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Urban poor need immediate aid interventions

With so much at stake, lack of foresight and planning is unacceptable

THE second wave of the coronavirus coupled with the most recent round of lockdown, which took effect from April 14, has once again laid bare the extreme vulnerabilities faced by the urban poor in Bangladesh. According to an estimate from the BIDS, the countrywide shutdown last year had caused an 80 percent drop in income of people belonging to the labouring class in urban areas. A report in this daily yesterday details how the circumstances are likely to be the same this year, too. However, despite the severity of the situation, the government is yet to come up with a coherent plan to include these marginalised households into its social safety net schemes.

This lack of planning is particularly disturbing given the fact that a government survey in December had already revealed that the country's social safety net schemes fail to cover millions of urban people facing food insecurity. Despite having this information, why did the authorities not have the foresight to come up with programmes targeting the urban poor, especially since so many global health experts had by then already started issuing warnings about a second wave of the pandemic and the possibility of future lockdowns in order to stop transmission?

On top of lost income and depleted savings, the rising prices of essentials have created an unprecedented crisis for the urban poor. But the inefficient planning in terms of food reserves means the government will no longer be able to sell rice at a subsidised rate of Tk 10/kg through its OMS outlets either. As a result, millions of people will now face food insecurity and be forced to cut back on essential spending, such as on healthcare, in the middle of a pandemic.

The government needs to demonstrate its ability to govern and provide for the most marginalised citizens, taking coordinated actions on long-term policies instead of simply reacting in a haphazard manner when faced with a crisis. For now, there must be quick and transparent collaboration among relevant ministries, city corporations, local government bodies and NGOs to ensure that pandemic relief funds reach their targeted populations as soon as possible, and more allocations must be made for the urban poor.

In the long run, the authorities must listen to the experts and design a social security system for the urban poor that is free of incorrect targeting, leakages and lack of coordination. The importance of a comprehensive household database for this purpose cannot be stressed upon enough. It is extremely disappointing that the National Household Database, which was meant to be the country's first poverty registry, is nowhere near being finished even after seven years. The delay means that not only are poor households deprived of benefits, but that the data collected is now obsolete due to the fast-changing conditions of the pandemic and the creation of a "new poor". When projects such as this drag on, it does not only cost taxpayers' money but also, as the pandemic amply demonstrates, eventually cost lives. All because of inefficient planning and unnecessary delays. The authorities can, and must, do better.

Bangladesh joins Chinese initiative for vaccine, oxygen

A much-needed partnership that should be seen through diligently

WE welcome the government's decision to join five other South Asian countries in a multilateral effort to ensure vaccine and oxygen supply among the countries. The China-led initiative, called "China-South Asia Platform for Covid-19 Consultation, Cooperation, and Post-Pandemic Economic Recovery", had its first meeting held virtually with the foreign ministers of Bangladesh, China, Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan in attendance. During the meeting, Bangladesh's foreign minister stressed on the importance of multilateralism and cooperation among countries during the Covid-19 crisis.

There are plans of establishing a Covid Emergency Medical Facility, a Poverty Alleviation Centre, and of exploring e-commerce in rural areas in Bangladesh, as proposed by China. While there are no solid plans yet as to when and where the medical facility would be built, we would urge the government to see the plan through diligently. Last March, the prime minister had reportedly proposed setting up a regional institution for emergency medical services but the plan never reached fruition. Now that the pandemic has resulted in dire situations across the region, such multilateral partnerships are more crucial than ever.

While Bangladesh is trying to purchase China's vaccine doses following an unexpected halt to supplies from the Serum Institute of India, China had also agreed earlier to provide five lakh shots of its vaccine as a gift. Both the Chinese vaccine and the Russian Sputnik V will be imported under "emergency use authorisation". However, we must also stress on the importance of ensuring an adequate supply of not only vaccines but also oxygen. There is no better example for us now than India's current situation of oxygen shortage, to the point where its supply to Bangladesh has been kept on hold for almost a week. Bangladesh itself does not have enough supply of oxygen, as demand has doubled amid the recent Covid-19 surge. Even with companies switching production from industrial oxygen to medical oxygen (as reported in this daily on April 21), many patients are not being able to get oxygen at public hospitals.

Therefore, while we congratulate the government on joining the Chinese initiative that will hopefully promote cooperation amongst the partners in fighting the pandemic in their respective countries, we must also urge it to ensure that maximum benefits are derived from this partnership in terms of vaccine and oxygen supply for our citizens.

Has Hefazat been put in its place?

NAZMUL A KHAN

FACED with the full might of the state, the Hefazat-e-Islam has started to crumble. In a sudden move on Sunday night, Hefazat chief Junaid Babunagari dissolved its central committee, as more than half a dozen of its leaders reportedly prepared to defect. On record, they blame what they call a blunder of the Hefazat leadership when the group's angry supporters took to the streets to challenge the visit of the Indian premier Narendra Modi. Off the record, however, they cite serious pressure from the authorities that undertook a multi-

secretly meeting with the home minister, understandably to negotiate with the government, further hurt Hefazat's uncompromising posture. Finally, the government was able to quickly find support from a few renegades within Hefazat who bolstered the government's position, such as Maolana Abdullah Mohammad Hassan, who resigned in a press conference blaming the Hefazat leadership for the recent deadly violence in Brahmanbaria and elsewhere.

All these factors culminated in a serious crisis for Hefazat, one where Babunagari had little choice other than disbanding the central committee to

possibly the largest political gathering in decades, during its heyday in 2013.

The group's Chattogram-based leaders, except for one or two, have so far avoided any harsh treatment from the government. However, given the still-lingering tensions, it is necessary that both parties take a step back. Hefazat has already signalled its willingness to scale back its rhetoric, and the government may reciprocate.

Although the government refrained from arresting Babunagari and his secretary general, Nurul Islam Jihadi, Hefazat may soon have to compare itself with the BNP's situation during 2008-

mutually sympathetic to each other, BNP and Hefazat leaders now increasingly consider each other rivals.

Harun Izhar, the charismatic Hefazat cleric, recently harshly criticised a "neo-pro-India" BNP for its "betrayal". BNP secretary general, Mirza Fakhruul Islam Alamgir, complained days ago that their activists were being detained by the government in its anti-Hefazat crackdown. "They often say that [we] are associated with Hefazat. But it is you (Awami League) who are attached with Hefazat. You have struck an agreement with them... the prime minister was awarded 'Qawmi Mother' by them (Hefazat). So are we involved with Hefazat or are you?" he posed the question to the government in a virtual meeting held last week. Therefore, as Hefazat and BNP may see it as a zero-sum game, the government may not yet want to diminish Hefazat and allow BNP to recapture the vacuum.

When Ahmad Shafi was at the helm of Hefazat, it reached what seemed like a mutually beneficial understanding with the government, albeit to the dissatisfaction of the country's secular forces. Shafi and others backed down from inflammatory rhetoric against the Awami League. In return, they had some of their demands met by the government, even though some of these demands strikingly collided with the secular ideals preached by the ruling party.

It is strange how realpolitik supersedes ideology. It was only after Hefazat forcefully challenged a core political tenet of the government—its alliance with India's current government—that the group provoked its wrath. Until now, the government was very much willing to entertain this group's regressive, misogynistic and communalist agenda, as long as it did not test the government politically.

Shafi's demise, amid a chaotic internal power struggle within the group, paved the way for Babunagari to become the new custodian of the Qawmi madrasa-based organisation. The government watched warily as the Islamist ideologue started strengthening his support base after taking over Hefazat. In the end, it was probably because of Babunagari's inflexible attitude that cost the group dearly. Its leaders, driven purely by dogmatic rage, seriously lack political shrewdness and maturity to take on a party as resourceful and efficient in political manoeuvring as the ruling Awami League.

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Activists of Hefazat-e-Islam build lines of defence on a road near the main gate of Hathazari Madrasa in Chattogram on May 27, 2021 protesting the visit of the Indian prime minister, as policemen stand guard in front of them.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

pronged approach in dealing with the group.

First, popular Hefazat figures such as the firebrand Mamunul Huq or Nurul Islam had their image blemished with embarrassing leaks about their private life which hampered their political authority, making them a fair target of legal prosecution (some would say, harassment). Second, the arrests of a number of Hefazat leaders, particularly those based in Dhaka, put the group on the back foot. Rattled to the core, its aging leaders were quick to make it clear that the group was no political threat to the government, nor did it have any political ambition.

Third, the carefully orchestrated leaks about the group's senior leaders

avoid more embarrassing desertions.

The government has treated the Islamit group just like any other political opponent. Incidentally, the recently imposed "strict" lockdown went in favour of the government. With a nationwide lockdown in effect and Covid-19 infections rising fast, Hefazat was unable to summon its supporters to the streets as its leaders were picked up, one after another, by law enforcement agencies.

However, it will be too early to write off Hefazat-e-Islam as a formidable political actor. Its appeal will stay strong to the masses who may view the group as oppressed and marginalised. One would be wise to recall that the group did not need a committee to organise what was

2013. Back then, the BNP chairperson and secretary general were generally considered safe from arrests, although the party activists had innumerable cases filed against them. But things changed within the span of a few years. If the government crackdown continues, it is a plausible scenario to imagine Babunagari and others in jail in the near future—unless, of course, Hefazat is able to make the tables turn. To avoid a repeat confrontation, both parties should now restrain themselves and live to fight another day.

Surely, the government has many reasons to not let this crisis escalate, one being to avoid a possible political revival of the BNP, which vied with Hefazat for the spotlight in recent years. Once

Covid-19 vaccine divide and diplomacy: What we must do

DEIWAR HOSSAIN

THE global Covid-19 pandemic has caused catastrophic consequences in every corner of the world. Rich and poor nations have suffered almost equally but with asymmetric capacity and resources. The detection of coronavirus in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and its subsequent outbreak in more than 216 states and regions has been termed as the biggest public health threat after the Spanish flu in 1918-20. As it happened with other global public health crises, vaccine development was immediately considered to be an effective response to the devastating impacts of Covid-19. The global drive for vaccine development witnessed an unprecedented success led by powerful countries and multinational pharmaceutical corporations, with countries like the USA, Russia, China, the UK and India engaging national resources to develop vaccines at the earliest—whether under private or public enterprises.

Eventually, vaccine became a new hotspot of global diplomacy triggered by the existing patterns of competition and rivalry among the great powers. Vaccine nationalism soon captured the imagination of experts. The race for developing vaccines within the shortest time possible can be attributed to the nationalist tendencies of vaccine-producing countries such as the USA, Russia and China. While the states are involved in diplomacy, companies are focused on profiteering. Both the phenomena have created an adverse situation for millions and millions of people across the globe who have become victims of the vaccine divide. The ever-growing numbers of deaths and infections have created a hostile environment where lives and livelihoods are being traded off. Even experts now argue that the coronavirus will not completely go away; people in the world will have to live with it for an indefinite period.

In this context, large-scale vaccination has become the only way to save people and economy. But what one can see is a timid response by the global institutions. The utter disregard for multilateralism since the inception of this crisis exacerbated the situation in different countries, particularly in the developing and underdeveloped regions. It is true that WHO, along with the European Union and France, has launched COVAX

as a Covid-19 global vaccine access point. Coordinated by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the WHO, COVAX aims to ensure that vaccines are shared fairly among all nations, rich and poor. Countries that have joined the COVAX are divided into two groups: self-financing rich countries, and middle- and low-income economies. By now, 80 members have joined in the first category, while 92 entered the second category.

But one can clearly see that the COVAX initiative is quite inadequate, given the magnitude of the present crisis and its devastating consequences. Besides, the process of COVAX is flawed as rich

vaccine procurement is also alarming. According to a report published by Duke University, the world's wealthiest nations have locked up much of the near-term supplies. For their population of 1.2 billion, the wealthier nations have booked 4.6 billion doses, so the manufacturing capacities of vaccine firms will be locked up for months to fulfil these orders.

Coming to Bangladesh, one can see how vaccine diplomacy is being played out. The uncertainty of getting 30 million Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines from the Serum Institute of India—due to a sudden halt to export—has forced Bangladesh to look for alternative sources. Bangladesh has received new

global attention to it when she placed a three-point proposal in the special UNGA session in September 2020 to deal with the challenges of Covid-19. These include: ensuring universal and equitable access to quality Covid-19 vaccine, transferring technology to developing countries to manufacture vaccine locally, and providing them with financial assistance to face challenges in the wake of the pandemic. Bangladesh repeatedly asserted in global forums that Covid vaccine is a global public good and urged vaccine-producing countries to help others to produce the vaccines with a view to attaining universal vaccine coverage. Bangladesh also pointed out that the world should recognise the vaccine manufacturing capacities of developing countries like Bangladesh.

Three issues become critically significant against the backdrop of insufficient access to vaccines by developing and least developed countries. First, the world has been witnessing a new vaccine divide between the Global North and Global South. It's likely the worst form of divide the world has ever seen in history. Secondly, all the powerful nations who are capable of manufacturing vaccines are the key actors in vaccine nationalism and vaccine diplomacy. The third issue is the dominance of the market mechanism which indicates to the profit-seeking behaviour of vaccine-manufacturing countries and companies. One can see a rising private-sector involvement, often at the invitation of governments, as countries struggle to ensure both supply and distribution. It may lead to a situation where private companies could purchase their own vaccine and provide it to those capable of paying.

If the current trends continue, the vaccine divide will create an alarming situation, causing the deaths of millions of people and damaging the livelihoods of marginalised populations around the world. More importantly, it would have devastating consequences for the low-income countries. It would deeply compromise their national capacities in healthcare, economy, education, and other vital sectors. So the world must declare and treat Covid-19 vaccines as a public good, and must effectively deal with vaccine divide based on a spirit of multilateralism and humanity.

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PHOTO: REUTERS

countries under this scheme enjoy non-binding provisions—for them, it is merely a vehicle to further facilitate their vaccine diplomacy. The fate of initiatives to distribute vaccines to middle- and low-income countries also depends on funding from the rich countries, which is also not fully available. Hence, the COVAX, as a global facility to ensure fair access to vaccines, has a minimal capacity.

More worrying is the currently low level of access to vaccines in the developing and least developed nations compared to the developed countries. As per vaccine doses per 100 people in countries with the highest total vaccinations, rich countries are in a solid position. Discrimination in

offers of support from China and Russia. China has come forward with a regional platform to provide emergency vaccine support for South Asian countries barring India. It's a new twist in South Asian vaccine diplomacy. Like India, China has also offered some vaccine doses as a gift for Bangladesh. Similarly, Bangladesh and Russia are in collaboration for vaccine production in Bangladesh. But challenges persist as Bangladesh faces a crisis of vaccine availability due to the aforementioned global vaccine diplomacy. It may be mentioned that COVAX is also delaying its delivery of vaccines to its signatory states.

This reality certainly contributes to the vaccine divide. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina drew