

Fire in Rohingya camps

How can the risks be reduced?

THIS Monday's fire in the Balukhali refugee camp in Ukhiya was the third one that had broken out in the last four days. This has caused large scale devastation of the refugee homes, numbering in thousands, and has taken at least seven lives, as per latest reports, including those of two children and two women. The offices of IOM PHC Balukhali, Turkish Hospital and MSF were also completely burnt. There were two incidences of fire in the same camp and on the same day, one in the late afternoon and the other at 11:00 pm. One has to wonder, was the fire put out properly when it had broken out the first time around, or was there some sort of negligence involved that led to two such devastating fires in the same place, on the same day?

These camps (being so densely packed and housing more than a million refugees) are extremely susceptible to fires, given the materials with which the shanties are constructed, plus the temporary electricity lines and makeshift kitchens, and the lack of awareness about fire precaution measures. And this is not the first incidence of fire in the refugee camps. In January of this year, a fire broke out in the Nayapara Rohingya refugee camp, destroying more than 550 shelters housing about 3,500 people as well as 150 shops. Thankfully, there were no casualties back then.

The fires are a double blow to the refugees. Having been able to retrieve very little when they fled their homes in Myanmar, whatever they had managed to scrounge up in the last four years have been turned into ashes. We hope that the affected refugees will be adequately compensated. We also hope that the authorities will undertake a study to determine the causes behind repeated outbreaks of fire in the camps and adopt measures to reduce the possibility of future occurrences of such fires. It may be a good idea also to set up fire stations in close proximity of the camps for quick responses in case similar incidents occur again in the future. In the meantime, adequate firefighting equipment should be provided and volunteers from amongst the refugees should be trained to combat outbreaks of fire at the very initial stage, at least till the fire services arrive. That would help mitigate the damage and save lives.

These frequent incidents of fire outbreaks have brought to the fore how precarious the lives of these refugees are and how urgent is the need for a sustainable solution to this crisis.

Don't let the vaccination drive wither away

People must be made aware of its existence

HAVING gotten off to an impressive start, the government's vaccination drive seems to be losing steam at a most crucial time. The government's plan to inoculate 70 lakh people in the first month has not materialised—only about 49 lakh people have so far been vaccinated. And on Monday, the daily count of people who took the vaccine dropped to 70,933, which was around two lakh in the third week of February. Also, on Monday, the daily number of deaths from the virus rose to its highest in 10 weeks. And the number of people infected reached near 3,000. So, while the virus is back to its menacing best, the number of people receiving the vaccine is decreasing.

As this newspaper reported on Tuesday, many people, particularly in the rural areas, know very little about the vaccination drive, which is one of the main factors driving down the number of people receiving the vaccine. The majority of people interviewed by this newspaper said that they would have taken the jab, had they known about it. This is a most unfortunate situation, where people are not being able to take a potentially lifesaving vaccine, simply because they are unaware of it. Another reason why the number of people showing up at the vaccination centres is dropping, according to experts, is because of the hassles involved in the registration process and the fact that people have to take a printout of their registration document to the vaccination centres. Not everyone—and especially the poor—has access to computers and printers, which makes this step of the process questionable. The government must, therefore, rethink many aspects of this drive before it withers away completely and the vaccines go to waste.

As the number of daily infections and deaths soar once again, we must come to terms with the harsh reality that the pandemic might still be far from over. It is dangerous for us to think otherwise at this moment. Therefore, the government must double down on its vaccination drive and raise awareness among the populace regarding the high rate of infections and the potential benefits of getting vaccinated. It must also evaluate the weak-points of its drive—for example, the complexity of the registration process for some—and come up with simple solutions to them.

So far, it seems that the poor and the people from rural areas have been left behind in the ongoing vaccination drive. And that leaves our entire population vulnerable to the disease, whether we are aware of it or not. Thus, the government must ensure that they too are receiving the vaccine as soon as possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Sonali Bag and its hurdles

Although the pilot project for manufacturing "Sonali" bags or jute cellulose-based throwaway bags was successful in 2018, we are yet to see commercial production. This delay is reportedly as result of disagreement between the inventor of this bag and its producers regarding the technology and methods of production. Regardless, a low-cost biodegradable bag to replace plastic and polythene will be a great thing for the environment. We plead that all differences be set aside and the commercial production process begin as soon as possible for the sake of our environment and climate.

Md. Raquibul Islam, North South University.

End vaccine apartheid before millions more die

ANIS CHOWDHURY and JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM

AT least 85 poor countries will not have significant access to coronavirus vaccines before 2023. Unfortunately, a year's delay will cause an estimated 2.5 million avoidable deaths in low and lower-middle income countries. As the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General has put it, the world is at the brink of a catastrophic moral failure.

Vaccine apartheid

The EU, US, UK, Switzerland, Canada and their allies continue to block the developing country proposal to temporarily suspend the World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement to enable greatly increased, affordable supplies of Covid-19 vaccines, drugs, tests and equipment.

Meanwhile, 6.4 billion of the 12.5 billion vaccine doses the main producers plan to produce in 2021 have already been pre-ordered, mostly by these countries, with 13 percent of the global population.

Thirty-two European and other rich countries also have options to order more, while Australia and Canada have already secured supplies enough for five times their populations. Poor countries, often charged higher prices, simply cannot compete.

Big Pharma has also refused to join the voluntary knowledge sharing and patent pooling Covid-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) initiative under WHO auspices. Thomas Cueni, International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations (IFPMA) Director General, snubbed the launch, claiming he was "too busy".

Pfizer's CEO dismissed C-TAP as "nonsense" and "dangerous", while the AstraZeneca CEO insisted, "IP is a fundamental part of our industry". Such attitudes help explain some problems of alternative vaccine distribution arrangements such as COVAX. According to its own board, there is a high chance that COVAX could fail.

Suppressing vaccine access

Despite knowing that many developing countries have much idle capacity, Cueni falsely claims the waiver "would do nothing to expand access to vaccines or to boost global manufacturing capacity", and would jeopardise innovation and vaccine research.

Big Pharma claims manufacturing vaccines via compulsory licensing or a TRIPS waiver "would undermine innovation and raise the risk of unsafe viruses". US Big Pharma representatives wrote to President Biden earlier this month claiming likewise.

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vaccine discoveries patent-free, while many contemporary vaccine researchers are against Big Pharma's greedy conduct only rewarding IP holders regardless of the varied, but crucial contributions of others.

Big Pharma's price gouging

Vaccine companies require contract prices be kept secret. In return for discounts, the EU agreed to keep prices confidential. Nonetheless, some negotiated prices were inadvertently revealed, with a UNICEF chart listing prices from various sources.

Reputedly the cheapest vaccine available, Oxford-Astra Zeneca's is sold to EU members for around USD 2 each. Although trials were done in South Africa, it still pays more than twice as much, while Uganda, even poorer, pays over four times as much!

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US negotiated bulk prices for Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines are much higher, at USD 15.25–19.50 per dose in several contracts, yielding 60–80 percent profit margins! Moderna will charge the rest of the world USD 25–37 per dose.

Hypocrisy

Quite understandably, most developed countries opposing temporary TRIPS suspension have provisions in their own IP laws to suspend patent protection in the national interest and for public health emergencies.

Canada, Germany, France and others have recently strengthened their patent laws to issue compulsory licences for Covid-19 vaccines and drugs. European Council President Charles Michel announced that the EU could adopt "urgent measures" by invoking emergency provisions in its treaties.

Similarly, in the US, 28 US Code sec. 1498 (a) allows the government

to make or use any invention without the patentee's permission. To handle emergencies, the 1977 UK Patents Act (section 55) allows the government to sell a patented product, including specific drugs, medicines or medical devices, without the patentee's consent.

When avian flu threatened early this century, the US was the only country in the world to issue compulsory licences to US manufacturers to produce Tamiflu to protect its entire population of over 300 million. The drugs were not used as the virus was not brought over either Pacific or Atlantic Oceans.

Biden must act

By helping developing countries expand vaccine manufacturing capacity and access existing capacity, US President Biden can earn much world appreciation

vaccines developed by the NIH. The NIH also provided extensive logistical support, overseeing clinical trials for tens of thousands. Moderna has already announced it will not enforce its patents during the pandemic.

Thus, POTUS has the needed leverage. The Bayh-Dole Act applies to Moderna's vaccine, enabling the Biden administration to act independently and decisively against vaccine apartheid.

Sharing knowledge crucial

Developing countries not only need to have the right to produce vaccines, but also the requisite technical knowledge and information. Hence, the Biden administration should also support C-TAP, as recommended by Dr Anthony Fauci.

When the Medicines Patent Pool



Thousands of activists across the world demanded a People's Vaccine as part of the global day of action on the first anniversary of the World Health Organization declaring coronavirus a pandemic.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

overnight. US law and precedence enables such a unilateral initiative.

The Bayh-Dole Act allows the US government to require the owner or exclusive licensee of a patent, created with federal funding, to grant a third party a licence to an invention. Moderna received about USD 2.5 billion from Operation Warp Speed, which dispensed over USD 10 billion.

Moderna was founded in 2010 by university researchers with support from a venture capitalist. It has focused on mRNA technology, building on earlier work by University of Pennsylvania scientists with National Institutes for Health (NIH) funding.

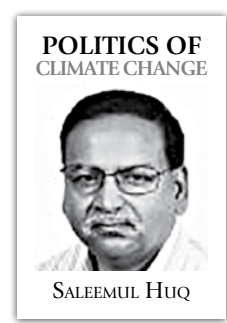
The vaccine developer also used technology for previous coronavirus

(MPP) was in similar trouble, the Obama administration came forward to put US-owned patents into the pool while encouraging drug companies to help improve developing countries' access to medicines.

President Biden knows that early US support was critical for the MPP's eventual success. It dramatically increased production and lowered prices of medicines for HIV, tuberculosis, hepatitis C and other infectious diseases in developing countries.

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Science and solidarity are key for tackling climate change



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

AS we are now well into the second decade of this century, it is widely acknowledged that this coming decade is our last opportunity to keep the increasing rate of the global atmospheric

temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius and prevent the catastrophic impacts of human-induced climate change from occurring around the world. This is a very clear message from the scientific community to the world and is the direst warning they have given so far.

But how does the scientific community work, and what are their latest findings? How can we build on the scientific consensus and take the message across the world, not just for world leaders, but for all people on the planet through a sense of global solidarity, if we are aiming to avert globally catastrophic impacts after 2030?

The scientific community has been very well-organised under the United Nations through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), who have brought together thousands of scientists from different disciplines and from all countries to carry out periodic assessments of the state of knowledge about climate change. I have had the privilege of being one of the scientists involved as a lead author in the third, fourth and fifth assessment reports of the IPCC, along with a good number of other eminent scientists from Bangladesh. The IPCC is currently finalising its sixth assessment report and we will be getting the results over the coming months. At the same time, the IPCC has also published special reports on specific topics over the years and the one on the 1.5 degrees Celsius temperature increase limit in particular will be discussed below.

The first point I will make is that over the 30 years that the IPCC has been making these assessments, they have always provided scenarios of how things will develop in the future, with upper and lower estimates of how bad the results will be. Now that they have produced

these reports for so long, they have found that the actual observations of climate impacts over the last few decades have tracked very closely with the worst-case scenarios from early reports, and indeed in some cases (such as the rise in sea levels), the actual observations have been even worse than the worst scenarios from the earlier reports. Hence, the climate change impacts are likely to be even worse than what we had feared earlier.

The second important message from

possible—although not easy.

The third important finding is that the transition from a fossil fuels-based global economy and energy system to more sustainable energy systems based on renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind, are now becoming cost-competitive and completely viable going forward. Therefore, the race to zero emissions of greenhouse gases can now take place by shifting investment from fossil fuels to renewable energy

increase below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

At the same time, we cannot afford to leave everything to our world leaders, as they have always shown reluctance to take the kinds of actions that are required. As has already been pointed out by the scientific community, we are living in a state of planetary emergency and we need to take drastic actions that are commensurate with the scale of the emergency, and not just incremental steps forward which will be completely inadequate.

Hence, it is incumbent for all sections of society in every country to mobilise and take necessary actions at the local and national levels to tackle climate change, but also at the global level through a strong sense of solidarity across borders and continents. An excellent example is being shown by the Fridays for Future movement initiated by the young Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, who took individual action by boycotting school every Friday and sitting on her own with a placard in front of the Swedish parliament in Stockholm. This has led to a huge global movement across all countries of the world, with school children boycotting classes every Friday—the biggest such strike taking place last Friday. The school kids in Bangladesh were very much involved in the Fridays for Future movement as well.

We now need to encourage other groups, including private sector companies, parliamentarians, mayors of cities, governors of provinces, vulnerable communities and all conscious citizens in all countries to reach out to each other from a sense of solidarity, to combat a truly global problem by building a truly global movement.

As Bangladesh now leads the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) of most vulnerable countries, we have a great opportunity to express this sense of solidarity with the other nearly 50 countries in the CVF through citizen-to-citizen networks and collaboration. This will go a long way towards enabling the world to avoid the catastrophic impacts of climate change in coming decades. After all, we only have nine more years of this decade left to act.

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Student demonstrations at Manik Mia Avenue in Dhaka on September 20, 2019, urging the world leaders to act against climate change.

PHOTO: STAR/ PRABIR DAS

the IPCC is that there is a big difference in potential impacts between the global temperature being below 1.5 degrees Celsius and above 2 degrees Celsius (what we are currently headed towards). This big difference has to do with who will be most affected. In other words, if we can keep the global atmospheric temperature increase below 1.5 degrees Celsius, then most of the world's vulnerable communities and countries can adapt, but with an increase of over 2 degrees Celsius, adaptation will be almost impossible for hundreds of millions of the poorest people on the planet. Hence, the very clear message from the scientific community is to keep the global atmospheric temperature increase below 1.5 degrees Celsius, which is still

worldwide.

Finally, the key message from the scientific community is that world leaders must now listen to science and act accordingly if the worst-case scenarios are to be avoided. This particular message has been reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic and the evidence of a higher number of deaths in countries where leaders did not follow the scientific guidelines, as opposed to lower deaths in countries where guidelines were enforced more by leaders. This is a lesson that all world leaders need to accept and act upon when they meet at COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland in November this year. This is in fact the last opportunity for the world leaders to take the level of action that will keep the global atmospheric temperature