

Depoliticisation of Qawmi teachers and students

A radical solution for a radical problem, but will it be effective?

AMIDST lingering tensions between the government and Hefazat-e-Islam, the combined Islamic education board of Qawmi madrasas has decided that teachers and students of the Qawmi madrasas will stay away from all sorts of political activities. The board is reportedly under pressure to distance itself from Hefazat leaders who have had links to last month's three-day mayhem over the Indian prime minister's visit that had left at least 17 people dead. The decision, thus, can be seen as part of ongoing countermeasures against the Islamist group, which still enjoys support from a large section of the Qawmi madrasa community. But several questions come up: can a decision like this be executed given the lack of a central oversight mechanism? And, most importantly, will it address the bigger issues of radicalism?

The government-recognised combined board, Al Hayatul Ulaya Lil Jamiatul Qaumia, is formed by the representatives of six Qawmi madrasa education boards. It organises the central examinations for Qawmi madrasas and issues certificates. Beyond that, it holds little sway over how the thousands of Qawmi madrasas in the country are run. Although the government now recognises the Qawmi degree, there is no oversight of the Qawmi curriculum. No authorisation is needed to form a Qawmi madrasa. In essence, the government has no control whatsoever over these institutions and their activities. It is because of this lack of central oversight and efforts to mainstream madrasa education through necessary reforms that some politically ambitious leaders of Qawmi madrasas have been able to exploit the feelings of vulnerability among the students and teachers. The radicalisation problem in the country can also be linked to this situation.

Any move to depoliticise this community without addressing the core issues of oversight and reforms is basically tantamount to fiddling around the upper foliage of a problem rather than the problem itself. On the contrary, it may have the unintended effects of increasing the feelings of neglect and vulnerability among the students and teachers, leading to further chaos.

While the depoliticisation policy may seem like a timely move given the destructive influence of Hefazat, it is neither enough nor is it very practical. As if to validate our concern, the Hefazat leadership has formed a convening committee shortly after dissolving its central committee. It will likely continue to attract the support of madrasa students and teachers, although its tactics will change under the current circumstances. So instead of supporting such short-sighted measures, the government should go for wider reforms in the Qawmi madrasa system in consultation with its teachers and students, without compromising the core character of its education. Only then can it nullify the threats of radicalism for good.

Do we have enough food grain stocks?

Govt must increase domestic capacity to ensure adequate supply at all times

RECENT media reports have highlighted that during this Ramadan, prices of medium-sized rice in the retail market have gone up by 1.89 percent per kg than the usual rate, while prices of coarse rice has also increased up to 4.35 percent per kg. Although there are many reasons behind this price hike, a report published by *The Daily Star* yesterday has highlighted the government's inability to maintain adequate stocks.

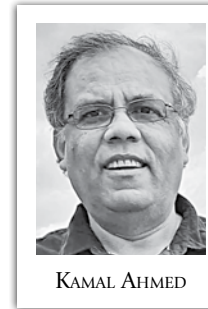
Food experts suggest that the government has to store a minimum of 12.5 lakh tonnes of grains on a monthly basis to prevent sudden food shortages or price hikes. However, this stock has now fallen to a mere four lakh tonnes, which is the lowest since 2008, the year following Cyclone Sidr, a calamity that caused acute food scarcity for coastal populations at the time. Although the country's total demand for food grains is 30 lakh tonnes per month, the report shows that the government's total food storage capacity at present is only 19 lakh tonnes. Ideally, say experts, the government should have food grain stocks of 24 to 25 tonnes for emergency situations and for its safety net programmes for the poor.

Bangladesh constantly faces natural disasters that destroy large amounts of valuable crops. This is why storing a large amount of food grains during peak harvesting seasons should be the top priority of the concerned authorities, to prevent people suffering from hunger during crisis periods. For example, there was no food shortage during last year's Boro season, a time when Bangladesh became the third largest rice producer in the world. So why didn't we have enough stocks for possible shortages this year?

The respective bodies have to ensure that farmers get appropriate prices for their crops during harvesting seasons so that the latter have the incentive to provide the necessary food grains to the government when needed. Also, the government has to focus on increasing domestic food production capacities instead of relying on imports from foreign countries that include high taxes and chances of possible disruption in the supply chain during such emergency periods as the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. The number of government warehouses to store food grains also needs to be increased from its current rates. Lastly, market regulation and strict surveillance of illegal food hoarders have to be initiated by the government in order to keep the prices of essential food products like rice within acceptable limits.

While there is no reason to panic regarding current supplies, the government must take immediate steps to replenish stocks and maintain an adequate amount in the case of exigencies.

We need louder calls for patent waivers of Covid-19 vaccines



KAMAL AHMED

BANGLADESH, like most other developing countries, is now facing the daunting task of procuring Covid-19 vaccines, as the world witnesses unprecedented inequities in vaccine access. It is true that Bangladesh is one of the few nations that succeeded in securing 30 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines, allowing us to get an early start in the nationwide inoculation programme. But, the Indian producer of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, the Serum Institute (SI), now says they will not be able to export Covid-19 vaccines before June-July. As a result, Nazmul Hassan Papon, managing director of Beximco, the Bangladeshi supplier of the vaccines from SI, says as Bangladesh has paid in advance for the vaccines, the SI has no right to halt the supply. He has now turned to the government and seeks diplomatic intervention. But, it is unlikely that India, amidst its worst public health crisis due to a record surge in Covid-19 transmission and deaths, would be easing the ban on vaccine exports anytime soon.

Supply of vaccines has become a highly sensitive political issue. It has already caused tensions among neighbours in the European and American continents. In January, the European Union and the

United Kingdom had a brief diplomatic spat over failure of the British-Swedish AstraZeneca to fulfil its promised supply. Its dispute with AstraZeneca has not been resolved yet and only yesterday, the European Commission started legal proceedings against the company, even though both Germany and France argued that such a legal action amidst a pandemic may cause distraction and affect the company's production and supply chains. Similar issues have caused discomfort

population, according to the People's Vaccine Alliance. There is no question that governments have a responsibility to their own people, but can excessive buying or hoarding be justified?

Indemnity demanded by manufacturers from governments against liabilities arising out of any adverse effect makes handing over excess vaccines to third countries difficult. An investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism unveiled in February that "Pfizer required

2021, more than 170 former heads of state/government and Nobel laureates, including former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Gordon Brown, former President of Colombia Juan Manuel Santos, former President of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former President of France François Hollande and Nobel Laureates Muhammad Yunus and Professor Joseph Stiglitz, called on US President Biden to support a waiver of intellectual property rules for Covid-19 vaccines and pursue a people's vaccine to end the pandemic. *The New York Times* on April 24 in an editorial urged wealthy nations to stop hoarding vaccines, suspend patents, share technology and resources, build more capacity and invest in alternatives.

The new chief of the WTO, Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, however, has come up with a third option. Instead of waiving the patent rights, she has suggested voluntary licensing. She also said that it was "not acceptable" to leave poorer countries at the "end of the queue" for vaccines. Pointing to AstraZeneca's deal to transfer its know-how to a mass vaccine manufacturer in India, she said "There is some capacity in developing countries unused now. Let's have the same kind of arrangement that AstraZeneca has with the Serum Institute of India." Although, it has to be noted that the campaigners claim that there are loopholes in AstraZeneca's deal, as it lacks a clear commitment that the vaccine will be free from pharmaceutical monopolies.

Moreover, AstraZeneca and its licensee Serum Institute (SI) have both failed to keep supply commitments, exposing the limitations of such commercial arrangements. Despite SI having the highest vaccine production capacity in the world, it is no match for the huge demand of the region. Besides, it does not enjoy any exemption from the export control regime of India, which leaves countries like Bangladesh exposed to increased vulnerability.

In this backdrop, any offer for supplying any vaccine approved by WHO must be welcomed in Bangladesh. Any opportunity for manufacturing or partnership in relation to Covid-19 vaccines should also be considered with utmost sincerity and urgency. Covid-19 is not going to be eliminated anytime soon and in the absence of a cure, there is no other alternative. We need to raise our voices in support of patent waivers to utilise and develop further our own capacity in producing the Covid-19 vaccine.

Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

In the absence of a global agreement on a structured system, there is no limit set for countries on how much one can buy in relation to the actual requirement. It allowed some richer countries to secure supplies ranging three to nine times over their needs.

in relations between the United States and its neighbours, including Canada and Mexico. The richer nations' race for securing excess doses and varieties of vaccines as insurance, in the case of unseen problems arising from the preferred ones, has aggravated this inequity in global supply. Unfortunately, warnings by experts about an impending public health disaster could not sway world leaders. Calls for sharing knowledge, technology and resources for maximising productions of vaccine were not heeded.

In the absence of a global agreement on a structured system, there is no limit set for countries on how much one can buy in relation to the actual requirement. It allowed some richer countries to secure supplies ranging three to nine times over their needs. As a result, more than half of the available doses have been purchased by richer nations for their citizens, who account for only 14 percent of the global

some Latin American governments to put up sovereign assets—which could include federal bank reserves, embassy buildings or military bases—as a guarantee against indemnifying the cost of future legal cases". On April 14, the South African health minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize, voiced frustrations about "difficult and sometimes unreasonable" terms his country's government had been presented with during contract negotiations with vaccine manufacturers, including Pfizer.

In May 2020, about a year ago, the World Health Organization (WHO) called for voluntarily sharing knowledge, intellectual property and data necessary for tackling Covid-19. Other global campaign groups like Global Justice sought clear commitments from big pharmaceutical companies for open licensing of Covid-19 research and technology, as well as patent-free vaccines. More voices have now joined in demanding a waiver of the intellectual property rules. On April 14,

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Powering sustainable food systems

AGNES KALIBATA and KRISTINA SKIERKA

THE 17 members of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate generate around 80 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. That means they have the power to pull the brakes on the climate emergency. The political leaders from the world's richest countries, after gathering for a US-hosted climate summit on Earth Day (April 22), must now use the occasion to acknowledge their shared responsibility to the planet and everyone on it.

The countries most affected by climate change bear the least responsibility for the problem. Of the 16 most climate-

the twin challenges of food and energy insecurity. This will be necessary to support developing countries in leapfrogging to a sustainable growth and development model.

By convening its first-ever Food Systems Summit and its first High-Level Dialogue on Energy in 40 years, the UN has provided an ideal platform for all countries to commit to doing their part. To meet the agriculture challenge, we must devise solutions that sustainably fuel people, the planet, and prosperity, and account for the well-being and livelihoods of the world's 500 million smallholder households, which are among the most vulnerable to climate change.

lighting and electrical appliances to hundreds of millions of households. But an estimated 840 million people are still living without electricity for basic appliances. With greater access to clean energy, more farming families could adopt technology to reduce the burden on human labour, which currently accounts for 80 percent of energy use on African agricultural land. And this, in turn, would make food systems more sustainable well into the future.

But achieving these goals will require a significant increase in climate finance. Developing countries need more resources to expand and de-risk distributed renewable energy systems, and to make

decision to halt exports of raw cocoa reflects preparations to scale up domestic processing in order to obtain better returns for farmers.

Companies providing renewable-energy access are emerging as a significant employer across Africa and Asia. Every job they create brings the potential for up to five other income-generating opportunities in adjacent fields, such as crop irrigation on farms with access to ample electricity. These developments not only will improve food security by increasing farming efficiency and productivity, but will also build resilience against climate shocks and stresses.

More broadly, there is potentially an USD11.3 billion market for the use of decentralised renewable energy in irrigation, processing, and cold storage in Sub-Saharan Africa. But with the costs of the necessary technologies still too high for most farmers, the existing market is just USD 735 million—a mere six percent of what it could be. Similarly, affordable, clean electricity for refrigeration could help to reduce food loss and waste, which costs more than USD 310 billion per year, 40 percent of which occurs after harvest and early in the supply chain.

Finally, donors and governments in high-income countries must provide more than lip service. Transforming low-income countries' energy and food systems calls for an unprecedented level of cross-sectoral collaboration—internationally, regionally, and nationally. Some of this is already happening through Food Systems Summit Dialogues that are taking place across more than 100 countries. But these conversations will need to continue and grow in scope and scale.

The 1,200 ideas that have already emerged from the Food Systems Summit open engagement process offer hope that the Pre-Summit in July in Rome and the Summit in September will yield concrete policies and commitments. At its core, the climate crisis is an energy crisis, and the climate crisis has contributed to a situation in which 690 million people go without enough food to meet their basic needs.

By focusing on the food-energy nexus, the world has an opportunity to tackle both climate change and food insecurity, building a brighter future for everyone.

Agnes Kalibata is Special Envoy for the United Nations Food Systems Summit. Kristina Skierka is CEO of Power for All.
Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021.
(Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)



PHOTO: COLLECTED

vulnerable countries, 10 are in Asia and five are in Africa, where millions rely on agriculture but lack access to the clean energy that they will need to power a more resilient and profitable future. For these countries, "building back better" will be a stretch. They are already being held back by developed countries' own energy and agriculture sectors, which are the leading sources of GHG emissions.

The period between now and the United Nations climate conference (COP26) in Glasgow in November represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for world leaders to build a "climate-smart" framework for tackling

Rising temperatures are already costing Africa an estimated 1.4 percent of GDP per year, as well as imposing adaptation costs as high as three percent of GDP per year. Because this burden falls predominantly on farmers, building resilience and expanding access to clean energy in rural areas is crucial. In the short term, smallholders must be empowered to manage the consequences of climate change; but in the long term, they also must be incorporated into a more sustainable agriculture sector.

Over the past decade, decentralised renewable energy solutions like rooftop solar panels and mini grids have brought

these technologies affordable for farmers. Smallholder farmers currently receive a mere 1.7 percent of climate finance. With just a fraction of the world's resources, they are left to fend for themselves against increasingly frequent and severe heat waves, droughts, and floods.

Fortunately, investing in clean-energy infrastructure in low-income countries offers an extraordinary return, easily paying for itself through future savings, resilience, and greater domestic economic activity. In Ghana, distributed solar energy is already emerging as a key source of power for local agro-processing facilities. And the Ghanaian government's recent