

Tackling the Delta variant

Why are we still so lax about enforcing heath guidelines?

THE icddr,b study that has found 68 percent of coronavirus cases in Dhaka city to be of the highly transmissible Delta variant is no great surprise. The rapid spread of infections from the border districts, where the variant was first detected, to other districts in the hinterland made it quite inevitable that it would soon spread to the cities as well. But what is surprising is the lack of foresight and planning for a crisis that we knew was coming ever since the variant wreaked havoc in India, and then Nepal, where hospitals were overwhelmed and thousands of people were dying every day. To think that we would not face a similar crisis, especially after the frightening experience of April in Dhaka and other cities, was naïve if not foolhardy.

Like a broken record we can talk about all the steps we didn't take to keep the Delta variant infections in check. But this will not take us back to the time when the rate of infections was coming down and there was virtually no sign of Covid in many rural areas. Now the scenario is changing even in villages, where more deaths are being reported of people with Covid-like symptoms.

Which brings us to another big problem that experts have been crying themselves hoarse about—the low number of testing for the virus and the antigens, which prevents us from getting a more accurate picture of how widely the infection has spread and due to which variant. Experts apprehend that there are many unreported deaths in areas where transmissions are high. The World Health Organization had announced at the very beginning of this pandemic the crucial need for testing, isolation and contact tracing—the most basic steps in the fight against the virus. So why have we kept our testing numbers so low?

While at present the Delta variant is dominating, other variants are also at work, including the South African, Nigerian and UK variants. The Delta variant is a cause for greater worry because of the way it has devastated India having a much faster transmission rate and leading to very serious health complications in a very short time.

While we know we have lost the valuable window of opportunity, we must now tackle the impending crisis judiciously. This means taking immediate measures that have worked in the past and taking them simultaneously. The government must ramp up testing (both for the virus and antigens), ensure free testing for the lower-income groups, and enforce health guidelines especially mask wearing and social distancing all over the country, especially in crowded areas. Going out on the streets of Dhaka, it seems as if there is no virus, with crowds in shopping areas, traffic jams and many people not bothering to wear masks. This must stop immediately, with strict restrictions on the gathering of large numbers of people. At the same time, the government must accelerate the procurement and administering of vaccines nationwide so that people can be protected from the severe conditions of the virus that can lead to death. Increasing ICU beds and high-flow nasal cannula and oxygen supply in hospitals have to be done on an urgent basis as the crisis is far from over.

Titas must be cleansed of corrupt elements

Govt. has to punish all those who are guilty

A report published by *The Daily Star* on June 17 has once again brought to light the allegations of illegal gas connections being provided in exchange for extra charges to customers by syndicates linked with former and current employees of the state-owned Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited. According to the report, the syndicates with the help of some Titas officials have taken part in defrauding a total of 500 customers.

According to the report, customers who did not have any gas connections could get old gas lines fixed or new lines installed allegedly with the help of the syndicate members. These individuals had also stolen documents of 500 customers from the Titas office, and started to charge extra fees from these people claiming themselves as Titas officials. Syndicate members have been illegally working with those Titas employees for the last seven years, and they even have machines to provide new gas connections, according to the Special Superintendent of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). CID has also found identity cards of some Titas employees from these syndicate members.

Allegations of graft at Titas are nothing new. Titas is the largest gas provider in the country with 60 percent share of all gas connections. In a report published by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) on April 17, 2019, the government body had found 22 sources of corruption inside Titas, among which providing illegal gas connections was on the top of the list.

Although three members of one of these syndicates have been arrested, this will not necessarily bring about any change in such illegal practices. Major reforms have to be undertaken to root out all the bad elements within the organisation. All the syndicate members have to be arrested and given exemplary punishment. The list of those inside Titas who helped these individuals to steal government data is already in the hands of the CID. Thus taking legal action against them should not be difficult. In the meantime, the organisational structure of Titas has to be changed too. The ACC, moreover, should be given the power to take immediate action against any official found guilty in its investigation. As long as there are insiders working for these syndicates, customers will continue to be victims of extortion and the government will continue to lose revenues stolen through illegal connections.

A press release that bares it all



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY
ALi RIAZ

THE news that the Dhaka University authorities said they will take legal action if the university and/or its vice-chancellor, Prof Akhtaruzzaman, is mocked in social media is quite shocking. However, on second thoughts, it should not come as much of a surprise to anyone considering the sorry state of public universities in Bangladesh and particularly the previous behaviour of the VC in question. This stern warning was delivered in a press release issued by the university on Thursday.

The announcement came after *The Daily Star* published a cartoon along with a report about the university on June 15. Although the press release is worded as a “clarification” about the information in the report—which the university described as “misleading” and “fragmented” without directly mentioning the newspaper—the most intriguing part is that the university felt that it should send a chilling message to the public. This was a not-so-veiled threat. The university authorities have every right to offer clarification regarding any news report it deems misleading. In fact, it owed an explanation to the citizens about the allegations that it has not done enough as the premier institution of higher learning and research in the country during this pandemic, except for placing fences around the campus. The press release describes the university's efforts in continuing the testing of Covid-19, but falls short of providing its reasons for not emerging as the centre of research. “There is no denying that Dhaka University was not able to invent any testing kit, vaccine or medicine like Oxford University or Johns Hopkins University. But many know the reason behind it,” the press release says. But to be candid, we don't really know. The university didn't explain it either.

The inadequacy of its “clarification”

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pales in comparison to its rude posturing about legal actions to muzzle any criticism or “mocking”. The decision, according to the university, has been taken to ensure that the image of the university is not tarnished in the national and international spheres. While I was reading this news, I couldn't help but recall that the centenary of Dhaka University is only a few days away. Perhaps this press release is an indication of where the university stands in its 100th year.

This announcement raises a simple question: If a university and its VC cannot tolerate mocking, how would it teach tolerance and the lessons of freedom of expression? If an autonomous public university cannot tolerate differences of opinion, what would it teach its students? A university—or any educational institution including primary schools for that matter—offers education not only within the four walls of classrooms but through creating a free environment there.



'Dhaka University should not be concerned about its image—it is not its job to be in the business of image protection.'

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

This is far more important for a university. Hundreds of years of higher education and the emergence of universities around the world have taught us that academic freedom is an essential element of the functioning of any university. Besides, public universities are funded by the citizens, and so they have the right to criticise them. Let us not forget that these universities are called “public” for a reason.

Half of the 100 years of Dhaka University was spent under colonial rule when it had very little autonomy. The 1973 Ordinance, which provides autonomy to the university, was enacted to avoid the control of the government so that there are no hurdles in exercising academic freedom. This autonomy also made the university accountable to the citizens. Even in the dark days of the 1960s under the military rule of Ayub Khan, nobody had heard of such a threat coming from the university administration, perhaps not even from

fascinating that those who are in power think that they are invincible, yet a simple cartoon can make them worried.

The DU authorities are concerned about the university's “image”, as if image is an abstract issue that has little to do with what is happening at the university. On the contrary, images are created by the behaviours of those who are responsible for leading the institution—and by the actions of the institution. This vague notion of “image” has become a catchphrase in recent years. If one must be vilified and harassed, it is enough to simply suggest that she/he has “tarnished the image” of individuals or the country. One of the crucial elements of the DSA is purportedly to protect the image of the country and individuals. The tendency to use this provision has reached a level that is nothing short of an obsession. Immediately before the DU's press release, the chairperson of the Political Science department of Chittagong University issued a notice to the students

but the university spent Tk 28 crore. This allocation was less than that of the previous year. These are the things that contribute to the “image” the university currently has, not a cartoon.

Dhaka University should not be concerned about its image—it is not its job to be in the business of image protection. The university's job is to independently generate knowledge, disseminate it, study it, ensure that the freedom of expression is ensured for everyone (students and teachers alike), and to administer the university free from external interferences. Interestingly, what hundreds of cartoons could not have done has been achieved by one single press release—it has laid bare the true state of Dhaka University. For that, we must thank the university authorities.

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Asia needs bold action on climate change



MASATSUGU ASAKAWA

AS the Asia-Pacific region confronts and recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic, we must continue our pursuit of sustainable development and take action on global climate change, the existential challenge of our time.

Our region must take its place at the front lines of this effort. The region, which now accounts for 36 percent of global GDP, has made great progress in economic development and poverty reduction. But it is also responsible for around 80 percent of the world's coal consumption, and up to 60 percent of CO₂ emissions. Many countries have experienced the devastating consequences of climate change: floods, droughts, heat waves, and storms.

Now is the time for bold action. We must commit wholeheartedly to fighting climate change, including meeting the emission-reduction goals under the Paris Agreement, all the while promoting economic growth and putting the region's development on a green path.

This will require major changes in the energy sector. These include: avoiding the use of fossil fuels and switching to low-carbon fuels, deploying more renewable energy, improving energy efficiency, reducing final energy demand, and incentivising investment in low-carbon technologies.

A broad commitment across the region, along with tailored, country-level support from development partners, will be needed to meet the goal of limiting global warming to no more than 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels.

We need to get back on the path to low-carbon sustainable development. We have to balance climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. And we must ensure universal energy access, as more than 200 million people in the region still have no electricity.

In spite of the current situation, there is a path to addressing these challenges successfully.

Global action to achieve net zero emissions by around mid-century has gained momentum over the past year. Among the countries that have pledged carbon neutrality are China, Fiji, Japan, South Korea, Maldives, the Marshall Islands, Singapore, and Timor-Leste.

This November, the 26th Conference

which means on average about USD 6.6 billion annually. This year, we are confident that we will be able to provide over USD 6 billion for climate mitigation and adaptation through measures including investing in clean energy.

ADB will contribute to the global effort envisioned by COP26 on multiple fronts. We will promote greater collaboration and cooperation; balanced climate mitigation and adaptation



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FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

of the Parties (COP26) will convene in Glasgow. More countries are expected to submit more ambitious nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and to signify their commitment to carbon neutrality.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is ready to take on a leadership role in Asia and the Pacific in meeting these commitments. We aim at stepping up our climate finance and capacity-building efforts to help our developing member countries (DMCs) achieve their NDCs.

Under our Strategy 2030, our target is to focus 75 percent of ADB's operations on climate adaptation and mitigation. We will also provide at least USD 80 billion in climate financing from 2019 to 2030,

efforts; and a holistic approach that integrates the ecological, social, and financial aspects of resilience across our operations. We are aligning our operations to support the targets of the Paris Agreement.

We will also continue to utilise our private-sector operations to support this agenda. Private-sector finance will be pivotal to filling investment gaps and spearheading technological and business innovation in the pursuit of sustainable solutions.

The energy transition requires comprehensive long-term planning combined with effective innovations. ADB is committed to helping our DMCs formulate and implement technology

roadmaps to achieve their NDCs.

Our support is taking full advantage of major technological advances that have slashed the costs of producing renewable energy—by up to 80 percent in the case of solar photovoltaics. Emerging technologies like smart grids, energy storage, and hydrogen are making it easier to integrate renewable energy into power networks and distributed energy systems. Smart technologies have enhanced the flexibility and resilience of power networks. Digitalisation has boosted energy efficiencies on the demand side.

Innovative energy projects are leveraging the synergy between the public and private sectors and having cross-sectoral impacts. In Thailand, for example, ADB provided long-term financing for a 10-megawatt wind power project with an integrated 1.88 megawatt-hour pilot battery energy storage system. It is the first private-sector project in the country to integrate utility-scale wind power generation with battery energy storage.

In Mongolia, our USD 100 million loan for the first utility-scale energy storage project in the country will increase renewable energy use by providing a large energy reserve, load shifting capacity, and emergency back-up. This will support decarbonisation of Mongolia's heavily coal-dependent energy system.

We are now reviewing ADB's Energy Policy in light of the profound changes in the energy landscape. We have been consulting stakeholders since last year and plan to update our Energy Policy by the end of 2021.

We envision an Energy Policy that is aligned with global commitments under the Paris Agreement. A policy that is responsive to the needs of our DMCs as they build sustainable and resilient energy systems. And, while the final decision will have to be made by our Board, a policy that includes a formal withdrawal from financing new coal-fired power generation.

..... Masatsugu Asakawa is President of the Asian Development Bank (ADB).