

Vandalised livelihoods of Bangladeshi expats in South Africa

Urgent action needed from our government

It is extremely disturbing to learn of the plight of Bangladeshi expats in South Africa, as over 400 Bangladeshi-owned shops have been vandalised and looted in Free State's capital, Bloemfontein, since May 16. These attacks were carried out as part of the protest against the shortcomings of the local government in providing its services. No doubt the misled belief that migrants are "stealing" opportunities for locals is behind the targeted attacks on shops owned by Bangladeshis and other foreign expats.

The nearly 10,000 Bangladeshis living in and around the Bloemfontein area now fear for their lives and livelihoods. Those who have already lost their shops and businesses are currently taking shelter with other Bangladeshi migrants near the town. This large-scale vandalism has led to many losing everything they had. On top of this, those who want to return home to Bangladesh are unable to do so, given that entries from South Africa have been banned since April due to the fear of the country's Covid-19 variant spreading here.

While we realise how frustrating it can be to witness the local authorities not providing their due service to the members of the public, we condemn the targeted and ruthless attacks against the businesses and homes of Bangladeshis and other migrants by South African locals.

We also believe the Bangladesh government and its representative in South Africa, the Bangladesh High Commission in Pretoria, should act urgently to aid our expats who have suffered these attacks. Simply "collecting information about the incident", as the foreign minister said the high commission has been asked to do, is not enough. There needs to be a marked effort to help the affected come back to Bangladesh safely (with necessary health checks performed, of course) or to aid them in recovering their livelihoods in South Africa. We hope the high commission has made its concern for the safety of the lives and livelihoods of Bangladeshis known to the South African government which has an obligation to protect foreigners living in their country.

Sinopharm vaccine delivery in June a welcome announcement

Diversification of vaccine sources should have been a priority months ago

We commend the government's quick action in securing more vaccines for the citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially since we have recently seen a spike in cases, prompting another round of lockdown across the country. According to Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, Bangladesh will purchase 1.5 crore Sinopharm vaccines from China, and its first consignment of 50 lakh vaccines is likely to arrive in Dhaka in June. The remaining one crore will arrive in July and August, with 50 lakh vaccines being delivered each month. The minister also said that a Chinese team will visit Bangladesh in a week or so to see the feasibility of vaccine co-production, and that discussions with Russia are also in its final stages.

While we are glad to hear of this positive turn of events, we cannot help but wonder why such steps were not taken much earlier, instead of Bangladesh becoming wholly dependent on one source of vaccination. This has turned out to be a crucial error since, so far, the Serum Institute of India has delivered only seven million of the 30 million vaccines bought by Bangladesh, and the authorities are scrambling to make up for this vaccine shortfall.

Yet almost eight months ago, in September 2020, Health Minister Zahid Maleque told *The Daily Star* that Russia was not only keen to provide Bangladesh with Covid-19 vaccines, but wanted to explore options of manufacturing the vaccine within Bangladesh as well. We are at a loss to understand why—when this possibility opened up so long ago—we had to wait until April 2021 for talks between the two countries on the potential supply and manufacture of Sputnik V within Bangladesh.

We feel the authorities, in a similar fashion, failed to explore the option of Chinese vaccines last year, even though in June 2020, the Chinese embassy in Dhaka confirmed that Bangladesh will be a priority once China has developed a vaccine. However, after the possibility to collaborate with Sinovac on vaccine trials in the country fell through when the Chinese company asked Bangladesh to co-fund the project, no more was heard on the matter of procuring Chinese vaccines.

With Covid-19 cases soaring in districts bordering India, experts have expressed fears of another coronavirus surge in Bangladesh by the end of next month if transmission of the Indian variant cannot be contained. There is absolutely no room for complacency in this scenario. The government must make amends for its previous lethargy and ramp up efforts to get Covid-19 vaccines from all possible sources in order to urgently re-start Bangladesh's vaccination programme.

HANDLING OF THE SECOND WAVE

Can someone in the administration please explain their decisions?



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

It is not easy to rationalise some of the recent actions of the government related to the realm of governance, in other words, related to us the people. For now, let us address the second wave of the pandemic and the government's actions or reactions to deal with it.

Can anyone tell me why the government continues to extend the so-called lockdown which is being observed only through its violation by most people? What is the logic in keeping the shopping malls open without ensuring that the safety guidelines are followed? The poor and marginalised people, who eke out a living doing daily jobs like the Pedit cab ("Pedit cab" gives some dignity to the rickshaw pullers) or three-wheeler drivers, were kept from plying the road without arranging for their sustenance, while private cars were seen chock-a-block on the streets. Their owners were going to tend to their businesses which provide their livelihoods.

For a considerable time, buses, both private and public, were kept off the road but private offices remained open. How were those who work in these private enterprises, most of them of the lower and middle-income groups, to attend office? Small shops were asked to close, at least

during the early phase of the lockdown in April, whereas big shopping malls were allowed to stay open. And very few were seen to be observing the Covid-19 safety protocols in these malls. When public buses were allowed eventually, with the caveat that they could carry only fifty percent of the capacity, the fare was increased by sixty percent—strange logic, if anyone can find any logic at all.

But what has defied reason most is the government decision to keep all kinds

doubled from what it was in early and mid-May.

The vaccine fiasco is another difficult issue for anyone with anything between the ears to figure out. The pandemic has spawned some new terminologies of which "Covid diplomacy" is one, followed by the "vaccine diplomacy". We saw the frenetic vaccine diplomacy early this year, sometimes open and sometimes furtive, by two of our close friends, both vying for our backing on strategic and geopolitical

decision makers, in their infinite wisdom and magnanimity, had paid for the three million doses in full and in advance. We were left in the limbo, and China had the last laugh. China has finally agreed to sell 1.5 crore Sinopharm vaccines to us and the first consignment is likely to arrive in Dhaka in June, according to a statement made by our foreign minister on Wednesday. That is some comfort.

Surprisingly, very little about this matter has been discussed or commented upon in the media, and very few questions asked, if at all.

The government's handling of vaccine procurement reeks of unprofessionalism, and has been bereft of any concern for national security. One needs hardly reminding that public health is an important adjunct of national security, particularly when it has been afflicted severely by an unprecedented pandemic, in Bangladesh as well as almost all countries in the world. And no one should tinker with it. Going for only one single source, for any item, and more so Covid vaccine, defies the basic fundamentals of procurement. No one has the right to put public health at risk, which this very injudicious decision had.

We are fighting an enemy for which one of the main weapons is vaccines. Should we have depended on only one source of supply and one business house at home to handle this issue, even if the cost was cheaper than other vaccines? Keeping handy alternatives and multiple sources is a part of intelligent and judicious planning. On the issue of cost, can anyone tell me what have we done to be charged more than a dollar for the vaccine than what it costs in India?

The nation deserves an answer. Such an issue would have been discussed in parliament were it functioning the way it was meant to be. Decisions should stem from thrashing out all options and their pros and cons. The administration owes it to the people to do so. But today, one cannot ask unpleasant questions or reveal unpleasant facts without risking the Sword of Damocles—the draconian Digital Security Act—falling on one's head, or another one—the Official Secrets Act—as it did on the head of a senior journalist of the leading Bangla daily in the country. There are more questions to be asked regarding that and a few more pressing national issues, but we shall defer those for next week.

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The government-enforced lockdown has proved to be a complete farce with contradictory decisions coming from the policymakers and people continuing to disregard health safety guidelines.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

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of transports off the road during the Eid holidays, hoping that doing so would discourage people from travelling home. Did it? No administration conversant with the traits and attitude of its people, or alive to their woes, could have thought of such a policy. Nothing can keep our people from going home on the occasions of the two major festivals of Eid, except perhaps an all-out curfew. And nothing could. In fact, nearly three million people had reportedly left Dhaka for the Eid holidays and a large number, if not as many, had come in Dhaka. We are all aware of the way these people made for their destinations. Wouldn't it have been better if all the modes of surface transport could run with enforced safety protocols? That would have saved these poor people money and physical torment as well as ensured a modicum of health safety. No wonder, the number of infected cases has

issues. Ultimately, our government put everything in the Indian basket, for whatever reason. It was a victory of sorts for India over China, which was also in the running for acquiring contract with Bangladesh to supply Covid vaccines, but only fleeting, revealing what Shashi Tharoor calls "unspoken subtext: rivalry with China". And we were left high and dry in the face of the Serum Institute of India renegeing on the agreement.

Serum even failed to meet up the agreed amount of five million doses per month, except for the first month. Not only could it not supply the agreed quantity of doses, after the second consignment, the supply was stopped altogether. Should our planners not have foreseen a *force majeure* situation where India's own requirement might necessitate disrupting external supply, as was the case in this instance? Surprisingly, our

The case against SP Babul Akter

Only a robust investigation can serve justice



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

The complainant is now complained against. This dramatic development, however, does not come as a total surprise because, in the informed quarters, there was a continuing suspicion of the veracity of the complainant's version of the incident that allegedly led to the killing of his wife in 2016 in broad daylight in Chattogram city. We are talking about the arrest and remand of former Superintendent of Police (SP) Babul Akter, who had earlier lodged a murder complaint accusing some unidentified criminals, without furnishing credible and cogent motives for the murder of his wife.

It may be recalled that SP Babul Akter was very much under the cloud of suspicion immediately after the murder. Reportedly, a high-powered committee, formed by the commissioner of Chattogram Metropolitan Police to enquire into the incident, found traces of culpability in the conduct and actions of the complainant husband, and accordingly sent a report to the Police Headquarters.

At the Police Headquarters, some senior police officers reportedly interrogated Babul Akter and they also did not find the actions and submissions of the said officer above board. In short, Babul's version of the incident supposedly occurring due to his actions taken against terrorists and criminals was not found to be credible. He was, however, not charged for criminal actions, as sufficient evidence pointing to his culpability was not forthcoming at the time. The officer reportedly resigned which was accepted by the government, although there were speculations that he was, in fact, eased out of public service for unbecoming conduct and disturbing accusations pointing to his probable involvement in the conspiracy to commit the murder of his wife.

In spite of what has happened during the time since May 2016, when the unfortunate murder took place, the redeeming feature as of now is the Police Bureau of Investigation's non-acceptance of the version given by the accused officer, as well as the registration of a regular case



File photo of former SP Babul Akter (Centre).

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

for murder and conspiracy and the arrest and remand of the suspect. At the time of writing this piece, it has been learnt that Babul Akter declined to judicially confess his involvement in the murder conspiracy. This was only natural, the accused being an investigator of some experience himself and suspected to be criminally disposed.

It would be pertinent to mention here that judicial confession, even if given by an accused, is not a strong piece of evidence in the absence of credible material and oral corroboration, and almost invariably runs the risk of being retracted during the trial process. The need, therefore, quite clearly, is the unearthing of the conspiracy and resultant commission of the murder. So when this writer is urging a robust investigation, the import is that the investigation should move, in earnest, from the evidence to the accused and not otherwise.

According to media reports in this

regard, the source of the accused officer who allegedly hired the killers has been able to evade arrest thus far. Therefore, the arrest of this individual is strongly likely to unearth the motive and conspiracy of the murder. Any experienced investigator would know about the needful to be done following the apprehension of an abettor of criminal conspiracy.

This writer would recommend caution in the process of investigation. It needs to be mentioned that the rule of law, in its application to the criminal process, is primarily concerned with the protection of the rights of the accused persons and not of the victims, and upholding civil liberties of the citizens. To many, both the rule of law and its subservient criminal jurisprudence are unequivocally in favour of the offenders, the criminals, the lawbreakers, the accused. Experts say that the dice, from the very beginning, is loaded against the effectiveness of

investigation.

In a case where the charge against the accused is one of murder, in the normal course, it may not be possible to convict the accused on circumstantial evidence without adducing direct evidence. Though there is no legal infirmity in basing conviction only on circumstantial evidence, it has to be satisfied that the circumstances from which the inference of guilt is to be drawn have been fully established by unimpeachable evidence beyond a shadow of doubt. We have to remember that the accused is not to prove his case but has simply to give a reasonable explanation to the charge.

Admittedly, investigators have a difficult task at hand. They have to come with flying colours in the interest of honest and truthful investigation as also the ethos of public service.

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