terms like "anti-government" and "anti-state" in the Act's application, is evidence enough that it was framed not in the interests of the people/state, but of those in command of the state apparatus. Litmus papers have turned red in all three cases (Kajol, Mushtaq and Kishore) with regard to the efficacy of the law.

The DSA substantively curtails freedoms of expression, thought and the media. With its vague provisions, the law was open to abuse from the very beginning. It targeted free thinkers, journalists and dissenting voices. Not surprisingly, it was enacted only months before the 2018 elections. The law was framed without consultation with major stakeholders. Those involved in the drafting of the law refused to take into account the inputs of those who were likely to be most affected by its application. In response to the widespread condemnation about the draconian contents and broad sweep of the law, the umpteenth numbers of ministerial promises to amend it and introduce Rules to clarify the ambiguities have remained undelivered. The non-bailable provisions have made the law inherently unfair. As Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, counsel for both Mushtaq and Kishore, observed, it deprives the accused of the opportunity to put up a legal fight that s/he generally enjoys and "there is no scope for the accused to get justice".

The Bangladesh police headquarters has reported that in the first five months alone of 2020, 403 cases were filed and 353 arrests were made under the Act. No further

information was made available for the subsequent seven-month period.

A detailed analysis of 197 cases of 2020 by Prothom Alo found that most of the cases were filed for "making adverse remarks" (*kotukti*), "defamation", "sharing distorted images", "spreading rumours" and "conspiracy against the state". In 80 percent of instances, the plaintiff was either leaders or activists of the ruling party or police. Of the 197 cases, 88 were filed by Awami League MPs, union council chairs and activists of youth, student and volunteer wings of the ruling party, and 70 more were filed by the police. Journalists were the principal targets.

The investigation further revealed that the news items for which journalists were charged included theft of relief goods, criticism of Covid-19 treatment arrangements, criticism of actions of local MPs and public representatives, and land/property grabbing by the locally

there was not enough evidence to support the charges. In merely 25 cases, the state was able to prove the charges. Of these, 24 were filed under the ICT Act and only one under the DSA.

Thus, there is little doubt that instead of providing redress to the aggrieved, the DSA has come in as a handy tool to suppress those who may hold contra views or dare to question and expose the wrongdoings of those who hold power. The fact that most of the provisions are made non-bailable means that the accused may have to endure incarceration for prolonged periods, even before s/he is found guilty. It therefore provides some quarters, who do not wish to be accountable and be questioned for their deeds, an opportunity to abuse the law. This provision of the law is contrary to the tenets of the rule of law and human rights. As rights lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua further states "any application (of such an inherently flawed law), itself is a misapplication".



PHOTO: COLLECTED

powerful. Some cases were filed for updating Facebook statuses on current topics, and criticisms of MPs and local government representatives. Of the 197 cases, as many as 48 were filed for allegedly publishing false news against MPs, public representatives and ruling party activists; 40 for objectionable posting against Bangabandhu, the president, prime minister and other important persons of the state, and 30 for passing adverse remarks against religion, hurting religious sentiments and spreading communal hatred.

The tenuous nature of the charges is evident from the following figures. In the last seven years, of the 2,682 cases filed at the Dhaka Cyber Tribunal—the only competent court to try cases under the ICT Act and DSA—990 were disposed of up to September 2020. Of those, more than 400 were disposed of after the final report. In many cases, the accused were exonerated as

A brief examination of Mushtaq and Kishore's cases would reveal the extent of the misapplication of the law and the propensity of law enforcers to circumvent the rule of law.

Firstly, in his interview with *The Daily Star* within hours of his release, Kishore alleged that he was picked up by 17 plainclothesmen, some brandishing weapons, without any warrant or identity documents. This is a violation of the law and High Court order.

Secondly, Kishore was picked up an hour before Ifaara on May 2, 2020 and produced before the magistrate on May 6. The concerned agency claimed that he was picked up at 2:30 am on May 5 and thus within the time-frame allowed under the law. In reality, if one goes by Kishore's statement about the timing of his arrest, one has to surmise that he was involuntarily disappeared during the interim days.

WTO receives a booster shot with new DG



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE World Trade Organization (WTO), the body that is entrusted to promote free international trade, has recently received two very well-timed shots in the arm. The WTO was in a moribund state—almost on life support—during the last year and a half, following the outbreak of the US-China trade war and the total decimation of its Appellate Court. International trade among nations suffered a massive blow during the Covid-19 pandemic and there

was concern on whether the WTO would just fold itself up and wait for another international body to take its place. Now, the WTO cheerleaders can keep their fingers crossed and hope that this year will bring about a much-needed morale boost and restore some normalcy in the global arena. This will not only facilitate the resuscitation of the WTO but also enable rule-based trade and commerce to grow, which will in turn create a synergistic effect on economic growth and create a virtuous cycle.

On March 1, the new Director-General (DG) Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a Nigerian economist and former government minister, took charge at the WTO headquarters on the banks of Lake Geneva. On the same day, she addressed the ambassadors and other top government envoys that make up the 164-member body's General Council and minced no words. "The world is leaving the WTO behind. Leaders and decision-makers are impatient for change," she said. She warned them that several trade ministers had told her that "if things don't change," they would not attend the WTO's biggest event—a ministerial meeting—"because it is a waste of their time."

Incidentally, she is the first woman and African to head the WTO. With International Women's Day a few days away, her ascendancy bodes well for the role of women in international leadership.

The WTO has been without a permanent leader since the former DG Roberto Azevedo stepped down on August 31, a year ahead of his term. Dr Okonjo-Iweala will be at the helm for a renewable term expiring on August 31, 2025. However, she understands that she does not have much time before the next Ministerial Council meets in June 2021 in Nur-Sultan, the Kazakh capital. The meeting, known as MC12, will be an important

milestone as the world economy emerges from the clutches of the pandemic.

The new DG is aware of the role she will play as she tries to revive the WTO. She made three important points on her first day at work. As was expected, she called for a "technology transfer" when it comes to Covid-19 vaccines. After her appointment last month, she said that promoting and facilitating the enhanced distribution of Covid-19 vaccines and protective equipment will be high on her priorities list.

Second, she urged member nations to reach a deal to reduce overfishing after years of fruitless talks. Third, she immediately set about trying to change the organisation's culture. "It cannot be business as usual. We have to change our approach from debate and rounds of questions to delivering results," she proclaimed to the General Council.

MC12 was originally scheduled to take place on June 8-11, 2020, but was postponed due to the Covid-19 outbreak. The last meeting of this group, MC11, was a total failure and the leaders of member countries need to recognise now that the issues need to be resolved well in advance of the ministerial council meeting, and that talks need to be sped up. Areas of contention include e-commerce, subsidies, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

The new DG's arrival couldn't have come at a better time. The future of world trade has been in jeopardy since the US-China trade war broke out in 2018. Even before the pandemic hit in early 2020, the WTO was facing mounting problems. Countries closed their borders, and nationalistic agendas challenged the economic argument for free trade. "Numerous countries began to impose trade restrictions—on imports and exports—under the pretense of national security."

The WTO forecasts that trade could decline this year by as much as 32 percent. World merchandise volumes had been in decline for nearly a year, even before the outbreak hit. In 2019, governments introduced trade restrictions, including tariff increases, stricter customs procedures, and the imposition of import taxes and export duties, on USD 747 billion worth of global imports, the highest since 2012, prompting businesses to postpone investment and hurting growth, job creation and purchasing power around the world.

However, Okonjo-Iweala is realistic in terms of her expectations. In an online press conference after her election in mid-February, she said, her task "will not

be easy because we also have the issue of lack of trust among members which has built up over time, not just among the US and China and the US and the EU... but also between developing and developed country members, and we need to work through that."

Okono-Iweala holds a PhD from MIT and is the board chair of Gavi, a global alliance to ensure low-income countries can access life-saving vaccines. Many are hoping that her political interpersonal skills, rather than trade background, can help inject some confidence back into the system. "She can contribute to strengthening multilateralism by using her influence," said Peter Ungphakorn, a former WTO secretariat staff member. "There is cause for renewed optimism that the WTO can measure up to the tasks ahead," Alan Wolff, a WTO deputy director-general and an American trade lawyer, said at a conference last month.

The global trade body was created in 1995 to help settle trade disputes, write new trade rules and encourage the flow of goods and services worldwide. However, the last ministerial meeting, MC11, held in 2017 in Buenos Aires, was a total failure, with members at loggerheads in two negotiations over fishery subsidies and the digital trade. Before he resigned in frustration, the former DG Azevedo cautioned, "Ensuring that businesses and households have the confidence to invest and consume will be a very important part of our economic recovery. And it is why the multilateral trading system has an important role to play in all of these efforts."

"All members must intensify efforts to do what they can—at home, and collectively—to foster a strong rebound. In our activities here at the WTO—on monitoring and transparency, implementation of commitments, negotiations and broader reform efforts—we must work to ensure that our organisation emerges out of this crisis more resilient than ever, and even more responsive to members' changing needs."

Bangladesh has a lot at stake in the revival of the WTO and the new DG's success. Our march to middle-income status will hinge on export growth and remittances. The Bangladesh government has outlined a plan to raise USD 150 billion through remittances in the next five years. The success of the DG's agenda will only assist us to achieve the target.

There has been outrage at the death of Mushtaq and Kishore's treatment in custody. Demands have been raised to rescind the DSA. Careful and well thought-out amendments of a few provisions of the ICT Act would be enough to address the concerns of digital safety, of the citizens and the state. Thus, one hopes the government will pay heed to these calls to scrap the DSA. The golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence provides a perfect opportunity to make a declaration to that effect and renew the compact between the government and the people.

The name of Mushtaq's Lalmatia residence is Parampara (from generation to generation). There is little doubt that the torch of liberty that Mushtaq so ardently upheld with his colleague Kishore, and gave his life for, will continue to inspire new generations of Bangladeshis to stand up for their rights and freedoms.

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