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The Indian variant is here!

Immediate measures must be taken to avoid cataclysmic consequences

IT is not possible to talk about Covid-19 without appearing to be an alarmist. It was not a question of if but when we will be attacked by the new variant that has mutated in India. At a time when we are fighting the second wave of the pandemic and seeing a gradual fall in infection rates and deaths, the news of the Indian variant in Bangladesh is disturbing. The subtype found in Bangladesh seems to be diffusing rather more quickly than two other subtypes detected by scientists in India, it being more contagious than the UK variant.

Given the unbridled movement of people between two countries even when the pandemic was raging in India, that the new variant would affect us, was only to be expected. The ban on cross-border movement has taken effect only a fortnight ago but we shut the stable door after the horse had bolted. Now that the new mutated variant is here there is a need to go for stricter control if we want to avoid facing an India-like calamity.

One of the reasons for the spike in India was the pathetic public disregard for safety measures, large gatherings, and political rallies. But added to that was the fact that medical facilities were totally overwhelmed and the many fatalities that India witnessed were due to lack of oxygen cylinders. We would like to believe that the medical administrators and high-level planners in Bangladesh have taken lessons from the painful and bitter experiences of India. In other words, the only-in-name lockdown will not do. The mad rush for home only shows that people will not be deterred by anything from going home to celebrate Eid with their families. Thus halting inter-district buses has not helped in preventing people from leaving the cities. Now there is even more crowding inside whatever mode of transport they can find and many are not even wearing masks. Although the second wave may be in the wane, it may be a false indicator, because the worst is yet to come. And it is not an issue of one or two days of Eid. We should factor in all possibilities and prepare for the worst eventualities. There may be a need to go for lockdown in its true sense with everything closed. We do not want a repeat of confusing and contradictory policies and half-hearted lackadaisical enforcement measures that we witnessed this time. As we have witnessed with horror, the catastrophe in India, we must take steps now to prevent the spread, increase testing and contact-tracing, impose quarantine for those entering the country and, most importantly, ensure there is adequate oxygen supply in hospitals and in the market for those whose lives may depend on it.

Whom were the RMG stimulus packages for?

Implementation of subsidies must be more strictly monitored

IT is disappointing to know that 25 percent of garment factories which received stimulus packages during the pandemic on the condition that they would not lay off workers have not complied with this condition. A study conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) revealed this and other related findings. The survey from the study was conducted amongst 102 employers, 301 employed workers, and 100 unemployed workers from the garments industry of Dhaka and Gazipur districts.

While workers were laid off throughout last year, April and May saw the highest rates of job loss. 59 percent of those who had lost jobs received only their salary, while 18 percent were laid off empty-handed and with no aid that they could fall back on from their employers. Those who were unemployed tried to survive on temporary and low-paying jobs. With the absence of unemployment insurance, charity helped them stay afloat but that is certainly not a feasible nor permanent solution. It was also seen that female unemployed workers received a disproportionate amount of support from NGOs and the government, compared to their male counterparts.

Though 62.7 percent of the factories received government support for four months, 25 percent of them still laid off their employees. This happened during the pandemic, when there was already so much uncertainty, and many garment factory workers had to come back into the city after having left for their hometowns. Though 82 percent of the factories said they have a set of guiding principles to operate by, one can only wonder what they entail as they have not been made public.

It is no secret that factory workers have very little space to voice their opinions and complaints in the RMG industry, and so it is easier for unscrupulous owners to get away with not paying workers' dues or firing them. Only an external higher authority can stop them.

So, whose fault is it that a breach of conditions occurred on the factory owners' end? While the conduct of foreign buyers during the pandemic was highly condemnable, we believe it was the duty of the recipient factories to not lay off their workers (a condition they had agreed to in exchange for the subsidies) and the responsibility of the government to ensure that the factory owners were fulfilling all conditions. As such, we would urge concerned authorities such as the DIFE, Bangladesh Bank, BGMEA, BKMEA, and the labour and employment ministry to hold factory owners accountable when it comes to fulfilling conditions so that the taxpayer-backed stimulus packages benefit the workers as intended.

The geo-politics of the pandemic is not helping poor countries



FAHMIDA KHATUN

OVER the past one and a half years or so, the pandemic has changed many things in our lives. It may continue to bring in more changes as the consequences of the pandemic unfold. Such change will not only be due to the devastating economic impact of the pandemic but also because of the geo-political dynamics that will emerge from the crisis.

One of the important ramifications of the pandemic is the change in the world order. The pandemic has emphasised the need for a stronger global community. The need for a meaningful globalisation has been felt much more than even before. However, the spirit of globalisation became weaker much before the outbreak of the pandemic. A number of shifts were observed in the global geo-political order with implications for the global economy as well. Countries were resorting to protectionism increasingly in an attempt to save their domestic economies. There were increasingly more restrictions on movements of goods and services even though in a globalised world the need for such movement is essential. The power and necessity of multilateral trading system such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) became weaker over the years. The objectives of such organisations have been undermined as powerful countries remained too stubborn to make any compromise for the greater global interest.

During the pandemic, nationalism has become more prominent. The rationale for such nationalism has been justified given the nature of the deadly disease. The first attempt by countries to stop the disease had been through the closure of national borders and restricting international travels to and from their countries—given that the virus spreads across borders.

More recently, vaccine nationalism that emerged in view of the shortages of vaccines, is another demonstration of global politics. Vaccinating the domestic population first is of course a rational decision. However, the outcome of nationalistic positions is far-reaching. The way the pandemic has been addressed by global leaders so far indicates their apathy and incompetence to face such a challenge collectively. This has also demonstrated their short-sightedness in dealing with the crisis.

Despite the unprecedented spread of the virus, developed countries are yet to perceive that the pandemic is a global crisis. This is a global public policy challenge and this cannot be solved by anyone alone. Even if some countries vaccinate their entire population,

they are still not safe. Because we do not live in isolation. We live in an interdependent world. Closing of borders cannot be continued forever and is not a solution in any manner.

Unfortunately, the powerful countries have failed to demonstrate their leadership during the pandemic. A global crisis of this nature required prompt but farsighted initiatives. The USA under the Trump administration was in denial of the existence of this virus and was busy in unearthing the so-called Chinese scheme for spreading this virus. Now when the Biden administration has taken the pandemic seriously and has been vaccinating the American people fast, one still finds the lack of full commitment towards the global citizens.

Given the dire health crisis and shortage of vaccine supplies, several countries want to manufacture their own vaccines. But the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) stands as a stumbling block. The TRIPS

on the motivation of the companies for innovation, another important concern is geo-politics. The fear of China and Russia taking advantage of this waiver is also holding them back from taking the decision on waiver of intellectual property rights.

Unless vaccines are manufactured and distributed at a mass scale, economies around the world will not be able to go back to the previous levels of growth. Till now vaccines have gone to the richer countries mostly. The numbers are astonishing. So far, only one percent of the total population in the 29 poorest countries of the world have received the vaccine. On the other hand, about 67 percent in the UK and 56 percent in the USA have received the first dose of the vaccine. Such divergence in vaccine availability is going to accelerate the disparities among countries—both in terms of health and economic prosperity. The recovery from the pandemic will not only be delayed but will lead to a further

months of the initiation, the vaccination programme has faced uncertainty. The Serum Institute of India had agreed to supply 30 million AstraZeneca jabs in six months to Bangladesh. However, after sending only seven million vaccines the SII expressed its inability to send any more vaccines as the government of India imposed a ban on vaccine exports in view of the worsening pandemic situation in the country. So, about 13 lakh Bangladeshis who have been waiting for their second doses of vaccines are now concerned about it. Despite Bangladesh's requests, there is not much hope to get vaccines from India at this moment, even though Bangladesh has already paid for half of the doses to be supplied by the Serum Institute.

While this is a disappointing development, the dependence on one single source for such a critical health problem by the government of Bangladesh is now being pointed out as a major weakness in its effort to

In the midst of the rising health dangers and inability of the traditional global powers to support countries in inoculation, the geo-political vaccine competition has surfaced and is holding ground.



A staff member places a coronavirus vaccine candidate from Sinovac Biotech Ltd at its booth for display during the 2020 China International Fair for Trade in Services, in Beijing, China on September 5, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS

agreement which was negotiated during the Uruguay Round negotiations of the WTO and came into force in 1995 protects creations and innovations by patents, copyrights and trademarks. Pharmaceutical companies enjoy such patent benefits for investing on innovation and producing medicines. This has given them the monopoly of producing certain medicines due to which they can also charge high prices. Currently, pharmaceutical companies are opposing the transfer of intellectual property to countries for making the vaccines. The USA has agreed to enter the negotiation on TRIPS waiver at the WTO so that poorer countries can make their own vaccines. Unfortunately, some European countries including Germany are against TRIPS waiver. Of course, France and Italy have supported this move. The UK and the EU are in favour of sharing the knowhow with oversight under the system of licensing. Oxford-AstraZeneca and the Indian Serum Institute have made such arrangements.

Of course, apart from the argument

unequal world.

In the midst of the rising health dangers and inability of the traditional global powers to support countries in inoculation, the geo-political vaccine competition has surfaced and is holding ground. The Chinese and Russian vaccines are making their ways to several regions including some of the European countries. In some of the middle eastern countries, China supplied its vaccines. Chinese and Russian efforts in helping with medical supplies and doctors in some countries are also considered as strategic moves.

How is Bangladesh positioned in all this? Bangladesh had rolled out its vaccination programme in February this year with a lot of promises. It was relatively early compared to many countries. Also, the vaccination programme has been systemic and hassle free. However, within three

vaccinate its population. Currently, the government is trying to collect vaccines from China, Russia and the USA. Clearly, the geo-political standing of these three countries are different. Not only the USA, but also India is not likely to be happy with Bangladesh's efforts to procure vaccines from China. Indeed, China had offered vaccines earlier. Bangladesh did not respond to the Chinese gesture to keep India happy. Unfortunately, the geo-political factors have influenced Bangladesh's decision-making rather than public health concerns. By doing so, the government has ignored the urgency of tackling the health crisis. Hopefully, future decisions of the government on mobilising vaccines will be made in a more pragmatic manner.

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2030 not 2050 should be our climate goal



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

WE are seeing a growing number of brands, retailers and manufacturers setting climate targets at present. In many cases they are establishing science-based targets aimed at limiting global

warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Others are setting long-term targets of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 and signing up to programmes such as the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi).

Individual countries are also setting their own climate targets, with the aim of remaining in line with the Paris Agreement. In many cases, carbon offsetting schemes are being used to help achieve these targets.

I welcome moves by our industry in showing ambition on climate issues. It is clear that most of us are now pulling in the direction, and those that fail to embrace climate challenges will be left behind.

My concern, however, is that we are not being ambitious enough and are failing to realise the urgency of the situation we are currently in. There seems to be a lot of tinkering around the edges of this huge issue but a lack of action at genuine scale.

I have read extensively around this issue and the expert consensus points towards a number of conclusions.

The first of these is that 2050 targets are not enough. They are simply too far away and lack ambition. Many experts are calling, instead, for 2030 zero carbon targets and suggesting that we should simply get on with the matter of reducing carbon emissions as a matter of extreme urgency. We can't wait for another 30 years because, as we have seen, climate issues are volatile, and we simply do not know what is around the corner.

Consider also that, as humans, we have a tendency to put things off which we find difficult or challenging and instead focus on the simpler tasks at hand. Is there a

risk that businesses may let things drift between now and 2050? For instance, they might start focusing on carbon offsets to achieve their goals—which can be easily purchased—rather than the difficult business of emissions reductions? This is my fear—that we will drift between now and 2050 and that long-term targets will provide too much opportunity for inaction.

The other concern is that in order to be carbon neutral by 2050, businesses

cannot achieve climate targets on their own; they are dependent on their supply chain partners. In many parts of the world, supply chains are still heavily reliant on coal-fired power generation and the shift to renewable energy is long and arduous, bringing with it financial, logistical and political challenges.

Switching to renewable energy is critical in the battle to reduce climate impacts yet the move to renewable energy is slow and can take years. It takes time,



Bangladeshi villagers make their way to a shelter in Cox's Bazar on May 21, 2016, as Cyclone Roanu hits the coastal areas of the country.

PHOTO: AFP

and governments will need to achieve huge net reductions in carbon emissions. In many cases, they will need to adopt a completely different way of doing business.

I do not see much evidence of this at the moment. Net reductions in carbon are difficult to achieve for any business, let alone a growing business. Remember, if a large fashion brand is growing its global footprint by 10 percent a year in terms of volumes, reducing its carbon emissions—particularly in supply chains—becomes a huge ask. It would need to achieve a 10 percent net reduction in carbon emissions just to stand still.

It is worth noting that these brands

effort and money.

The analogy I would draw here is with a huge cargo ship travelling in the wrong direction. It's a monumental effort to turn around. That's where our industry is right now—we have only just begun the process of changing the direction of the ship but the task is mammoth.

So what is our industry doing? I see a lot of fine initiatives, a lot of willing and a great deal of noise. But there is also a concerning sense that we have still not fully grasped the urgency of the situation we face.

It feels at times like everybody is looking around to see what others are doing on the climate issue and nobody

alone is taking clear, decisive and radical action. Note the emphasis on that word radical because this is what we need right now if we are to avoid sleepwalking into a climate disaster. I am talking about huge, collaborative investments in renewable energy projects and massive supply chain decarbonisation programmes.

We have to start thinking big—and now.

I look at the impact of climate change and, from a purely nationalistic perspective, I also have serious concerns about my native land. Bangladesh is a country which is considered especially vulnerable to climate change, with one-third of the population at risk of displacement because of rising sea levels. This is also driving my own personal sense of urgency on this issue.

To go back to the original proposition of this article, I think that talk of 2050 targets is dangerous and misguided at a time when we need urgent action. From a purely psychological perspective, it gives people the chance to keep kicking the climate can down the road rather than planning now for the huge actions we all need to be taking—the massive changes we need to make to our lives.

I believe we all require a greater sense of urgency and would prefer that short, five-year targets be set, with hugely ambitious goals based on significant net reductions in emissions.

Of course, national governments are not going to change 2050 targets but there is no reason at all why individual businesses cannot set their own goals on these issues. Remember, globally we will only reach our objectives if everybody does their part; relying on others will doom us to failure.

So I urge my compatriots and their customers—brands and retailers—to look at what they are doing now and think about how they can do it more sustainably. We all accept that there is a need to reduce carbon levels at some point, so why not start the hard work now rather than leave it till a time when it may be too late.

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