

## Inefficiencies in Covid-19 vaccine purchase

Foreign Minister's candid remarks—a wake up call

At a time when the country's Covid-19 vaccination efforts are grinding to a halt due to shortage of doses, the foreign minister has remarked about delays in the procurement process caused by the health ministry's mismanagement. We appreciate the candour of his statement. The inefficiencies such as those highlighted by the minister in the urgent procurement process are regrettable to say the least.

While Bangladesh's vaccination efforts to combat the Covid-19 pandemic started out strong, the recent deadly surge of cases and deaths in India, coupled with shortage of doses there and a reported ban on exports, has meant that the country's planned supply of the Covishield vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India was affected. With the country running out of available doses, many people who have received the first dose may be unable to receive the second jab in time. Considering the situation, the government has been looking towards urgent procurement from other sources—particularly China and Russia—to continue the vaccination efforts.

China has already gifted Bangladesh 500,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine, with reports of another 600,000 to be provided. The foreign minister has remarked that there are ongoing efforts to collect vaccine from other sources as well, including from the US. However, other countries with higher death rates may be prioritised. In this context, the importance of a steady supply of the vaccine is crucial to continue our vaccination efforts. Thus, these delays in efforts for procuring from China and Russia—due to signing of wrong documents for example—have far-reaching consequences. They undermine the proactive efforts of the health and foreign ministries towards sourcing vaccines.

Only recently we saw how badly prepared our health sector has been in dealing with large number of cases as people had to rush from hospital to hospital looking for vacant ICU beds. Vaccination is crucial for slowing down the rate of new infections, preventing deaths, and ultimately towards ending this pandemic. Second doses for those who have received the first dose already are needed to ensure maximum efficacy of the vaccines. At the same time, we are far from vaccinating enough people in the country to reach herd immunity. Remembering these realities, we hope that the foreign minister's remarks are taken seriously, and concerted efforts are undertaken to resolve the inefficiencies and mismanagement he has highlighted in the vaccine procurement process. It is urgent for Bangladesh to resume large-scale vaccination and the longer the delays, the longer this pandemic will last.

## No regard for health guidelines post-Eid

Do we have nothing to learn from the crises in India and Nepal?

WHILE the most recent "lockdown" had helped bring down the number of positive Covid-19 cases in the country, it is now disappointing to see both members of the public and the authorities reverting to ways which led to the worst surge in the number of cases last month. The same disregard for health guidelines and restrictions that we witnessed before Eid, especially with homebound people, is being repeated now that those same people are flocking back to the capital. And with them, a fresh but morbidly familiar fear of a possible third wave of the virus.

The entry points into the capital are packed with thousands of people, while the enforcement of rules and regulations is lax, and ferry terminals are operating accordingly with each ferry leaving packed to the brim. Even though inter-district bus services are still closed, that is no hindrance to holidaymakers as they return to Dhaka in hazily packed vehicles.

Restaurants, shopping malls, kitchen markets, parks, and mosques also seem to have returned to their normal state of not paying any heed to health guidelines or safety restrictions. To top this, law enforcement is also losing its zeal of checking if people are engaged in essential travelling or not.

We wonder if this is the right attitude to have for a nation sharing its borders with India, a country that is still going through one of the worst Covid-19 crises the world has seen yet. Is it also of no concern to the authorities or the general public that the Indian variant has been detected in Bangladesh and that it is much more potent than any variant we have dealt with in the past?

All this is telling of the lack of responsibility and transparency within concerned authorities, such as the health ministry. According to virologist Prof Nazrul Islam, the recommendations sent to this ministry by an advisory committee have been left idle for days. Because the committee does not know which health ministry officials see their recommendations, receiving updates after a file has been sent is difficult. Listing down preventative rules and restrictions is only the first step of curbing the spread of the virus. These rules have to be implemented strictly by every arm of the government in every public corner of the country. The government must ramp up awareness regarding the need to adhere to all the safety guidelines so that people voluntarily abide by them. Hopefully it is still not too late to take these steps and stop a possible third wave of Covid-19 in its tracks.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Free press under threat

There can be no denying that the right to free speech in our country has been under threat for some time. The recent treatment of a senior Prothom Alo journalist is another example of how the media in our country is being suppressed. This is a worrying sign of authoritarianism.

Wahiduzzaman, Dhaka

# Domestic cracks in blanket US support for Israel

Palestine no longer anathema, but there's still ways to go



ASHFAQUL SWAPAN

NO child, Palestinian or Israeli, whoever they are, should ever have to worry that death will rain from the sky. How many of my colleagues are willing to say the same, to stand for Palestinian human

rights as they do for Israeli? How many Palestinians have to die for their lives to matter?

— Rep. Rashida Tlaib, Democrat of Michigan, in a speech in the US House of Representatives condemning pro-Israel bias in the US. Tlaib is the first Palestinian American member of the US Congress.

The world heaved a collective sigh of relief after a ceasefire in the horrendous Palestinian-Israeli conflict, though who knows how long it will last.

In the US, the hostilities have revealed signs of change.

Unequivocal bipartisan support for Israel, come hell or high water, is being questioned. US President Joe Biden has been taken to task by progressive Democrats. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, whose grandmother is in Gaza, made an impassioned plea to Biden during a brief meeting.

The times, they are a-changing. There was a time when the US media—and popular opinion—refused to even acknowledge the existence of Palestinian nationhood.

Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir had once infamously said that there were no Palestinians. US supporters of Israel, who tend to regard the conflict as a zero-sum game, agreed. For many decades, the term "Palestinian" was rarer than hen's teeth in US media.

As late as the 1960s, the US mainstream media promoted the notion that Israel was the only shining democracy in a neighbourhood of thuggish Arab nations.

Yes, Israel was democratic. So was erstwhile apartheid South Africa. (Perhaps not coincidentally, both nations were great chums.)

The anti-Palestinian animus was exacerbated by the Cold War. The most radical supporters of Palestinians were headline pro-Soviet Arab states like Syria, Iraq and Algeria.

The thaw began with the 1978 Camp David accords between Egypt's Anwar

Sadat and Israel's Menachem Begin, negotiated by US President Jimmy Carter. The word "Palestinian" began to pop up in the US media.

Even as late as 2007, I vividly recall how Carter was essentially blacklisted by the media when he went on a book-promotion tour for his book "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid" (2006). Never mind that the book went on to become a New York Times bestseller.

The response this time around is

Netanyahu Government") and Jewish Currents editor Peter Beinart ("Palestinian Refugees Deserve to Return Home. Jews Should Understand.")

A profound, broader shift in the mood in the Democratic Party appears to be driven by two factors.

The Black Lives Matter movement continues a long tradition of minority rights activists feeling an instinctive kinship with international freedom struggles. In 1967 boxer activist

movements like Black Lives Matter and the demand to address global warming, powered by a progressive, younger cohort, has gained more traction and is beginning to make electoral inroads.

Another factor is the growing rightward shift of Israeli politics and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's frankly partisan embrace of former President Donald Trump and the Republican Party.

All told, young people are driving this change, and even the Jewish community is affected.

"A Pew survey last year found that fewer than one-third of young Jews in the United States rated Netanyahu as good or excellent, and barely one-quarter strongly opposed the BDS movement to boycott Israel," according to a New York Times column.

However, the support-Israel-no-matter-what lobby still wields considerable power.

"America's mainstream institutions have gone to extraordinary lengths to obscure (Palestinian) oppression," Eric Levitz writes in New York magazine. "Few (if any) forms of political expression are more aggressively suppressed in the US than anti-Zionist dissent. Seventeen US states have passed laws that penalise businesses and individuals who endorse boycotts of Israeli settlements. Academics are routinely fired for pointed criticisms of Israeli violence. And the State Department's official definition of anti-Semitism suggests that calling Israel—which is, at present, a de facto apartheid state—a 'racist endeavour' is tantamount to hatred of Jews."

Take the case of Emily Wilder, a Stanford University graduate who recently joined the Associated Press. Stanford's student Republicans created a stink about the fact that in her student days Wilder was associated with Justice for Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace. Boom. AP fired Wilder.

So, there is still some ways to go, but what is heartening is that more and more people are saying it's time to stop giving Israel a blank check.

"If you oppose war crimes only by your enemies, it's not clear that you actually oppose war crimes," Nicholas Kristof wrote in his New York Times column entitled "The 'Unshakable' Bonds of Friendship with Israel Are Shaking."

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A child holds up a sign that reads 'Palestinian Freedom' as pro-Palestine protestors rally outside The Venetian hotel and casino in Las Vegas, US, May 15, 2021. PHOTO: AFP

different. Public radio network NPR provided detailed reports on the grossly disproportionate damage and human suffering in the Gaza strip.

New York City, arguably the US media capital, has a heavy Jewish influence. The New York Times, in addition to in-depth reporting, has carried guest essays by Palestinian American writers. Emmy and Peabody award-winning journalist Laila Al-Arian wrote about the heartbreaking story of her grandfather Abdul Kareem in "My Grandfather Bought a Home in Gaza With His Savings. An Israeli Airstrike Destroyed It." Writer-scholar Yousef Munayyer provided an incisive analysis in "This Moment is Different."

The newspaper has also published sympathetic guest essays by mainstream Jewish Americans like Vermont's Democratic Sen. Bernie Sanders ("The US Must Stop Being an Apologist for the

Muhammad Ali gave up his boxing license for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. who considered the war an imperialist project, praised him.

Especially since its early days of inception dominated by European Ashkenazi Jews, Israel and the US had a disturbing unspoken historical similarity rarely spelled out by its supporters—both nations felt a deep need to create a triumphant historical narrative whose validity depended on the denial of the humanity of the people it sought to displace. Ethnic minorities, many directly at the receiving end of colonial oppression and/or horrendous racial discrimination, instinctively see through the pious humbug that seeks to obscure the less salubrious reality of oppression and dispossession.

This time around, engaged progressive

## LEADERS' SUMMIT ON CLIMATE CHANGE 2021

# Climate change communication is a prerequisite for climate mitigation

Md MOFIZUR RHAMAN

CITIZENS' understanding about the causes of climate change and its consequences is vital for its mitigation. For that, communicating the relevant issues to the masses is a prerequisite. However, this has always been an issue in the circles of hard science and policy-making. There is a lack of planned initiatives by local and global stakeholders to make climate change knowledge understandable to the general public by using the mass media—with a few exceptions. On the other hand, the high-level summits including Conference of the Parties (COPs) have never been easy for citizens

Though the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has been saying for a long time that climate change is true and real and is largely caused by human activity, thus anthropogenic in nature, the international community took a long time to come to the consensus that climate change is an existential threat to human civilisation. Many debates took place since the Bali conference and finally the international community reached the Paris Agreement in 2015 with some definite goals and objectives. That created a global hope for action. However, when the Trump administration left the Paris Agreement, the hope for collective action for

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particularly important while the world community is pursuing the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. On the other hand, Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister, emphasised on the lifestyle of Indians which he considers as climate friendly and called for a lifestyle change in order to fix the climate change problem. However, these issues cannot be achieved by the respective government or by adopting international policy actions imposed from the top. They need to be communicated to the public and their participation is a prerequisite for behavioural change in lifestyle and changing attitude towards nature for harmonising the coexistence of species, nature and culture, leading to sustainable development.

Media is largely considered an effective vehicle for communicating climate issues to the mass public. However, there are many problems in mediated communication on climate change. Firstly, most of the media, due to their focus on the political economy or for some other reasons, do not realise the urgency and necessity of addressing climate change issues to development, public health, food security, national-international peace, conflict and so on. The transfer of scientific messages through mass media sometimes remains ambiguous due to the gap between people of science and people in the media. It is hard for the scientific community to translate their hard science knowledge to the media in a media friendly language. Similarly, they become incomprehensible by media communicators due to a lack of understanding of the state of the art knowledge, professional tools and techniques, etc. This is a big hurdle when it comes to communicating climate related hard science issues to the masses. The macro and micro link of climate change to nature, land and river, insect and animal, bio-diversity, public health, greeneries, flora and fauna, tourism, food habit, lifestyle and so on, need to be communicated to the public through the media.

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World leaders during the climate change virtual summit. PHOTO: AFP

to directly access—except for the myopic media coverage of the events from the top. The recent youth climate actions taken mainly by students from around the world following Greta Thunberg's "climate emergency call" is an inspiring one for creating public awareness. These actions have been guided by grassroots organisations and civil societies in Bangladesh. However, they have largely been missing in the mainstream media coverage.

emission reduction, mitigation, adaption and technology transfer disappeared once again. Having the USA on board and its leadership for climate action is enormously important for achieving the targets. It is expected to contribute to the annual USD 100 billion climate funds for the low emitting climate victim nations—because of its past emissions leading to climate change. So, there are many science-related issues, as well as historical and international policy

related issues that form our common climate problems. However, most people are unaware of them.

It is encouraging to see the Biden administration take visible initiatives by bringing the USA back on the table and in a leadership position for worldwide climate actions. The April 2-3 virtual climate summit led by the Biden administration was organised to find how the USA can work together with the world community to achieve the climate related common goals. Despite the Covid pandemic, Joe Biden's special envoy on climate change set out on an international tour to invite potential leaders to the virtual summit and he also met our prime minister to personally hand her an invitation. That showed the seriousness of the current US administration to climate change issues and their undercurrents. Appointing a special envoy and organising this summit in the first 100 days of coming into office made the global public hopeful of future climate actions. As reported in the virtual summit, world leaders also raised their targets in country specific voluntary emission reduction, being inspired by Biden's initiative. Along with future emission reduction targets, some leaders have talked about public behavioural issues that require more rigorous, planned public communication actions.

China's leader Xi Jinping emphasised on the harmony of nature with development activities. This is