

## Lockdown of border areas

*Everything should not be left to local administration*

ONLY a couple of days ago, we had opined in these very columns that the government should opt for a strict lockdown in the border districts if we are to avoid a situation like the kind that India is facing presently. The demand stemmed from the recommendation of the civil surgeons in six bordering districts who had called for complete lockdown in the infection-prone areas to prevent further spread of the virus. And we believe there was no dissenting voice in this regard. Therefore, it is vexing to see that the local administration is yet to implement the call of the civil surgeons.

We do not believe that the matter of lockdown should be left to the local administration entirely. In the absence of specific directives from the standing committee on fighting Covid-19, which seems to have gone into hibernation, the health ministry should play the leading role, as it always should, and issue strict enforcement directives to the local officials of these districts. If the health minister says that he is in favour of a complete lockdown, why should it be left to the local officials in these districts to further observe the Covid situation for the next few days and decide on imposing lockdown after discussions with all the stakeholders?

The infection rates are alarmingly high in the districts bordering India, varying between 44.11 percent in Natore and 18 percent in Kushtia. Therefore, the situation brooks no further discussion. And, may we ask, who are the stakeholders with whom the local officials would like to discuss the situation? The only stakeholders, we believe, are the people, and the only thing at stake is their health.

We repeat our call because every moment of delay in imposing the lockdown will endanger people's lives. Not only should a complete lockdown in these districts be enforced, movement out of these districts should also be strictly regulated. Understandably, complete lockdown would entail inconveniencing people, especially daily wage earners and the marginalised. The government must have adequate provisions for such an eventuality, which should be geared up to tide over the situation.

## Students should be on the vaccine priority list

*Safely reopening universities must be a priority*

WE are pleased to hear that students of public and private universities are going to receive the Covid-19 vaccine on a priority basis, once they are available. According to a report published by this daily on June 1, the government will be getting 1.5 crore shots of vaccine from China throughout June, July and August—50 lakh each month—and is also in the final stages of procuring Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. These acquisitions, we hope, will re-energise the government's vaccination campaign, which has been stalling of late due to the dire situation in India preventing the Serum Institute from supplying the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine to Bangladesh.

The government's plan to vaccinate university students on a priority basis is a good one. It has been more than a year since universities were closed—on March 17, 2020—and we sympathise with the students who have gone through all that time in great uncertainty. The mental stress of not knowing when their regular academic activities will resume again, when they will graduate, etc. must be taking a heavy toll on them. And many students may not even be able to cope with such circumstances for too long financially—as they may have certain responsibilities towards their families or are in situations where they have to support themselves.

Moreover, the learning loss that students have had to incur is incomprehensible. And as experts have said, the cost of that loss to the nation will be massive in the long-run. Therefore, getting university students back in their classrooms and into their academic activities should be one of the government's topmost priorities. Hopefully, once the students are vaccinated, universities will finally be able to reopen and academic activities can resume.

In that regard, the government must do everything to support students in continuing with their studies. And although vaccinating them is a good first step, there are other issues involved here that the government must be careful about. For instance, the government must ensure that all the measures associated with acquiring the vaccines and inoculating the students are done correctly. Even with the vaccines, the basic health guidelines have to be followed. Also, university teachers and other staff, too, will have to be vaccinated before universities can be reopened safely.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Reopen educational institutions

Due to the pandemic, schools, colleges and universities across the country have been closed for about 14 months. The result is that students' educations are at risk. Although the government has taken steps to resume education online, they were not effective. Despite the "lockdown", most places are open, except education institutions. We must reopen them and let the younger generation continue their education.

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# Protecting children online and in the real world

*The principles are the same*



LAILA KHONDKAR

ACCOR-DING to a report published in March 2021 by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 30 percent of children have experienced various forms of online harassment during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was conducted in five districts—Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Cox's Bazar and Sathkira. Among the victims of harassment, 56.25 percent are girls. Forty-one percent of these children informed their parents about the harassment and 12 percent refused to talk about their experiences. Legal steps have been taken in only six percent of these cases.

According to a pre-pandemic survey of ASK published in early 2020, 8.39 percent of girl children had experienced online harassment. However, in 2021, this number increased by over four times. Globally, children are spending excessive amounts of time online during the pandemic, which has created concerns.

Children are one of the most significant users of the Internet for education, communication and entertainment. While there are many benefits, various new child protection risks have also emerged due to children's access to cyberspace. Violence and harm against children in the online world could present itself in many different forms. One of these is the production,

distribution and use of materials depicting child sexual abuse. Online solicitation or "grooming" is another serious concern, where an abuser secures a child's trust in order to draw them into a situation where they may be harmed. Adult pornography exists in abundance on the Internet, which many children can access.

Moreover, information on tools for violence, cults, drugs etc. are freely available through the web, which could be very damaging for children. Cyberspace hosts a vast number of venues (chat rooms, message boards and games) where children congregate. This provides greater opportunities for abusers to seek out and approach children relatively

perpetrators and victims are children.

Lack of awareness among parents and children in Bangladesh is a major reason behind the increase in child protection concerns online. In many cases, children do not share their experiences of harassment in fear of further punishment from their parents.

Many parents in our society do not have updated knowledge on technology and feel helpless in such situations. However, one does not have to be a technology expert to provide the appropriate guidance to children on protecting themselves in the virtual world. The Australian E-Safety Commissioner made some useful recommendations for parents so that they can ensure children

children live in socially and economically difficult conditions, have already experienced harm such as sexual abuse and exploitation, suffer from loneliness and low-esteem, and are alienated from parents and others, they are more likely to be negatively affected.

The principles of protecting children online and in real settings are quite similar. It is about effective parent-child communication. If parents spend quality time with children, listen to them actively and understand their lived realities including their interests, friends etc., they will be able to offer the right guidance and support as and when required.

Children are not homogeneous as a group—their vulnerabilities and capacities are different (based on their age, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, history of abuse, etc.). Some of them are aware of the risks and adopt self-protection mechanisms, while some do not. Parents, teachers and caregivers should support the children by making them aware of child protection issues and educating them on how they can use the Internet to enhance the quality of their lives.

We need a multi-sectoral response to protect children in cyberspace. The government should develop and implement policies on awareness raising, rehabilitation services, industry accountability, research, etc. Online child harassment cases should be tried under cybercrime tribunals. There is a need to harmonise relevant laws such as The Children Act, 2013 (amended 2018), Information and Communication Technology or ICT Act, 2006 (amended 2013), and The Pornography Control Act, 2012 to prevent online violence against children. Under government leadership, the ICT industry (Internet service providers, mobile phone companies, etc.) should participate in ensuring that the rights of children are internalised in the development of their products and services. The capacity of members of law enforcement agencies should be developed to collect digital evidence and they should learn to be child sensitive.

There is a need to achieve a balance between utilisation of the positive aspects of the cyber world—ensuring the rights of children to privacy, information, expression and association—and protecting them from abuse. It is our responsibility to ensure that using the Internet becomes an empowering experience for children.

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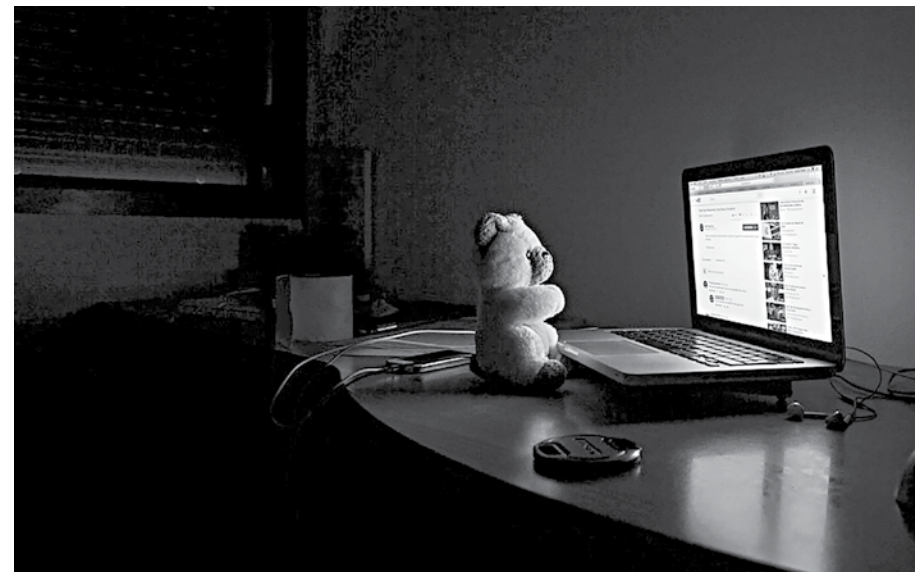


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easily, and eventually they can harm them psychologically and/or physically. Cyberbullying is also quite common.

It must be remembered that the abuse of a child is still more likely to occur within the family than anywhere else, but cyberspace opens up the possibility for family members to also use the technology abusively. Moreover, it provides other family members and strangers with the opportunity to contact children with whom they would not otherwise have had any kind of relationship.

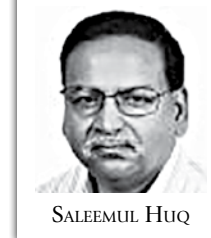
Online sexual harassment and paedophilia are not properly addressed in the legal system of Bangladesh. For example, there is no specific legal provision on paedophilia in the Digital Security Act, 2018. Child pornography has been addressed in the Pornography Control Act, 2012. However, there is no provision for the cases where both

are protected online, which are relevant for parents everywhere. These include: "build an open trusting relationship around technology; co-view and co-play with your child online; build good habits and help your child to develop digital intelligence and social and emotional skills; empower your child; use devices in open areas of the home; set time limits that balance time spent in front of screens with offline activities; know the apps, games and social media sites that your kids are using; check the privacy settings; use available technologies to set up parental controls on devices; be alert to signs of distress."

Online activities have their roots in offline behaviour, and it is important to understand the contexts in which the Internet is used, instead of just focusing on the technology itself. Some children are especially at risk due to a range of vulnerability-enhancing factors. If

## Can the G7 leaders rise to the occasion?

### POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE leaders of the G7 countries—consisting of the US, UK, Canada, Japan, Italy, France and Germany—will be holding their annual meeting in the UK in the second week of June and have a number of major issues on their agenda, including how to roll out global vaccination against the coronavirus and how to tackle climate change.

What do they need to do to ensure that the planet stays below the 1.5 degrees Centigrade global temperature that was agreed six years ago in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, while also supporting the vulnerable developing countries to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change?

The two cyclones that battered India's west coast from the Arabian sea, followed by the one in the Bay of Bengal that also affected Bangladesh in the last few days, are good illustrations of the fact that the world has passed into the reality of loss and damage from human-induced climate change.

The good news is that the environment ministers of the G7 countries have already met and agreed to phase out new coal plants around the world in order to stay below the 1.5 degrees ceiling. Now, the finance ministers, followed by the prime ministers and presidents, will have to do more when they meet in a few days.

Let me address the responsibility of the G7 finance ministers first. They are the ones who were primarily responsible for delivering on the promise that the developed countries made back in 2015 to provide a minimum of USD 100 billion a year, starting from 2020 onwards, to the developing countries to help them tackle climate change. Unfortunately, the year 2020 has come and gone and this sum was not delivered. It is not clear how much was actually delivered, as there is no transparency regarding which country is supposed to give how much and through which channels.

However, it is widely acknowledged that no more than USD 80 billion was actually delivered by the end of 2020. The main takeaway message here is not

that the missing 20 billion would have made a huge difference, but rather that the promises from these same leaders turned out to be meaningless.

Hence, if they wish to regain any sense of credibility, the G7 finance ministers must not only make up the deficit of USD 20 billion due for 2020, but also deliver, not just pledge, the USD 100 billion due in 2021. An important point to make here is that this announcement must be made by the finance ministers

loans. However, in practice, only 20 percent of the amounts that were actually delivered was given for adaptation, while 80 percent went into mitigation in the form of loans rather than grants. Hence, the G7 finance ministers must announce that they will deliver USD 100 billion for 2021 now, and half of that will be in the form of grants for adaptation in the most vulnerable countries that are already suffering from the adverse impacts of



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now and not in November at COP26, which will be too late.

Another associated shortfall in the delivery of finance to tackle climate change in the developing countries has been the ratio of funding for mitigation versus for adaptation.

The vulnerable developing countries had demanded that half of the total amount should be given for adaptation to the most vulnerable communities in the most vulnerable countries, and this amount should be given as grants, not

human-induced climate change. If they were really serious about tackling climate change, they would also commit to funding for the loss and damage from climate change that is affecting the most impoverished populations. This could be done as a gesture of solidarity rather than as compensation.

Finally, the prime ministers and presidents have the biggest role to play in answering a very simple question put to them by their own children and grandchildren, articulated by the 16-year-

other important issues is no longer a valid argument. The actions that are needed to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic consequences, as well as climate change and the loss of biodiversity, are all the same—we need to invest in things that will help people and the planet. It is not rocket science. We definitely cannot go back to the way things were.

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