

The Daily Star

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Bangladesh running out of vaccines

Serum's decision not to honour its agreement is disappointing

THE vaccination campaign in Bangladesh is set to suffer a major setback as, according to the CEO of the Serum Institute of India, “there is no clarity” on vaccine exports from India at least before June-July. In an interview published on April 21, he said that Serum is now focusing on providing all its vaccines to the Indian government amidst a steep rise in the number of daily infections in the country and is not looking to export any of them for the next two months.

As per an agreement signed in December, the Bangladesh government was supposed to get 50 lakh doses of Covishield from Serum each month. So far, it has only received 70 lakh doses in two instalments and another 32 lakh doses as a gift from the Indian government. With Serum failing to comply with the agreement to supply three crore jabs of Covishield in six instalments, the Bangladesh government’s nationwide vaccination programme now seems to be in a bind. Last week, health officials said that with the remaining stock of vaccines, the government will only be able to continue the vaccination programme for another 15 days. That means there will be no vaccines left soon and many people will continue to remain totally unvaccinated, while others might not receive their second shot without which they will also be vulnerable to the disease.

Moreover, as experts have been saying often, the key target is to achieve herd immunity, which will require vaccinating about 80 percent of the population. That means the government must continue its vaccination programme if it is to vaccinate anywhere near 80 percent of the population any time soon. Until then, the virus will continue to be a major threat. This is especially why we have been repeatedly saying in this column that the government should have back-up plans and look for alternative sources of Covid-19 vaccines. Why these suggestions have been ignored is bewildering.

Now, with this most recent development, the government seems to be finally scrambling towards finding alternative sources for the vaccine. This should have been done a long time ago. However, now that we are in this situation, the government must not delay any further. It should immediately start searching for and making other arrangements to acquire the Covid-19 vaccine. Meanwhile, it should try and find a diplomatic solution with India, and remind Serum that it has an agreement with Bangladesh that it should honour.

Movement restrictions lowering daily infection rates

Maintain strictness of lockdown rules

WE note with some hope that both the daily rate of new Covid-19 infection and the positivity rate have been declining over the past few days. This Wednesday saw 4,280 new reported cases, down from 4,559 on Tuesday. Experts believe the recent “strict” lockdown and restrictions on movement have contributed to this trend. They, however, have stressed the need to continue to adhere to health guidelines such as wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, which may protect against a large outbreak of the new variants of the coronavirus.

However, it is concerning that vehicular movements were reportedly on the rise on Wednesday, and law enforcement officials were not as rigorous in checking people’s movement passes. What is even more concerning is that the alleyways and kitchen markets of the capital are still crowded, and many shops are not abiding by the 3:00 pm closure rule. The decline in the daily infection rate is hardly comforting if necessary lockdown rules and health guidelines are being so blatantly ignored by both law enforcement and the public.

The authorities must ensure that the situation is not allowed to worsen (as it did in March) when we are only beginning to see some progress. When and if the daily infection rate falls to a “manageable” number, we must all still be vigilant in practising health safety guidelines. The beginning of the lockdown saw the police being adamant about enforcing the movement restrictions, and we believe that is what should be maintained at least until there is a significant drop in the number of new daily cases.

The elimination of Covid-19 is still a long way away, and both the government and members of the public must cooperate with each other to limit the spread of the virus as much as possible. The authorities must do all that is necessary to ensure that we do not ever revert to the frighteningly high Covid-19 statistics of the early part of this month.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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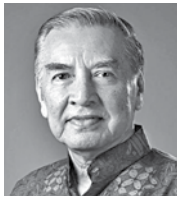
Sample testing must be increased

The severity of the second wave of the pandemic is increasing in the country. But the number of sample tests is not increasing concurrently, and the tests are still quite city-centric. Moreover, the coronavirus has not much affected the minds and lifestyles of most people in rural areas. As a result, despite having symptoms of infection, they are moving normally without having themselves tested. As a result, the risk of a community spread also remains high. In addition to increasing the number of sample tests, initiatives should be taken to make the whole process of testing easier for the rural people.

Abu Faruk, Banarupa Para Sadar, Bandarban

A story of two police killings and different accountability systems

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

IN this column and through our reports, commentaries and editorials, we have repeatedly stressed the need for accountability of all public institutions run by taxpayers’ money. Of them, the accountability of law enforcement agencies is most important. For, of all the institutions in a modern state, it is only the police force that is assigned lethal weapons legally and empowered by law to kill citizens, of course under clearly laid down conditions. But they have the power to kill. Each and every one of them is a potential 007, licensed to kill. Because they have the power of life and death over us—not to mention the power to detain, question, threaten, enter premises, confiscate, torture, etc.—they need to strictly adhere to the highest standards of their own procedure and their code of conduct.

But what happens if they don’t? Two recent cases—one in the USA and the other here in Bangladesh—have brought police procedures into sharp focus. An assessment of the two events will show how the accountability system in one has set in motion serious efforts at reformation, and how the absence of it in the other has led to perpetuation of the same maladies and worsening of the situation, as impunity has led to greater and more audacious violations of set practices and of the law itself.

In the first instance, in May 2020, a handcuffed George Floyd, 46, was killed by officer Derek Chauvin who knelt on his neck for over nine minutes, thereby causing asphyxia—lack of oxygen in the brain—that resulted in his death. Last Tuesday, after nine months of the death, with the trial completed, a 12-member jury of six white members and six Black or multiracial ones unanimously found Chauvin guilty of all three counts of second degree murder and manslaughter.

During George Floyd’s trial, we saw the presentations of both the prosecution and defence camps with a minute-by-minute description of how the event unfolded—starting from the telephonic complaint by a café employee that Mr. Floyd was trying to pass off a USD 20 counterfeit bill, to the police control room alerting patrol cars to go to the site, to confronting Mr. Floyd and handcuffing him, to attempting to force the accused to the back of a police car, to subsequently putting him down on the pavement, and finally to officer Chauvin pinning him down with his knee on his neck resulting in his death.

The whole case hinged on the question of “use of force”. And all the arguments were focused on that one principal question—did the police apply “excessive” or “appropriate” force?—with the prosecution trying to prove the former and the defence the latter. The jury was convinced of the former, and thus found officer Chauvin guilty.

The verdict has been welcomed by most rights bodies. In his reaction, US President Joe Biden said the murder “ripped the blinders off for the whole world to see” systemic racism in the

US, which he termed as a “stain on our nation’s soul”, and promised, “We can’t stop here. We’re going to deliver real change and reform.”

The question for us is, has it taken our blinders off in Bangladesh? Are we willing to work hard to remove our own “stain on the nation’s soul”—the stain of systemic corruption and miscarriage of justice due to class, ethnicity, religion, money and political affiliation that has become so commonplace today?

Now, in the second instance, which occurred in Bangladesh, at least five workers were killed and 21 others injured as police fired on demonstrating workers on April 17, 2021 at an under-construction coal-fired power plant of S. Alam Group in Banshkhal, near the port city of Chattogram.

Workers were merely demanding arrear pay—a most basic right—for 1-3 months and also some special time off for Ifar and Sehri purposes. They were also complaining about their appalling living conditions, especially the rudimentary shed where they slept with foul-smelling, uncleaned open drains and inhuman toilet facilities nearby. (A reporter of



An injured worker of under-construction SS Power I Plant is being taken to Chattogram Medical College Hospital, after at least five demonstrators were fatally shot by police on April 17, 2021.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

The Daily Star who visited the site found it impossible to suffer the stench even for a few minutes—workers have to *live* near it). Demonstration for pay-rights is permitted by our law and the police knew about it as they had helped negotiate with the workers the day before. All media reports confirm that on that fateful day—April 17—the demonstration started peacefully.

Two committees have now been formed: a three-member police committee and another four-member committee led by the district magistrate. Meanwhile, Tk 3 lakh will be paid as compensation for each dead worker and Tk 50,000 for each injured one. So far, no case has been filed on behalf of the five dead workers, nor on behalf of the 21 injured. But sure enough, police have already filed cases of assault on them and for destruction of property. Many of the poor workers—some already injured and may suffer permanent physical ailments and deformities—will now be entangled in a complex legal web which may ruin their lives.

In all likelihood, there will be no case filed on behalf of the dead workers. That is because it is never the “state”, but always the families of the dead, who have to initiate the legal proceedings. This they normally desist from doing, for reasons of

intimidation, high cost of litigation, etc. On the other side, there is the possibility of one-time financial compensation—as it has happened in this instance—which, for the poor workers’ families, means a lot.

Here, too, the crucial question is whether the force used by police was “appropriate”. Did the situation call for opening fire? Had all other prior measures, such as tear gas or warning through loudspeakers, been resorted to? Could they have fired in the air before aiming their rifles at the chests of victims? Did they give any warning? If yes, what sort of warning? If no, then why not?

A total of 332 rounds of bullets were fired. There is absolutely no reason for such massive use of lethal firepower. A total of 4,000 workers live within the fenced-off compound. The agitation could not have brought together more than a thousand. We all know how agitating mobs can be easily turned around by firing in the air. There is also a provision in the police code for firing into the ground just ahead of the rioters to frighten them off or at the height of the knee to cause injury, rather than death. None of these procedures were followed.

Who will ask these probing questions?

Consider this case in a different setting. Imagine a scene where, say, any one of us is walking alone in a quiet street and is stopped by a police officer carrying a firearm. What is the power dynamics between the two here? We do have our respective constitutional rights but who is the arbiter of those rights at that very moment? Who is to protect common, powerless, poor citizens from such harassment and potential extortion? The stories of people being picked up from their homes in the middle of the night and then being ransomed or beaten to death in custody, in case of a failure to pay, are not unknown. The latest trend is to threaten people of implicating them in a terrorism case unless they do as they are told.

Make no mistake, Bangladesh is not the only country to suffer from such malaise. But we are among those who do not have any reliable system of accountability, oversight or monitoring of the law enforcement agencies.

There have been only three prominent cases in which our police force (RAB is not included in this discussion) were found guilty and given harsh punishment. These cases involved the gang rape and murder in police custody of Yasmin, 18,

in August 1995; Shamim Reza Rubel, 24, a BBA student of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), who was tortured to death in DB custody in July 1998; and finally Ishtiaq Hossain Jonny, 28, who was tortured to death in Pallabi police station in February 2014.

In the last case, three policemen—Sub-Inspector Zahidur Rahman, and assistant sub-inspectors Qamruzzaman Mintu and Rashedul Islam—were given life sentences. Judge KM Emrul Kayesh of the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge’s Court, while pronouncing the sentence, said, “The highest punishment allowed in this law is life sentence—not death sentence—and that is what I am pronouncing today.”

According to case documents, on February 7, 2014, a police team led by Sub-Inspector Zahid picked up Jonny and Rocky from a pre-wedding function and tortured the former for about two and a half hours, after which he lost consciousness and was later pronounced dead. A death after two and a half hours of torture indicates its brutality and beastly nature.

In his judgement, Judge Kayesh further said, “When custodial torture by law enforcers happens, nobody witnesses it except the victim and God. This verdict was possible because Jonny’s uncles were also detained and were in the same police station cell. They saw the torture happen.” In most cases, there are no witnesses. So it becomes an instance of police’s word against the victim family’s, and this is how it stays.

By contrasting the two instances of police killings—of George Floyd in the US and Banshkhal workers in Bangladesh—it was not our intention to compare the two legal systems but simply to make the point as to what difference it makes when law enforcement agencies operate under a strict code of ethics and scrutiny by the judiciary, government, parliament, civic bodies and the media, and when such oversight is absent. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), from January 2016 to July 2020, a total of 1,426 people died in custody or in “crossfire”, a euphemism for extrajudicial killing. Except in one or two cases, none of the above deaths were looked into to unearth the reasons behind and bring the real perpetrators to justice.

Nearly 1,500 citizens were killed, and no institution of the country even batted an eye.

Post Script
Justice Department of the US has opened a civil rights investigation on practices of the Minneapolis Police Department to determine whether they violated the Constitution or federal civil rights laws. The investigation will take a comprehensive look at the Department’s policies, training, supervision and use-of-force investigations. Attorney General Merrick Garland said. (NBC News)

Will our law ministry, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law, the Human Rights Commission, the office of the Attorney-General, the Anti-Corruption Commission or any other concerned governmental body open an investigation on our law enforcement agencies as to whether their practices violate our fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution and legal rights enshrined in various laws?

To be a developing nation, along with rising per capita income and upgradation of infrastructure we also need greater recognition of all our basic rights and a functional accountability system.

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Covid-19: Getting the messaging right

AAYSHA CADER and MOHAMMAD IBN ABDUL MALEK

BANGLADESH is currently struggling to overcome a massive surge in Covid-19 infections. In a country that bears one of the highest burdens of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the region—particularly diabetes and heart disease—the overwhelming of the healthcare system during this second wave of coronavirus poses the additional threat of “collateral damage”, in terms of increased mortality and morbidity arising



‘There needs to be clear public health messaging that vaccination does not invalidate one’s fast.’

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

from delayed care of such diseases.

While the public may have developed greater awareness of the general signs and symptoms of Covid-19, particularly those necessitating hospital admission and dedicated respiratory care, it is unlikely that a similar health-seeking behaviour will be demonstrated in the case of the aforementioned non-communicable diseases. This is particularly pertinent to acute cardiovascular emergencies such as

observed a marked reduction in the number of patients presenting to hospitals for non-Covid related medical emergencies. It largely coincided with the periods of the “general holiday”, the term used for the nationwide lockdown measures instituted from March to May 2020.

Such delayed care or non-presentations to hospital, presumably owing to a fear of contracting Covid-19, were anecdotally

observed for both medical and surgical emergencies, with potentially detrimental consequences downstream. This was perhaps further compounded by the restrictions of movement owing to the lockdown measures and a lack of easily available public transport, thus limiting and delaying the general public’s access to hospitals.

Unfortunately, the ongoing strict nationwide lockdown, instituted in different stages in April 2021, bears all the hallmarks of a repetition of the healthcare consequences of the previous lockdown, perhaps further compounded by the advent of the fasting month of Ramadan.

In this regard, the importance of appropriate public health messaging cannot be understated. While social distancing measures remain one of the safeguards against the surge in Covid-19 cases, crucially, they should not serve as a deterrent to people seeking healthcare. The general public needs to be educated with an emphasis on the concept that the consequences of an untreated acute medical emergency could be fatal, and may outweigh that of any potential hospital-acquired Covid-19 infection.

Admittedly, while the healthcare sector was relatively under-prepared during the initial wave of the pandemic last year, experience and time have enabled better organisation of hospitals, and healthcare workers now are far better-equipped with knowledge and logistics in handling acute medical emergencies during the pandemic. Many tertiary centres have on-site coronavirus testing facilities, and have established well-designed triage mechanisms and zonal divisions within hospitals—such that non-Covid patients are well-separated from Covid cases—thus minimising the risk of hospital-acquired infections and transmission of disease. In addition to such preventive protocols, healthcare workers are better supported by the availability of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), thus

minimising the risk of contagion.

Another important aspect of pandemic containment is the effective rollout of vaccines. This remains a formidable challenge in a country with a population upwards of 160 million, particularly in the absence of an organised routine digital healthcare records system. These logistical issues might be further compounded by vaccine hesitancy, which refers to the refusal of vaccination or a delay in its acceptance, despite the availability of the vaccination service.

A study carried out on 1,134 respondents in Bangladesh reported a vaccine hesitancy of 32.5 percent. There is a concern that the advent of the Islamic lunar month of Ramadan and the obligatory fast might further propagate this vaccine hesitancy. As such, there needs to be clear public health messaging that vaccination does not invalidate one’s fast, as has been reiterated by religious scholars.

This is in addition to evidence-based communication of the scientific basis and benefits of vaccines, promoted via mass and social media campaigns, as well as policy initiatives for an effective and consistent vaccine rollout. Efforts to curb the devastating effects of this pandemic need to be multi-pronged and multi-dimensional, involving stakeholders and policymakers from various sectors. With the burden of disease not just limited to Covid-19, the importance of effective public health messaging in what is already looking like an overwhelming second wave of this pandemic cannot be understated.

The message is simple: distance socially, vaccinate, continue to wear masks, and seek appropriate care in a medical emergency.

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