

## Public officials blatantly breaking the rules of service

*Those who are breaking the law for personal benefits must be punished*

IN a gross violation of service rules, a huge number of civil servants are owning and running businesses on the side, according to a letter by the Anti-Corruption Commission. This is a most unethical thing to do, as it gives rise to clear conflicts of interest. Public servants are getting paid through taxpayer's money and enjoy substantial benefits due to their positions—the fact that they are still breaking the rules of their service in this most egregious manner is unacceptable and unpardonable.

According to the Government Servants (Conduct) Rules, 1979, "no government servant shall, except with the previous sanction of government, engage in any trade or undertake any employment or work, other than his official duties." The reason for this is simple: if public officials, who in many ways get to define the rules of business, or at least have substantial influence over them, get involved in business themselves, then they may easily distort the market in their own favour. When public officials are so blatantly violating the rules of their service, are we to expect that they will not break the rules when it comes to business or distort the market?

Despite discovering that a huge number of government employees are involved in business while enquiring into allegations of people accumulating wealth beyond their known sources of incomes, the ACC only asked the cabinet secretary to make all public servants aware of the rules, but did not ask him for further probes or to take punitive actions against the rule violators. The Cabinet Division, in response, only asked secretaries to make sure that the public servants were aware of the rules. We find both of their actions to be inadequate and objectionable.

Why do we have rules for public servants if they are not to be followed? And why should public servants get a pass when they violate rules, when everyone else don't? Just making public servants "aware" of the rules is not enough—being aware of the rules of their service should be a prerequisite as it is. Action must be taken against the law-breakers to ensure accountability. In regards to that, the ACC should make public which officials are involved in owning or running businesses and how much money they are making in the process, to inform the public what those who are meant to serve them are really up to.

## Stimulus schemes failing to reach female entrepreneurs

*The government must work harder to remove obstacles in access to the funds*

IT is disheartening to know that despite the government's stimulus packages for SMEs owned by women, the funds are not reaching them. Instead, many entrepreneurs are taking loans from microfinance institutions where interest rates are around three times higher than the banks. According to a report by this daily, the government had allocated Tk 20,000 crore for stimulus packages last year, half of which was to be disbursed among people owning cottage industries and SMEs. The government put aside five percent of this stimulus package (amounting to Tk 1,000 crore) for women entrepreneurs only. Another stimulus package amounting to Tk 1,500 crore this January was also set aside with the same intention. The interest rate for taking loans from the second stimulus package was almost half of the first one (four percent only). So why are women entrepreneurs not being able to take advantage of this opportunity?

For one thing, many women entrepreneurs are still not even aware that these funds exist. A recent study by Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) found that almost 59 percent of women entrepreneurs were completely ignorant about these packages. Even in the case of women entrepreneurs who were aware of the stimulus package provisions, a lack of information about the process of applying for these loans, along with worries about repayment and lengthy processes, were acting as deterrents. There have also been cases of bank officials discouraging them from availing the government loans and making the process more difficult.

While we commend the government for allocating a sizeable sum for female owners of small businesses, it is disappointing to see this continuous disconnect between government policy action and the realities on the ground. We believe it is high time for the authorities to listen to the experts and accept their solutions on how to ensure the stimulus packages reach those who need it the most. One of the suggestions is that cash incentives, rather than loans, would be more effective in easing the burden of women with small businesses in the informal sector. Also, if medium-sized enterprises were exempted from paying VAT for at least three years, they would be able to sustain their industries for the next few years. Finally, concerned authorities have to carry out massive awareness raising campaigns across the nation to let small-scale businesswomen know how to avail government's funds, and banks, especially government-owned ones, must be more efficient in this process. At a time when the global pandemic has forced more than 41 percent of small businesses run by women entrepreneurs to close down (according to CPD), the government must do more to ensure these women do not fall into poverty despite their existing a safety net, simply because of difficulties in access.



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

IT reads like a Netflix blurb of a horror movie. A young man took a machete from a street coconut seller, uttered his last words: "please forgive me", and then slit his own throat in front of Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The body ended up in the morgue as an unidentified corpse, as everyone, including his friends, fled the scene after the outrageous turn of events. Once the mystery was unraveled, we were told that the young man was a student of the oldest university of the country, and at the time of the incident he was under the influence of a mind-altering narcotic substance, LSD. The investigation worm exposed the snake heads involving some top-notch private university students who were using international courier services to smuggle the drug soaked in highly absorbent "blotter papers."

I re-read the paragraph I just wrote and dreaded the combination of sensory information packed in it. All the places mentioned here are closely related to our personal identity: the universities in question and the hospital concerned. These are the physical spaces where we look for prospect and shelter. The places where we live and the experiences that we have define who we are. These physical surroundings with their aura of familiarity play an important role in creating a sense of order, meaning and stability in our lives. They are the sources of our daily activities and cultural rituals, which form the very fabric of our personal and social lives. We associate the university with education that will lead us to prosperity; we associate the hospital as a place that can heal us. But what happens when such realms of familiarity are changed and disoriented? How does it impact the feelings of comfort, predictability and security that we expect from a familiar setting?

You get down from a rickshaw and ask the coconut seller to hand you a green coconut to seek respite from the heat or the chores in hand. You haggle over the price a bit, complain about the price hike as an ever-evolving national plague while instructing the seller to give you a large fruit with sufficient sweet water and tender meat inside; you chide him for holding the mouth of the straw with his dirty hand as you proceed to gulp the fresh water. You have come to the campus

to meet a friend or are here to visit a patient in hospital. Everything gives an impression of normalcy and familiarity.

A group of students are having a chat nearby. You hear a mild heated discussion. One of them is slightly being rebuked for manhandling a disabled rickshaw-puller the day before. The words trigger him—he starts touching the feet of some rickshaw-pullers nearby, asking for their forgiveness, rushes to the coconut

good is his death? What benefits have come out of this self-mutilation? What vision can we derive from this footnote of "tragedy" (the Greek word that literally means a "goat song")?

A ring of drug-dealers is exposed. The police have been prompt in arresting some suppliers. I see these young boys in their handcuffs, accused of peddling. They are no different from the boys I have in my classes. They look normal. It does not

man to try out the blotter paper and lose full control over his senses? The guilt of abusing a disabled rickshaw-puller was heightened by the toxic chemical that was troubling his mind. His death has given us a lesson. Are we ready to learn from it? Or do we brush it aside as an exceptional freak show that has given us a momentary chill?

How about those other students? Did we tell them to be entrepreneurial without being ethical? What prompted them towards the cheap thrills of importing drugs and selling them with a five-time profit margin? What happens when we tell our students that they need to find their own jobs? The system cannot employ all the graduates who will come out of the universities. Start a start-up. Be your own employer. Be innovative. Be creative. Think out of the box. We copy and paste Youtube motivational speeches and chant inspirational mantras for the next generation. There is nothing organic about the skill-sets that we want them to acquire or the knowledge that we want them to have. We simulate, mimic and copy with no knowledge and understanding of the real.

Where did this toxic knowledge come from? Did these students get inspired by popular movies that glorify drugs? Did they watch *Breaking Bad*, *Money Heist* or *Narcos*? How much influence did popular media have on them planning their illicit businesses? Or did they grow up in broken families that lacked empathy or ethics?

If the death of the DU student is caused by mental illness or momentary lapses of reason, the lives of the other students are affected by social illness. Treating this incident as an isolated one will be foolish. Frustrations, anxieties and horror are creeping in and taking over the geographical, architectural and psychological spaces that we consider familiar. These familiar places are creeping us out by the uncanny behaviour of the people that we know. The import of LSD by courier is symptomatic of a subculture that is eating us from inside and turning the users into living-dead zombies. The public suicide of the young man is symbolic of everything that has gone wrong in all our familiar territories. He brought his insides out to expose us to the invisible enemies that we carry inside. We must tackle them head on. There is not much time to lose. Or else the next generation will never forgive us!

Shamsad Mortuza is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), and a professor of English (on leave) at Dhaka University.

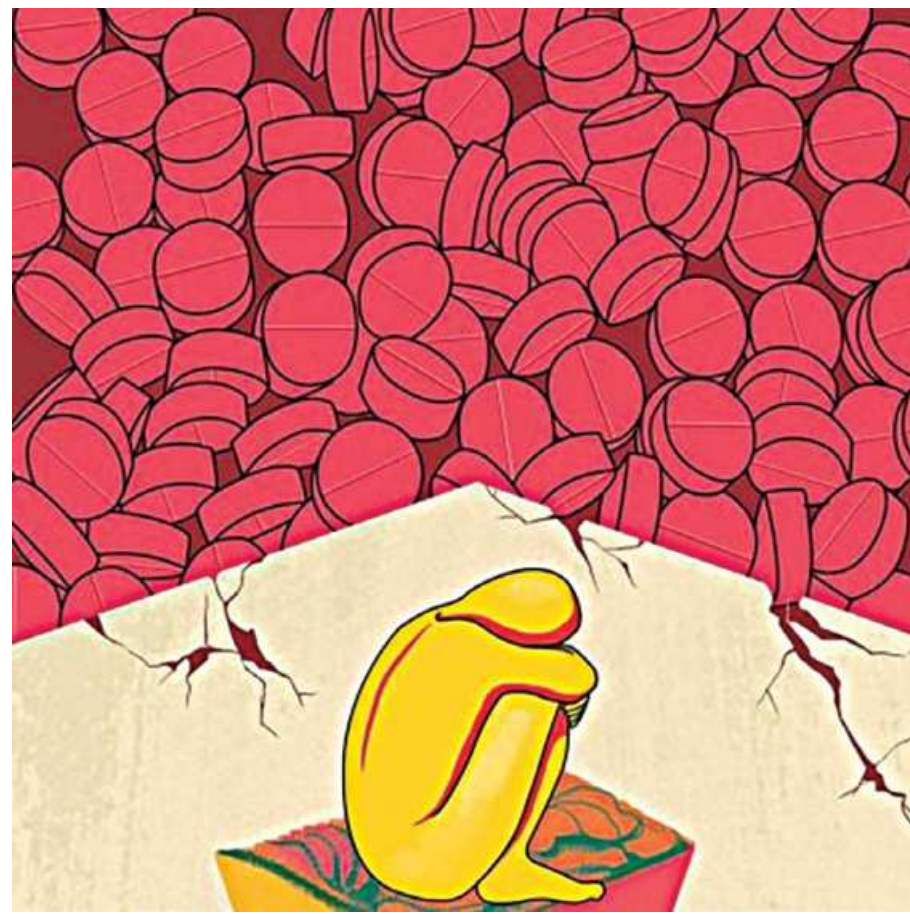


ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIZ JAHAN MONNI

cart, grabs the machete, and butchers himself. You run as the blood of a young man gushes out like the water from a green coconut. Suddenly, the entire familiar landscape becomes unfamiliar, grotesque and morbid. You run and try to erase it from memory. But the newspapers reinforce it, and there is no escape from the violence.

The young man came back from his hometown after the Eid vacation, citing some errands that he had to run in the city. His trip led him to tripping. His eventual death like a sacrificial animal is reminiscent of the fatal cattle that are brought to Dhaka for consumption. What

comfort you to know that these kids go to two different top-ranking institutions. Maybe they come from families that I know, or maybe I am even related to one or two! They are all our children: the one who died, and the ones who are being implicated for supplying the dead with the deadly drugs.

Is there any relationship between the pandemic and the drug use? The pandemic has caused people to become really stressed and isolated. Chances are: many will make unhealthy and unwise decisions. I cannot say it with certainty, as no research has been done in this respect. Was it peer pressure that led the young

## Can the G7 finally bring an end to the pandemic?



KAMAL AHMED

YESTERDAY, leaders of the industrialised nations, known as G7, started their first day of discussions at the English seaside county Cornwall—the first meeting since the Covid-19 pandemic started, which has already claimed more than 3.75 million lives and the livelihoods of over a billion people. According to a survey by Gallup in 117 countries, pandemic-induced economic impacts were felt disproportionately on developing countries, where half of their workers lost jobs. Yet, there is no sign of the virus being under control.

Despite the pandemic being one of the biggest and deepest crises the world has been passing through since the beginning of 2020, there seems to be very little action being taken in a globally coordinated way. It is a bigger crisis than the global financial crisis of 2008 following the collapse of the Lehman Brothers, said former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who was at that time at the helm of Britain, the fourth largest economy in the world. Last Sunday, ex-PM Brown, appearing on major global TV networks, repeated his call to world leaders for urgent intervention, saying that a global crisis needs a global solution. A week before, on May 3, he also called for underwriting about USD 60 billion for Covid-19 vaccinations in poorer countries by the richest nations. Appearing at a World Health Organization briefing, he said, "By our failure to extend vaccination more rapidly to every country, we are choosing who lives and who dies."

According to the AFP's count, on June 8, more than 2.15 billion doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been injected in at least 215 territories around the world. But the irony is, while US states are offering incentives (like awarding quarter of a million dollars through lottery) among vaccine-takers to encourage reluctant or sceptic citizens, leaders of developing countries are literally begging for the sharing of excess stock. After being overwhelmed by Covid-19, the Nepalese Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli wrote to the UK Prime Minister as chair of the G7 for urgent help. He wrote "Our sherpas are known for sharing their oxygen with

struggling climbers at high altitude. Today, Covid-19 is leaving our country breathless and so we are looking for the "sherpas" of the international community".

According to the BBC, he appealed to PM Johnson saying that the sacrifices of Nepal's Gurkha soldiers serving the UK should make Nepal a priority for UK Covid aid. On that very day, when Nepal sought vaccines for Gurkha soldiers, British health authorities approved Pfizer vaccines for children aged 12 to 15 years. In response to Nepal's plea for help, the British Foreign Office said, "The UK is a leading donor to COVAX, the international initiative to procure and distribute vaccines equitably." Bangladesh's similar request remained unfulfilled as well. Whether vaccinating

has allowed the coronavirus to continue spreading, thus increasing odds of a variant emerging that could render these treatments ineffective.

Pressure on the G7 countries for sharing excess stock of vaccines mounted further following UNICEF's intervention. It said that the UK should commit to make 20 percent of its vaccines available within this month for poorer countries, arguing that the UK will still have enough to vaccinate every adult by the end of July. PM Johnson is expected to announce what portion of doses that are not needed by the UK will be shared with developing nations. The recent announcement by US President Joe Biden to release 25 million doses of its stock was also seen by some observers as a

stepping up the manufacture of vaccines, lowering barriers to the international distribution of those vaccines—as the UK has done with Oxford-AstraZeneca—and ultimately sharing surplus doses with developing countries bilaterally and through COVAX.

However, his plan does not explicitly support the call by rights groups for the temporary waiver of patents on Covid-19 vaccines. Gordon Brown is among more than 200 former heads of governments and civic leaders who have called for a waiver on Covid-19 vaccines so that manufacturing capacities in developing countries can be fully utilised and faster vaccination achieved.

Besides, the summit will have a particular focus on how the group can

*Despite the pandemic being one of the biggest and deepest crises the world has been passing through since the beginning of 2020, there seems to be very little action being taken in a globally coordinated way.*



PHOTO: COLLECTED

children in richer countries who are less vulnerable than the elderly population in the developing world is morally justifiable—that debate seemed to fail to sway politicians' priorities.

Leaders in Europe and North America are now more concerned about how to save upcoming summer holiday season and how to allow experimental socialising. In some countries, so-called vaccine passports have been introduced for travel and entertainment services. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus rightly describes it as "a two-track pandemic: many countries still face an extremely dangerous situation, while some of those with the highest vaccination rates are starting to talk about ending restrictions." He warns that unequal distribution of vaccines

sign of a further push at the G7 summit for coordinated action, which has been missing so far since his predecessor Donald J Trump's introduction of the America First policy and his withdrawal from international bodies, including the WHO. US media reports suggest President Biden will announce a doubling of the US contribution of Covid-19 vaccines over the next year. French President Emmanuel Macron, too, has announced that it would donate up to five percent of its vaccine stocks to COVAX, the UN-backed initiative to get vaccines to lower-income countries.

As the G7 chair, PM Johnson is expected to push for a firm commitment to vaccinate the entire world against coronavirus by the end of 2022. His plan outlines that it can be achieved by

lead the global recovery from coronavirus and tackle the climate emergency. As the next climate summit COP26 is scheduled later in the year in the UK, Boris Johnson is expected to say that like the Covid-19 crisis, the climate emergency could spell disaster for the developed world too, even if developing countries appear to be more vulnerable at first, especially since the situation has worsened in the past decade. The impacts of climate change have increased tremendously. In the case of the climate emergency, we are likely to hear the familiar theme, "We are all safe or no-one is safe." However, the immediate test for G7 is whether they can bridge the gap between the "two tracks" of the ongoing pandemic.

Kamal Ahmed is a freelance journalist.