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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Lockdown is on but deaths continue to rise

Health guidelines should be strictly and uniformly enforced

WE are disheartened at the ever-increasing daily Covid-19 death rate in the country, with Friday seeing a record 101 deaths. Though it should be reassuring that we are in the midst of a "strict" lockdown, it seems it is only the main roads and intersections which remain free of people. Disappointingly, kitchen markets, mosques, and alleys are still as crowded as ever (in the capital and in cities like Barisal, Sylhet, and Chattogram), with many people not even wearing masks. One has to wonder at the actual strictness of this lockdown if kitchen markets and mosques are exempt from the basic guidelines of mask-wearing and social distancing.

While law enforcement agencies must be lauded for adamantly carrying out their duties at check-posts, fining people not carrying movement passes, and making announcements on the roads asking people to stay home, it is unfortunate that these measures were only being taken on major streets. As a result, the alleys remained populated and many shops (besides pharmacies and grocery shops) operated freely.

This lax implementation of the lockdown only adds insult to the injury that is the exponentially higher daily Covid-19 death rate. Earlier this month, the health minister announced a makeshift hospital in Mohakhali's DNCC Market, which would have 200 ICU beds (initially 50), 200 HDU beds, and 1,000 isolation beds. While this gives us hope in the current situation (wherein the scarcity of ICU beds and oxygen tanks are causing deaths nationwide for Covid-19 patients), we cannot help but wonder why authorities waited until there was a second wave to finally take such an initiative.

While it is true that many people neglect their symptoms and delay seeking treatment resulting in fatalities, it is undeniable that even for those who do seek treatment, the medical facilities are far from adequate. While the capital is receiving special attention from the authorities in this regard, virologist Dr Nazrul Islam says that at least 36 districts lack any proper treatment facilities for Covid-19. The government must be much stricter in its enforcement of basic health guidelines (wearing masks, social distancing, and maintenance of good hygiene), and this enforcement must be carried on in the post-lockdown period as well, so as to avoid a third wave of the virus. Citizens must be made aware of the dangers of not practicing health guidelines. It is also necessary for the authorities to not only hasten the addition of treatment facilities in the capital, but to also introduce these facilities (such as ICU beds and ventilation support) all over the country. Only when every Covid-19 patient in every corner of the country has access to proper treatment can we be truly optimistic about eliminating the virus.

Another attack on a journalist

If BGB men were involved, they must be punished

WE are appalled by the news of a journalist—Jahangir Alam Shahin—being assaulted and tortured allegedly by BGB men in Kulaghat while he was trying to get information on incidents of drug smuggling in the area.

According to Jahangir Alam, he had gone to Kulaghat area in Lalmonirhat with a local named Sohag to report on drug smuggling at 11:30 pm on Thursday, April 15. He was talking to some BGB men when the Camp Commander came and started assaulting him and Sohag. Jahangir says that the BGB men took both of them to the camp and beat them up, with Sohag being released afterwards, while Jahangir was kept in custody. Jahangir has described how he was allegedly beaten with sticks and kicked mercilessly. What is most shocking is that Jahangir was taken to Lalmonirhat Sadar police station with his hands and waist tied with a rope and with a bottle of phensydid that the BGB men claimed was found on him. A case was filed against him for possession of drugs. Thankfully, a virtual court granted him bail.

It does not take much imagination to glean what happened here. We will refrain from commenting, as it is now a case that will be tried in court.

We do however, have to ask the following questions: Why would a journalist from a reputable newspaper and news agency (also a college teacher) go all the way to Kulaghat to get phensydid? And then talk to BGB men? How will the injuries on Jahangir Alam's eye, face, nose, neck and waist, as confirmed by the medical officer of the local hospital he was taken to, be explained? The answers to these questions must be unravelled by the investigation officers.

The frequent assault of journalists by individuals in positions of power and random cases filed against them under the Digital Security Act or for possession of narcotics, that we have seen recently, gives an indication of how freedom of the media is being threatened. These individuals enjoy a culture of impunity that allows them to abuse their power to intimidate, incarcerate and physically torture journalists or anyone who they deem to be challenging the status quo. We demand a thorough, fair investigation into this case of assault and torture. If the BGB men are found involved they must be punished according to the law of the land. The government is obliged to prevent such abuse of power and protect its citizens.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Improving in test matches

Bangladesh has not been able to perform as expected in test match cricket for the last 21 years. Our weaknesses in the long form of the game are quite obvious. But that does also give us the opportunity to work on them more.

Wares Ali Khan, Sadar, Narsingdi

World faces a looming crisis compounded by vaccine inequities

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

IN a world that has always favoured the rich over the poor—both within a country and across nations—the Covid-19 pandemic will worsen this maldistribution further unless actions are taken soon to rectify it. The richer countries have already garnered more than their fair share of vaccines, and are somewhat busy taking care of their own people. The resource-poor countries, without vaccines and now facing shortages brought about by the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson (J&J) missteps, can only hope that the international organisations will take action to remedy the crisis and offer a helping hand by providing the financial and logistics support needed to balance the lopsided current distribution of vaccines and healthcare facilities with loans/grants that can prevent the disaster looming on the horizon.

I am not resorting to fearmongering here. The Washington Post earlier this month provided a summary of a recent intelligence report from the US National Intelligence Council. The report entitled "Global Trends" forecasts that the world faces a bleak future unsettled by the coronavirus pandemic, compounded by climate change and mass migration fuelled by climate change. The council describes the pandemic as "the most significant, singular global disruption since World War II" and calls upon global leaders to take charge of the potential harm that will inevitably result unless governments and institutions respond with an open mind and take measures to change their own biased attitude and "long-held assumptions".

What triggered this colossal vaccine inequity? First of all, a handful of rich nations like the US, Canada, UK, countries in the EU, China and the UAE, among a few others, have monopolised almost 65-70 percent of the world's vaccine doses, even though they only have 16 percent of the global population. It is estimated that these rich nations are vaccinating one person every second, while the majority of the poorest nations are yet to administer a single dose. These statistics are just further proof of the emergence of "vaccine nationalism" which I warned about last August in my op-ed, "Cheap and fast vaccination is an urgent need for poorer countries" (The Daily Star, August 20, 2020).

The stark reality speaks for itself. The United States has 1.5 billion doses of vaccine while the European Union has locked up nearly two billion doses—enough to vaccinate all of their citizens and then some. Many poor countries could be left waiting until 2024 to fully vaccinate their populations.

The IMF earlier this month circulated its Economic Outlook with a mix of optimistic and a not-so-rosy scenario for the coming years. It cautioned that its projections hinged on the deployment of vaccines and a moderate spread of the variants of the virus, which could pose both a public health and economic threat. It rightly pointed out that the pandemic has strained the health systems and severely hit the economies of developing countries with limited policy space to respond. Millions of

more and the inequality in vaccination will lead to further inequalities in income.

Low-income countries are facing bigger losses in economic output than advanced economies, reversing gains in poverty reduction. And within each country, whether we are talking about advanced or developing economies, low-skilled workers have been hit the hardest and those who lost jobs could find it difficult to replace them. To take an example, studies by SANEM has shown that, in Bangladesh, the poorer segments of the population had their income and food intake go down, and the recent lockdown will only exacerbate their stress and economic vulnerability.

IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva echoed this grim assessment and cautioned that half of the developing nations will see their per-capita income levels relative to

and China. If the poorest countries do not gain vaccines, the global economy will surrender USD 153 billion a year in output, according to a recent study from the RAND Corporation. "It's clear that developing countries, and especially poorer developing countries, are going to be excluded for some time," said Richard Kozul-Wright, director of the division on globalisation and development strategies at the UNCTAD in Geneva. "Despite the understanding that vaccines need to be seen as a global good, the provision remains largely under the control of large pharmaceutical companies in the advanced economies."

By 2025, the long-term economic damage from the pandemic will be twice as severe in so-called emerging markets compared with wealthy countries, according to Oxford Economics. High debt burdens limit the ability of many poor countries to pay for vaccines. Private creditors have declined to take part in a debt suspension initiative championed by the Group of 20.

The recent setbacks in vaccination efforts due to blood clots associated with the AstraZeneca and J&J vaccines need to be carefully followed. Drugmakers GlaxoSmithKline and Sanofi have already announced that their potential Covid-19 vaccines won't be ready until late this year because they need to improve the shot's effectiveness for older people. Availability of cheap and plentiful vaccines is crucial in wiping out the pandemic. The AstraZeneca vaccine is regarded as the pillar of the UN-backed COVAX programme, since it is cheaper and easier to store than many others, an important consideration in the global effort to get vaccines to some of the world's poorest countries.

Last but not the least, African countries plan to vaccinate 60 percent of their population by the end of 2022 and the programme is dependent on the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine and its widespread acceptability. It is feared that safety concerns may delay inoculations, erode confidence in the shot, and lead to uneven implementation.

"You need to vaccinate health care workers globally so you can reopen global markets," said Clare Wenham, a health policy expert at the London School of Economics. "If every country in the world can say, 'We know all our vulnerable people are vaccinated,' then we can return to the global capitalist trading system much quicker."

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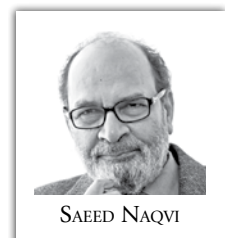
people have fallen into extreme poverty, and food insecurity has risen starkly, especially in the poorest countries and for those living in fragile and conflict-affected situations. "Our urgent priorities are to contain the pandemic, for which scaling up vaccinations will be crucial, and rebuild our economies to avoid a lost decade of development and a major decline in people's well-being", an IMF communique advised.

We are now increasingly becoming aware of an interesting but frightening possibility, a vicious cycle of Covid-triggered instability. The uneven rollout of vaccines might leave the developing countries behind. One cannot deny the link between vaccine inequality, income inequality, and inequality in economic recovery. Poorer countries have suffered

advanced economies fall as a result of the pandemic, marking a reversal from recent decades. "This year we face the risk of great divergence," Georgieva said. "The path to recoveries is uneven, and that unevenness can translate with substantial problems for the world in the years to come." Forecasting models cited by the IMF chief show that low vaccination and weak recovery in developing countries could result in a major setback, costing a sizeable chunk of the expected USD 8 trillion output growth between 2021-25.

In the absence of a major advance in the vaccination efforts spearheaded by COVAX, poor countries will continue to be ravaged by the pandemic, forcing them to expend meagre resources that are already stretched by growing debts to lenders in the United States, Europe

April 2003: US in Iraq, Vajpayee's Pak initiative and Worldview India



SAEED NAQVI

APRIL, 2003, was the cruelest month for the people of Iraq, a month of reflection on Pakistan by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and a rare opportunity for Worldview India, a dedicated group of Indian journalists who helped lift the mist from the historic events that month.

Americans had occupied Iraq, by April 3. Vice President Dick Cheney, the real author of the operation, was eager to declare victory on April 9. It was to be a spectacular media event. After all, Cheney had embedded 300 plus journalists with the forces.

The choreography was audacious. In a prepared statement Dick Cheney would declare victory on Global Media. This statement would be interspersed with images of an ecstatic, popular upsurge pulling down the statue of Saddam Hussain at Firdous square. Cheney's talking head would alternate with the slow fall of the statue. Cheney would never have dreamt that all the back channel tricks that had gone into the manufacture of the memorable spectacle would be exposed. For the first time in the history of Indian journalism, Worldview India had posted camera units/cum reporters in Baghdad, Najaf, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Amman, Lebanon. Some of these reporters happened to be in Palestine hotel, witness to the real story—the one the world was not supposed to know.

Contrary to the narrative of a popular uprising toppling the statue, the Americans had to think on their feet: they had to improvise the iconic images because the popular upsurge had simply not materialised. US marines were mobilised to "lasso" the neck of the statue and have it pulled down by cranes. CNN, premier cheerleader for the occupation, has to this day incorporated a video of the statue as a lasting symbol of Americans replacing a "brutal" dictatorship with democracy.

As we know from the experience of various "colour revolutions", camera angles can amplify a handful of people (in this case the workers of Palestine hotel) into a revolution on the march. True, the sole superpower can arrange for a statue to be pulled down, but how does it show images of crowds celebrating

Saddam Hussein's fall?

1991-92 Shia uprising in Najaf and Karbala encouraged by operation Desert Storm was harshly put down by Saddam Hussain. The only images of the damaged shrine of Imam Hussain was brought to the world by a TV crew led by this reporter. The Shia refugees from this almost unreported conflict had been settled in a vast ghetto on the outskirts of Baghdad. It was named, like much else in Iraq those days, as Saddam City. It dawned on Cheney's team that one group of people thrilled at the "fall of Saddam were actually the inmates of the nearby ghetto, teeming with disgruntled Shias.

A deal was struck with the controversial cleric, Muqtada Sadr. Saddam city was renamed "Sadr" city. That is when

New Delhi. They persuaded South Block to participate in the American victory by taking over the administration of Iraq's Kurdish North. Powerful cabinet Minister like Jaswant Singh found the American blandishment tempting. Prime Minister Vajpayee, as much a statesman as a skillful politician, rather than rubbish his cabinet colleagues, went into one of his extended spells of deep reflection.

He called up his friend AB Bardhan, Secretary General of the CPI. "Are you supporting Indian occupation of Kurdish Iraq?", Vajpayee taunted. "Not at all" exclaimed Bardhan. "But I see no protest". Vajpayee continued. The prime minister was looking for signs of street restiveness on the issue to cite in opposing the idea. The source for this exchange was Bardhan.



The first wave of American bombing of Baghdad at the start of the Iraq War on March 19, 2003.

PHOTO: AFP

celebrations erupted on the streets of Baghdad. Crowds from Sadr city trampled on posters of Saddam Hussain and beat it with their sandals. American romance with the Shias of Iraq burgeoned. On March 20, 2003, Thomas Friedman of the New York Times recommended Grand Ayatullah Ali Sistani for the Nobel Prize. Sistani remains the blue-eyed Ayatullah because he differs with Tehran on the clergy's role in governing the state.

Cheney's contrivance of a quick victory in Iraq was matched by the energetic diplomacy of the US embassy in

Vajpayee did not deny it.

This was a period of extraordinary tension between India and Pakistan. After the 2001 December 13 attack on Indian Parliament, the two militaries were in an eyeball to eyeball confrontation. On April 18, Vajpayee landed in Srinagar and, without a hint to his cabinet colleagues, held out his hand of peace to Pakistan. "An awesome power has arisen". Regional quarrels have no meaning now. Conflicts in the region would have to be composed. The January 4, 2004 Indo-Pak summit in Islamabad followed.

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Vajpayee found the "sole superpower" moment forbidding. Hence his quest for regional peace. Narendra Modi's crawl towards a regional entente is dictated by a different set of circumstance. The burgeoning China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan togetherness in the vicinity makes a friendly US look too distant.

Journalists of Worldview India remember April of 2003 for the kind of journalism Indian journalists have never practiced before or since. The idea was to cover the war and the occupation of Iraq from an Indian perspective. The western media would of course cover the occupation comprehensively, but from its own perspective. Indeed the embedded journalists would be part of the war effort. This would not be the Indian perspective, unless New Delhi accepted the proposition that it was India's war too. Indian media houses are stone deaf on such issues. For coverage of foreign affairs they have deals with Reuters, BBC, CNN, FOX News and so on—so much for atmnrharta or self-sufficiency. A word of gratitude is owed to SY Qureshi, Director General of Doordarshan, for having grasped the significance of the project. He fought the resistance in the system. The standard argument against covering foreign affairs was familiar. "Foreign affairs have low TRP ratings".

Let Qureshi bear witness. Amitabh Bachchan's Kaun Banega Crorepati (who will be the millionaire) had the highest ratings until Worldview India's one hour prime time reporting from the gulf by dedicated reporters pipped it to the post.

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