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Relief for Yaas survivors top priority now

Rising frequency of cyclones and tidal surges calls for long-term plans

BAKANGLADESH is no stranger to cyclones. The people of this land have had to live with such extreme weather events since as far back as modern history goes, with increasing frequency in recent years. Yet it is small comfort when life becomes a rollercoaster and you have to rebuild it, again and again, just like survivors are now set to do in the aftermath of Cyclone Yaas. The cyclone, coming a year after the super-cyclone Amphan, has left a trail of destruction in at least nine coastal districts, and the danger is not over yet, as swollen torrent continues to sweep through hundreds of villages. According to initial reports, numerous houses, farms, fisheries and even roads lie submerged after embankments holding back the rivers crumbled, or were partially damaged, in many places. Many bridges, culverts and tube-wells were also ruined.

It may take days before we get a fuller picture of the devastation and damages caused. According to one estimate, eight people died on Wednesday and three more on Thursday, as a result of the cyclone. The loss of lives, livelihoods and physical properties this time is expected to be lower compared to Amphan, but the government must urgently roll out aid and relief measures to help the survivors recover and rebuild. This is going to be a huge task, with the regular communication channels disrupted in many areas. We expect nothing less than a well-coordinated drive from the authorities so that no one affected by the cyclone falls through the cracks.

A continuing worry, however, is the tidal surges, with some rivers still flowing above danger levels at different points. The rising trend in higher tides in recent times has seen rivers swell even during non-cyclonic events. Experts fear this may have a long-term effect on the soil, water, environment and even public health in the region. Before Yaas, in the last four years, the Bay of Bengal alone had reportedly seen at least 12 cyclonic storms. According to the National Institute of Preventive and Social Medicine, whereas there was one big cyclone in every six years and four months previously, now a storm is hitting the country in every 1 year and 10 months. Even though the death toll from cyclones has significantly dropped in the last few decades, because of Bangladesh's increasing disaster response capacity, the fact that the incidence of cyclones and tidal surges is increasing calls for a longer-term plan.

With climate change expected to further increase the frequency and intensity of such cyclones and higher tides, the government must focus on undertaking more pre-emptive action. There is a need for more funding and more grassroots involvement to help the communities living in the coastal belt, so they can better stand up to these disasters. Reducing poverty and boosting their access to social safety nets are also paramount. But right now, the priority, of course, is to make food and medical supplies available to the Yaas survivors and also help them rebuild their lives through financial and other forms of assistance.

No decision on Electric Traction System for six years!

Govt has to watch out for possible graft

ACCORDING to a report published by *The Daily Star* on May 27, even after six years the Bangladesh Railway (BR) still has not been able to decide on introducing an electric train service in the country which could make this mode of transport both more efficient and environment friendly. The confusion of how to bring about such a massive change in our railway system lies mostly in the selection of rail routes like Dhaka-Narayanganj, Dhaka-Chattoogram, etc. Why is it taking so long?

If we just look at India, it has a whopping 45,881 km of rail tracks, among which a staggering 71 percent has been electrified till March, 2021. The railway lines in Bangladesh are only 3,019 km, on which both diesel-powered broad-gauge and meter-gauge trains ply regularly. The process of turning a country's rail tracks into electric ones is known as Electric Traction System (ETS), which is both cost effective and environment friendly. According to officials, if BR can implement electric traction system, 35 percent of the operation cost and 30-50 percent of maintenance cost of BR will be saved. Another specialist, who is also a former BR engineer, says that the cost of an electric locomotive is lesser than that of a diesel locomotive. Besides, BR spends a large amount of money on diesel. Also, ETS can be applied to the existing rail lines without taking any further initiative from the government to lay out new rail tracks.

So why are we not taking advantage of this wonderful opportunity? The reality is quite disheartening. The aforementioned report mentions that BR had prepared a proposal for ETS in February, 2015. It has been more than six years now but there is still no activity from the government's side to implement the project. The proposal is just passing from one hand to another. According to some current and former BR officials (wishing not to be named), a section of railway officials are benefiting from the decades-old diesel-powered rail operation system. These are the people who seem to be blocking the path of establishing ETS. Also, a large sum of money is spent every year for procurement and maintenance of diesel engines. As a result, if ETS is executed, certain corrupt officials inside the BR will lose their illegal benefits.

We urge the government to ramp up the process of implementing the proposal of BR to introduce electric train system as soon as possible. With reduced uses on diesel, the government will be able to save a large portion of peoples' money and use it in some other urgent development projects. Also, the government has to bring the corrupt officials to book and make sure that graft doesn't take place during the implementation of ETS.



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

DURING the latest rerun of the biblical David and Goliath narrative in a changed context, the age-old conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines

has come alive. The world witnessed the helplessness of millions of Palestinian people as buildings turned into rubble, hundreds of bodies became maimed, and 200 plus individuals became corpses under the heavy bombardment of the Gaza Strip by the Israeli Air Forces. Conversely, most of the homemade crude missiles hurled by Hamas got intercepted by the Iron Dome that acted very much like a sci-fi giant; some of the rockets dodged the interceptor and damaged property and killed about 10 civilians in Israel. But the damage caused to the Palestinian side was of epic proportion as residential, media and commercial towers crumbled, road and alleged tunnel network caved in. It was a brutal one-sided affair in which the disproportionate use of technology and military might was aided by diplomatic standoff to allow the destruction to go on to diffuse any semblance of Palestinian resistance.

In the Biblical story, David was a mere shepherd boy who killed the giant of a Philistine Goliath who was armed with a javelin and a shield with a single slingshot. King Saul, who raided the northern Jerusalem around 11th century BCE, was challenged for a single combat by the Champion of the Philistine, Goliath. Once David killed and beheaded Goliath, the Philistines ran away, and the state of Israel begin to flourish under different kings of Israel. Then came the Babylonians who caused the Jewish diaspora in the 8th century BCE, and the Jews got dispersed around the world. After the end of the First World War, the end of the Ottoman rule over the Middle East helped the creation of the State of Israel. The persecution of the Jews during WWII sent the western world on a guilt trip, allowing the dispersed Jewish community to subdue their "enemies" and expand their homeland. But the problem was, their promised home could only be built over somebody else's land who have been living on it for thousands of years. History and pre-history clashed to find the right story for the home of the two people: the Israelites and the Palestinians.

One of the videos that prompted this latest protest, leading to the raid of the Israeli army inside Al-Aqsa mosque in the holiest of the night for the Muslims and the consequent full-scale military engagement, involved a 22-year-old Palestinian woman. In the Sheikh Jarrah

neighbourhood in the occupied East Jerusalem, this woman confronted an intruder, saying, "Jacob, you are stealing my house." "If I don't steal your home, someone else will steal it," was the answer given by the Israeli settler to Mona al-Kurd. The house was under court order for eviction to make room for settlers. The arbitrary nature of the ruling shows how one can be dispossessed in a regime that has no empathy for its occupied

the Native Americans are in America.

The Jewish believe that the return to their "home" is a fulfilment of the prophecy made by Moses. Moses was the one who saved the Jews from persecution at the hand of the Pharaoh. Moses knew that during the low tide, the seabed of the Red Sea is exposed, when he could take his people away from the wrath of the Pharaoh.

Interestingly, the mythical exodus finds

Most of these people are fleeing some violent situations and making such desperate journeys to reach Europe. Their migration can be explained by the push/pull factors: they are pushed to migrate or dislocate due to the repressions at home, and they are simultaneously pulled by the myth of prosperity. Diaspora is guided by the twin-piston of fear and hope.

Every year, many Asians and Africans try to enter Europe through the Mediterranean Sea route. They call it a game. The human traffickers choose Spain, Italy, Cyprus, and Malta to smuggle fortune-seekers from around the world into Europe. They take advantage of the desperation of people looking to flee their homes and hoping to find new ones, and carry them inside the belly of what can only be described as slave ships from the colonial era.

According to UNHCR, the most common nationalities of Mediterranean Sea and land arrivals in the first four months of this year include Tunisia (14,649 people, 18.8 percent), Algeria (9,466, 12.1 percent), Morocco (5,399, 6.9 percent), Bangladesh (5,360, 6.9 percent), Syrian Arab Rep. (5,118, 6.6 percent), Afghanistan (5,061 people, 6.5 percent), Côte d'Ivoire (4,554, 5.8 percent), Mali (3,525, 4.5 percent), Guinea (3,138, 4.0 percent) and Others (3,122, 4.0 percent).

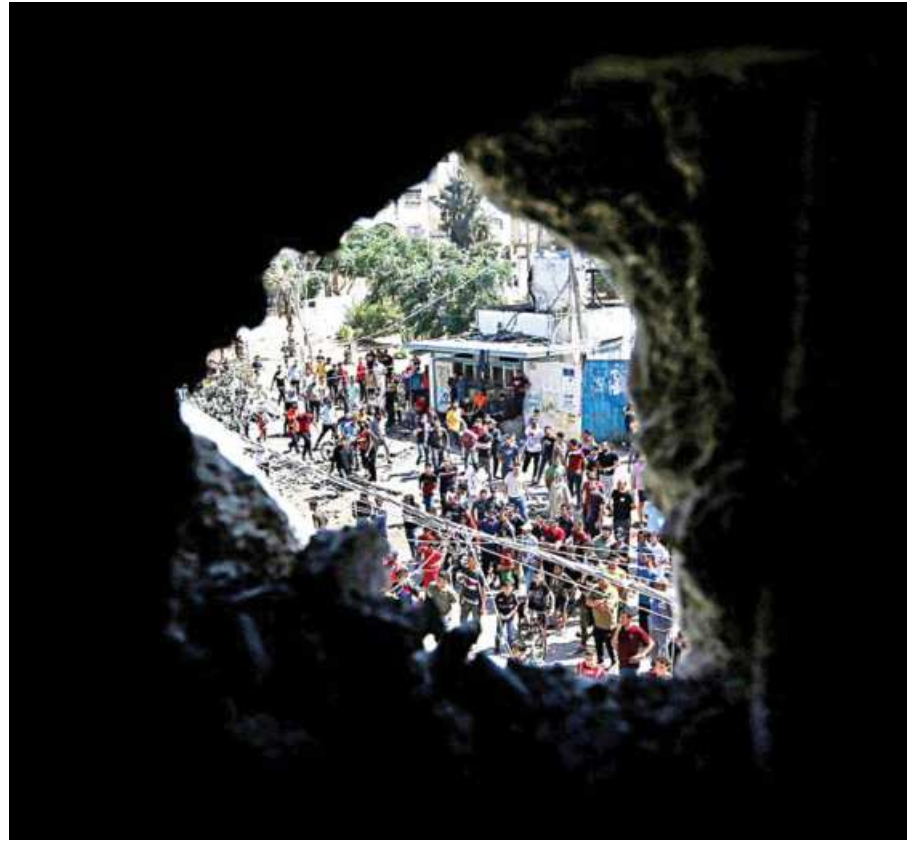
Bangladesh ranks joint third on the list. A local newspaper ran a lead story on May 23 to describe how 200 men paid Tk 8-10 lakh each in their efforts to enter Italy from the coast of Libya. 120 were rescued by the Tunisian police, while the rest are feared dead.

I looked at the list. I can understand the desperate measures taken by the people of some of these countries. I read about their tribulations and can discern their troubled travel. But in no way I can understand why our nationals are making such desperate attempts, and what does it tell us about a nation! Why isn't enough done to stop them from falling into the hands of the smugglers? Is this the gift of independence? Or do we think that some of these men would make it to the developed world and start sending revenues for us to bask in the glory of their sweats and blood?

Maybe we need to tell the tales of home and homelands to educate our people. We need to tell them, with reference to the people who are homeless, to remind them home is where your heart is. The dream-sellers will create a lakh-taka fancy of a better home—but the moment you enter the home of a different person, you will be treated as an intruder. As the ongoing drama tells us: nobody likes an intruder, whether powerful or powerless.

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Desperate Times, Desperate Journeys



Palestinians are seen through a damaged house as they gather following an Israeli air strike.

PHOTO: REUTERS

people. The whole narrative then is about homeland at a state level, and about home at a personal level. The questions are: who gets to stay, who runs away? Who has the power to stay? Who has the determination to stay back? The recent spate of violence has brought the issue of home and homelessness to the fore. How can you have two states in the land between the Jordan River in the Mediterranean Sea when all the lands are occupied by one group only? Is it possible to have a one state with a cosmopolitan Jerusalem and a pluralistic democracy? As long as the demography is on the side of the Palestinians, Israel would never allow it. They are afraid of the hostile Arab nations. The only way Israel can exist is by flexing its muscles. Meanwhile the Palestinians suffer with occasional doses of world sympathy. They are the strangers in their own land like

its parallel in a lived experience when migrants from Morocco started crossing the shallow water at Fnideq to enter Ceuta. At the height of the Israel-Palestine conflict, on May 18, at least 6,000 migrants reached Spain's Ceuta enclave. Apparently, Morocco has been angered by the way Spain gave medical support to one of its rebel leader. To retaliate, the Moroccan authority allowed the migrants to pursue their dream of going to Europe. The migrant manpower was unleashed to plague Spain as Ceuta saw a record number of people wading into their territory over a single day. These were desperate people longing for a sea-change in their lives.

They embraced the uncertain reality of a refugee. No one chooses to be a refugee, to leave everything behind for an uncertain future. They do so because there is probably a war or ethnic cleansing raging in their own country.

Single-dose Oxford vaccine cannot protect against Indian variant



KHONDOKER MEHEDI AKRAM

BANGLADESH is potentially approaching a dual crisis. One is the shortage of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, Covishield, leaving over 14 lakh

people in uncertainty over their second doses, and the other is the emergence of the notorious "Indian variant" in the country.

Initially, there was a glimmer of hope that people who received the first dose of Covishield will be protected from Covid-19 at least for three months or so—and therefore, they can wait for longer to get their second dose, when it is available, to achieve a fuller protection.

Previously, the Phase-3 clinical trial data showed that a single dose of Oxford vaccine can protect 76 out of 100 vaccinated people (76 percent efficacy) from symptomatic Covid by the non-mutated original version of coronavirus. This finding was later supported by "real world evidence" demonstrated by the Public Health England in their post-vaccine surveillance study amongst older people, published in the BMJ on May 13, 2021, which showed that a single dose of either Oxford-AstraZeneca or Pfizer vaccine provides at least 60 percent protection from symptomatic Covid and over 80 percent protection from severe Covid and death from the mutated "UK variant" (B.1.1.7) virus infection.

This data lets the policymakers in Bangladesh advise delaying for second dose beyond the WHO-recommended 12-week timeframe. The government appears optimistic about arranging the required Oxford-AstraZeneca shots from sources other than the Serum Institute of India within a couple of months to resolve the situation.

However, a recent study conducted by Public Health England, which has yet to be peer-reviewed, showed that a single dose of either Oxford-AstraZeneca

or Pfizer vaccines is not effective at all in preventing symptomatic Covid by the "Indian variant" (B.1.617.2). To achieve 60 to 80 percent protection against infection by the Indian variant, a double dose is absolutely necessary.

This finding emphasises how important it is to conduct variant surveillance in Bangladesh to monitor the spread of Indian and other variants of concern

first detected in India last December. Currently, B.1.617.2 is the most reported variant in India, and the dominant variant amongst all other foreign variants in the UK. The UK's leading scientists are expecting to see this Indian variant become the dominant variant in the UK in a few months.

The B.1.617.2 variant has two significant mutations on its Spike



People waiting to get tested for coronavirus in front of a tent on the premises of Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital, on March 15, 2021.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

(VOC). The course of the pandemic and the efficacy of vaccines are largely driven by the mutation of the virus. This recent development should make the policymakers rethink how to address the second-dose crisis in Bangladesh, and how to protect those who will be waiting longer for the second doses if the Indian variant becomes dominant in the country, which is very much likely to happen.

In the UK, the cases of the Indian variant are increasing rapidly. To date, over 3,400 cases of the B.1.617.2 variant have been detected, which is one thousand cases more than in the preceding week. This particular variant is a sub-type of the so-called "double-mutant" Indian variant B.1.617 that was

protein: one is on its receptor binding domain (L452R) and the other is on the furin cleavage site (P618R)—the key components of the virus for infection and spread. This simultaneous dual mutation enhances its infection and transmission capability by 40-50 percent compared to the UK variant, and thus makes it a "best fit" virus for rapid community transmission.

Between April 5 and May 16 this year, Public Health England conducted a vaccine efficacy survey using Oxford-AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines on 11,621 UK variant and 1,054 Indian variant (B.1.617.2) cases. The study reveals that a single dose of either Oxford-AstraZeneca or Pfizer vaccines provides only 33

percent protection against the Indian variant compared to 51 percent protection against the UK variant. On the other hand, two doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine provide 60 percent protection against the Indian variant and 66 percent against the UK variant. A similar trend was seen in case of the Pfizer vaccine as well, where its two shots show efficacy of 81 percent and 87 percent against the Indian and UK variants respectively. This data provides a clear real-world evidence that to achieve protection against the Indian variant, two shots are essential. For this, the UK government is now doubling up its vaccination drive to provide two shots to 60 percent of its population by June.

In Bangladesh, several cases of the Indian variant (B.1.617.2) have been detected during the last few weeks in the border regions and in Dhaka. Despite the so-called lockdown, pre- and post-Eid movement of people could not be stopped. We have been seeing a rise in daily cases for the last 10 days. Due to its highly transmissible nature, it is likely that the Indian variant could spread along with people's movement from one region to another.

From the UK's situation, we now know that the Indian variant has the ability to outcompete other variants like South African and Brazil variants. Once the Indian variant becomes dominant, the consequence of that could be catastrophic, as we have witnessed in India and Nepal. To avoid such a disaster, we must maximise our effort to conduct nationwide variant surveillance, either by genome sequence or by targeted RT-PCR tests, as done by Public Health England. To protect people who have received only one dose of Covishield, their second doses should be ensured within the shortest possible timeframe, unless otherwise it is confirmed that the Indian variant is not widely spread in Bangladesh. There is no doubt that a single dose of Covid vaccine is not effective against the Indian variant.

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