

Virus surge continues, getting closer to the capital

Are we waiting for the worst to happen before taking action?

WE are apprehensive of what is to come as Covid-19 infection and death rates continue to rise to dangerous numbers in many districts across the country. While the nationwide positivity rate of cases went over 11 percent on Saturday, tens of districts besides the capital, especially ones along our borders, have been experiencing very high infection rates for the past couple of weeks at least.

All throughout last week, the districts of Chapainawabganj, Chuadanga, Rajshahi, Satkhira, Noakhali, and Bagerhat had experienced positivity rates of 30 percent or higher. Besides these, 36 other districts also have positivity rates of 10 percent or above. According to health experts and officials, this drastic surge is owed to the spread of the Indian variant of the virus (dubbed the "Delta variant") at the community level and lax implementation of restrictions and health guidelines.

The most alarming aspect of this situation is that the deadly threat that this surge poses is not reflected in how we are leading our daily lives, nor in how our healthcare system is built. Though a DGHS spokesperson reassured us that there is no oxygen shortage in the border districts experiencing high infection rates, we still worry due to reports by this daily stating that hospitals in Satkhira have to take their empty oxygen cylinders to Jessore to have them refilled, as they have no way of doing so on their own. The Chapainawabganj Sadar Hospital recently upped its number of beds for Covid-19 beds from 20 to 50, but they were still at full capacity as of Thursday. Moreover this 250-bed hospital has no ICU facilities, and it cannot accommodate patients requiring more than 20 litres of oxygen per minute. Meanwhile, the lockdown in Dhaka seems to be mostly a sham as shops (besides pharmacies), vehicular movement, and many offices continue to operate in a business-as-usual manner.

Experts from the Institute of Public Health and IEDCR agreed that it will only take another week or two of not imposing restrictions for the entire country to experience infection rates as high as those in bordering districts.

While we sincerely hope the government is working vehemently on ways to contain this surge and not let the number keep getting worse, we also fear that we are not learning from the grisly example set by our neighbour India's Covid-19 situation over the past couple of months. Our healthcare sector is still in a fragile state and cannot afford to be overwhelmed again as it was during the first two waves. Health guidelines and restrictions on gatherings have to be enforced more stringently while the vaccination programme must continue without any hitch and the authorities must try to increase oxygen supply and ICU beds in the public hospitals, especially those in the affected districts outside Dhaka.

Budget ignoring environmental concerns?

Govt has to increase the allocation

IT'S quite disheartening to know that in the national budget for fiscal year 2021-22, only Tk 1,221 crore has been allocated for the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, according to a DS report published yesterday. This includes allocation for climate protection which is Tk 379.21 crore. Both of these allocations are less than what was allocated by the government in last year's budget. We don't understand why, when we are struggling with so many environmental challenges including climate change, the budget allocation, instead of being more than last year's, is actually less.

In fact, while announcing the national budget in the parliament, our finance minister said very little about environment. He just mentioned that a total of 16 round-the-clock air monitoring centres are being set up across the country that will store information and analyse them to determine the air quality. We all know that it is important to have a clear idea about the air condition, but the thing that the minister didn't mention was what will happen after the analysis. What steps will be taken if the air quality is bad? Besides, the minister talked only about air pollution but left out other crucial issues such as scarcity and degradation of water, loss of biodiversity, forests, fisheries, encroachment of rivers and other water bodies, introduction of renewable energy, protection of the Sundarbans and so on. This silence on the part of the finance minister gives the impression that saving the environment isn't on the priority list of the government right now.

It's not that the government has done nothing over the years to save the environment. While establishing Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund, it has also adopted the National Adaptation Program of Action (NAPA, 2005) under the requirement of United Nations Framework Convention on The Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992). The government has also created the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategic Action Plan (BCCSAP) in 2009, the Disaster Management Act 2010 etc. But, without adequate amount of money, these government initiatives won't be able to realise their goals.

As the national budget has just been proposed and not yet been put into action, we strongly urge the government to review its budget allocations and increase the amount to a large extent for the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. Doing so will enable this government body to take emergency steps to prevent further degradation of the environment. Of course, close monitoring and accountability of how the funds are spent must be part of the government's plans also.

Education budget ignores the pandemic

A dearth of imagination and targeted action



MANZOOR AHMED

THE education community's plea for breaking the pattern of Bangladesh having the lowest public spending on education in South Asia and among developing

countries has fallen on deaf ears. A targeted response in the education budget to cope with the immediate and longer term effects of the pandemic that has kept schools closed for 15 months has also been denied.

Out of Tk 603.7 thousand crore total proposed national budget for FY21-22, Tk 72,000 crore or 11.9 percent has been allocated to education. This is lower than 12.3 percent in the revised budget for the current year FY20-21. It has been around 12 percent in recent years, though the demand from the education community has been for 20 percent of the national budget and between 4-6 percent of GDP, as recommended by UNESCO, to meet the education priorities of developing countries. The proportion of GDP share for public education has hovered around 2 percent in Bangladesh—again the lowest in South Asia and among the developing countries of the world.

The finance ministry's budget narrative cites a figure of 15.7 percent for education and technology by lumping together the education allocations with items on industry and infrastructure for information and communication technology which fall under the domain of the Ministry of Science and Technology. These activities no doubt have a contribution to make in expanding the application of technology in education. Their importance has been felt acutely during the pandemic. But one might be forgiven if lumping education and technology together is seen as a way of deflecting criticism from low education

spending by presenting inflated numbers. Arguably the more important question than that of the size of the allocation is how the education objectives, strategies and targets for the education sector are reflected in the education budget. The proposed spending has to be directed at the right priorities and the money has to be spent effectively and efficiently. On both counts, serious challenges persist. The finance minister said in his budget

oriented education initiatives and develop infrastructure as announced in the last financial year, as well as expand the scope of our ongoing activities." It also mentions, "as many as 29,09,844 online classes have been organised... at the secondary and higher secondary level... A total of 497, 200 online classes were organised [in public and private universities]." Various independent surveys, however, reveal that the majority

term consequences for students and the education system.

A particular concern is that the majority of the 40 million students are served by educational services not directly under government management or financially supported by the government. The proportions vary by stages, but more than half of the students in early childhood education, TVET, madrasas, and tertiary level are enrolled in institutions not financially supported by the government.

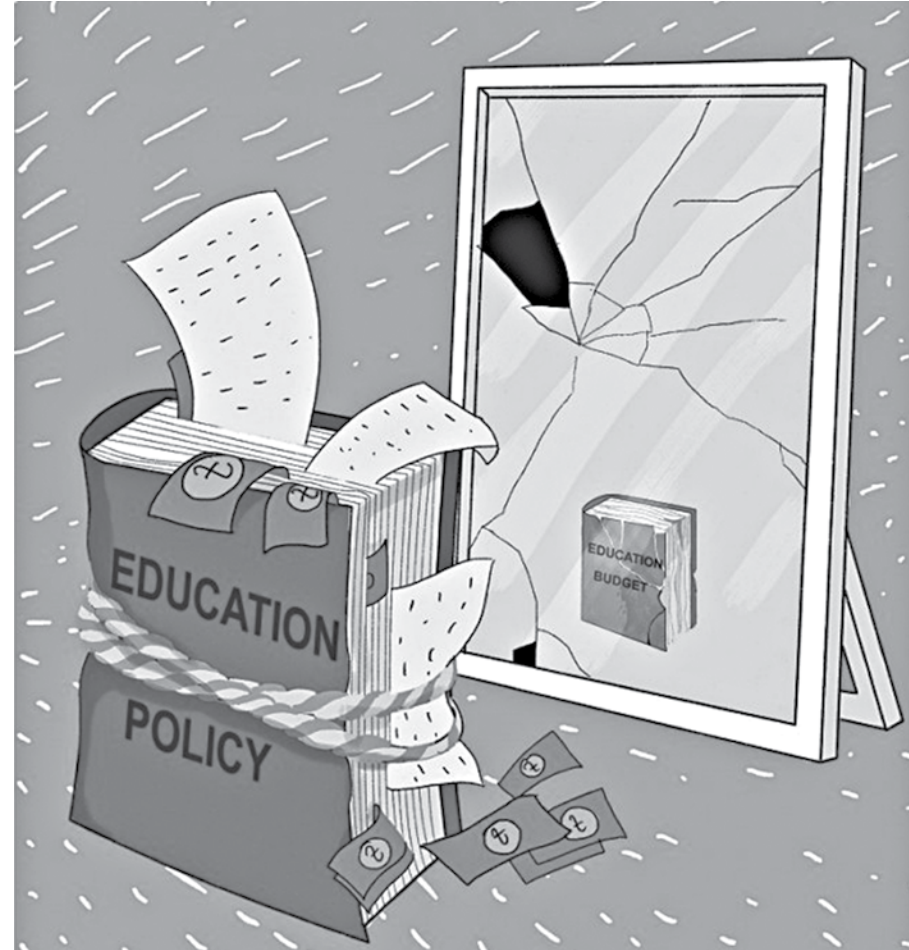
Education Watch in its recent study titled, "Bring schools and learning on track," identified key action points including financing measures. The action steps in broad terms, are four-fold: i) To reopen institutions safely with appropriate health and safety measures, each upazila and institution making coordinated plans involving health complexes and health clinics for testing, contact-tracing, isolating, and treatment as needed; ii) Within central guidelines, each upazila and institution—primary secondary and tertiary—should make their own plans involving parents, teachers, managing bodies, education NGOs and plan at least a two-year recovery programme. Elements of this plan, according to education experts, should include assessing where students are (all will not be at the same level), how they can be helped, shortening and rationalising the curricula, recasting exams, supporting teachers, and combining technology-based and classroom learning; iii) Effective implementation and management of the reopening and recovery have to involve the stakeholders beyond the education authorities and necessary financial support and incentives have to be provided; iv) the reopening and recovery plan has to be melded into a longer term education sector plan in line with the SDG4 education agenda for 2030.

While a national budget is not the instrument for spelling out a detailed educational reformation plan, it has to support the strategies for such a plan. Education experts also have suggested extending the current academic year to June next year and, opportunistically, change the school year permanently to September-June in 2022.

Most institutions at primary and secondary level suffer shortage of financial resources necessary for offering quality instruction. They will be hard-pressed to comply with the health and safety regulations and carry out the extra efforts and activities anticipated for the learning recovery programme. Additional financial support will be required from public resources for implementing the school reopening and education recovery programme inclusively for all students.

Whether the parliament members do their duty and help redirect the priorities in the budget and reverse the neglect and inaction regarding the effects of pandemic on the education sector remain to be seen. Let's hope that the parliament will take its job seriously instead of rubber-stamping the government's budget proposal.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University.



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ILLUSTRATION:
NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

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speech, "During this crisis, alongside adopting life saving strategies, we will give highest priority to ensure the continuity in teaching activities by restoring normalcy in the academic environment." The operative term seems to be to return to "normalcy" and continue normal educational activities. This betrays a lack of understanding of the devastation caused to the education system by the closure of schools for 15 months.

The critical concerns have many facets—the need to re-open schools safely, protecting health and wellbeing of students and teachers while the pandemic still continues; planning and implementing a programme of restoring the prolonged learning loss; coping with mental, emotional, economic and health effects on students and teachers; and managing the implementation of a complex programme of safe re-opening and recovering the multi-faceted learning losses.

The budget speech notes "... we will implement the inclusive and science

of students actually failed to participate in distance education because of lack of devices, problems of connectivity and the usual limitations of one-way communication in distance mode of teaching. The key lesson from this initiative clearly is that a pedagogical shift to a blended approach of face-to-face and technology-based learning is necessary, which calls for major financial investments at all levels of education.

The new education budget follows an incremental approach of continuation with expansion of the physical construction including some multi-media facilities, training of teaching personnel and an increase in enrolment, especially at the post-primary levels. The need for these planned expansions cannot be denied, but these by themselves do not constitute an immediate and longer term pandemic response. It is difficult to discern from the education budget that a pandemic still rages with devastating and multiple immediate and longer

Are vaccines really for all?



AMIR KHASRU

IMMUNISATION campaigns have been toting themes like "Vaccines for all" or "Vaccines bring us closer" signifying that the vaccine is universal, with everyone having equal access.

However, the reality is that vaccines are not for everyone but for a select few. An article in *The Economist* said that more than 85 countries in the world will not have widespread coronavirus vaccine coverage before 2023. Rich countries, however, have far more vaccines in stock than actual demand.

An article in *The Guardian* said, "The virus isn't a leveller. It has made the rich richer". Oxfam is already calling coronavirus the "inequality virus". The combined wealth of the 10 richest people in the world, including Amazon's Jeff Bezos, rose by USD 540 billion during the pandemic, with Oxfam stating that this amount would be enough to pay for vaccines for everyone in the world. However, so far, 85 percent of vaccine doses administered have been in high- and upper-middle-income countries—only 0.3 percent of doses have been administered in low-income countries, according to the latest global vaccine data. The World Health Organization (WHO) says that at least 70 percent of the global population will have to be vaccinated in order to defeat the pandemic.

Just as countries are using vaccines to expand their diplomatic and geopolitical dominance, so too are companies. The vaccine business has already given birth to nine new billionaires, according to The People's Vaccine Alliance. Eight existing billionaires with Covid-19

vaccine pharmaceuticals have so far seen a combined wealth increase of USD 32.2 billion. The vaccine market has exploded in value.

Questions of parity and inequality have been raised because the diplomacy of vaccines, geopolitical equations, and the global vaccine business is now controlling the vaccine rollout across the world. As Bangladesh saw, while India and China are both considered its close friends, India has not been able to provide the initially promised vaccines, and China has primarily agreed to sell the vaccine at USD 10 per dose.

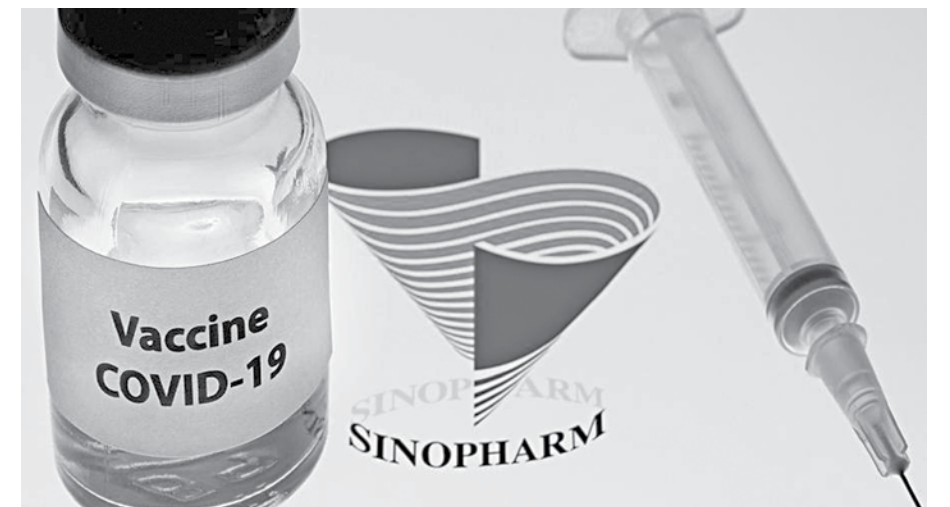
Is the vaccine a public health necessity or another business for profit? WHO is trying to establish the notion that the vaccine is for everyone, but their voice is far too weak among all these interest groups. It should be noted that vaccine-producing countries and companies do not view the vaccine as a public health necessity but as a tool for business and geopolitical domination. Low-income and developing countries are the primary victims, with Bangladesh among them.

Various countries, large international companies and concerned individuals are taking advantage of the emergency situation by defying standards or accepted practices. In Bangladesh's case, for example, there are already

various complications in buying vaccines from China. China finalised the sale of the Sinopharm vaccine to Bangladesh at the price of USD 10 per dose. Simultaneously, the two countries agreed on keeping the price confidential. Nevertheless, the price somehow got leaked and went public, which in turn led to protests from the Chinese. The same vaccine was sold at USD 14 per dose to Sri Lanka and to Indonesia at USD 17

across the world.

China has developed more than 140 million doses of the vaccine, according to a March 2021 research survey by Statista. The United States has produced around 100 million, Germany and Belgium have developed 70 million doses, India 45 million, the UK 12 million, and Russia 10 million doses. Yet, Bangladesh is still asking for vaccines from country to country, all while paying extra money.



A phial of the Sinopharm vaccine.

PHOTO: AFP

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per dose. With Bangladesh now having violated the condition of privacy, it has become uncertain whether China will sell more Sinopharm doses at the previously agreed price of USD 10 with the foreign minister telling the media recently that the price is set to be higher for future doses. The question is, why should there be a confidentiality agreement in the first place, and why shouldn't there be parity in vaccine prices? This is not only the case with China but also with other countries and pharmaceutical companies

Contracts for the vaccines and the deals being carried out have been kept secret from the general public.

In the end, how true is the theme "vaccines for all"? Covid-19 vaccines, while a blessing for some countries, companies, and individuals who have benefited enormously from the business, are an expensive necessity for low-income countries such as Bangladesh.

Amir Khasru is the Chief Executive, Study Group on Regional Affairs, Dhaka. He can be reached at akhasru1964@gmail.com