

Deadly gas explosion at Moghbazar

Authorities must punish those responsible and prevent recurrence of such incidents

WE'RE deeply saddened by the news of a deadly explosion in a building in Moghbazar, Dhaka on Sunday evening that killed at least six people, including an infant, and left about 50 others with various degrees of burns and injuries. Primary investigations have suggested that the blast may have been caused by accumulation of gas from a leakage. It will take some time to establish the reason and gauge the true extent of the damage, but it has been reported that the impact of the blast was so powerful that it shook several nearby buildings. Eyewitnesses have described how the ground floor of the building—where the explosion took place—was reduced to a mound of rubble, with pieces of broken machinery strewn everywhere as the walls and pillars collapsed. The force of the explosion also shot some rubble into the busy road in front of the building, hitting people and passing vehicles and causing injury to many.

What makes this incident outrageous is how easily and frequently such gas explosions are taking place. Only last September, another gas explosion took place in a Narayanganj mosque killing 34 people and injuring many more. In this case too, the blast took place due to accumulation of leaked gas from an underground Titas Gas pipeline that came into contact with an electric spark from the air conditioners at the Baitus Salat Jame Mosque. In the Moghbazar case, although the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) commissioner ruled out the possibility of sabotage, investigators have termed it "unusual" for such a powerful blast to occur from gas accumulation alone. They have also found traces of hydrocarbons, a compound of hydrogen and carbon. Whether there was any external intervention will be hopefully revealed by the probe committee, but this much is evident by now that a gas leak played a part in this and as such, Titas Gas, a repeat offender in such cases, cannot avoid its responsibility.

Titas has long been accused of doing little to prevent unsafe or illegal gas connections leading to many explosions, big or small, fatalities and injuries. This is what happens when corruption and lack of accountability are allowed to go unabated and compromise public safety as a consequence. After each such incident, we see the authorities scramble to control the damage and pledge action to bring those responsible to justice and prevent the recurrence of such blasts. But they keep on happening, leaving behind a trail of devastation. The six who died in the latest case were victims of a systemic failure to prevent such tragedies. Thus, we urge the government to take a long, hard look at the root causes of such gas explosions and take urgent measures to prevent them for good. The victims and survivors of the Moghbazar explosion have our deepest compassion and we hope necessary action will be taken to address their and their families' sufferings.

UP chairman marries a minor

End the culture of impunity enjoyed by corrupt and unprincipled public officials

THE news published in *The Daily Star* yesterday of a 60-year-old union parishad (UP) chairman forcefully marrying a minor girl, aged only 14, is an example of how corrupt public officials defy the law of the land recklessly and with impunity. The 14-year-old had eloped with a boy, another teenager, and the couple was caught after the girl's father lodged a complaint. The UP chairman arbitrated and his solution was to marry the child himself by recording a false date of birth in the marriage register. Thus, the chairman violated a number of laws. Not only did he violate the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 that prohibits child marriage, he also committed fraud and violated the Marriage Registration Act. Although he later "divorced" her, this hardly absolves him of committing these crimes.

Unfortunately, as obvious as it is that the UP chairman has abused his power, it seems he also has enough clout for the local administration to be hesitant about taking any action against him. When contacted, the local Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) said that they will take necessary actions only after directives are received from higher authorities and a proper investigation is conducted. The same goes for the local police, as the local Officer-in-Charge (OC) said that no one has issued a complaint yet, so they can't take action against the culprit of a child marriage. The fact that the chairman married a minor is not enough for him to be arrested. Such double standards when it comes to crimes committed by public officials are aplenty, but they are nonetheless reprehensible and must be discarded.

A UNICEF report on October 7, 2020, highlights that Bangladesh has the highest rate of child marriage in South Asia and ranks first among 10 countries in the world that have the highest number of child marriage. Bangladesh is a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which include ending child marriage by 2030. However, these incidents all over the country are testament to the fact that little is being done to eliminate child marriage once and for all. In fact, the pandemic has caused more and more girls to be married off as schools are closed and families are facing increased financial hardship.

We are relieved that the High Court has ordered the authorities to conduct three separate inquiries into the allegations. The government must do much more to protect the rights of girls. It must make sure birth certificates are not falsified to legitimise child marriages, and it must do away with the provision in the law that has created legal loopholes that allow child marriages under "special circumstances". Public officials are supposed to stop these violations and hence, it is even more abhorrent that they should actually commit them. The UP chairman must be punished under the law, and action must be taken against officers of the local administration and law enforcers who did not take immediate steps against the culprit.

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

As the country scrambles to curb the spread of Covid-19, we will be entering yet another lockdown. The current infection rate stands at 23.86 percent, with specific regions crumbling under surmounting pressure to contain the disease. This month alone, Khulna and Rajshahi recorded 295 and 245 Covid deaths, respectively.

Unfortunately, this is not a new scenario. In view of the current situation, the government's decision to look beyond the stop-gap, sporadic locality-wise lockdowns to a more holistic nationwide lockdown is a welcome move. While the next week or



PHOTO: STAR

two—if the government does indeed fully adhere to the recommendations of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19 (NTAC)—will be difficult, especially from an economic perspective, it is also expected to help curb the rapid spread of the highly transmissible Delta variant.

The government, at this point, needs to have a broader Covid management strategic plan and map stakeholders accordingly for their involvement in resolving the issues that will surface during the lockdown—complete or partial. They cannot fight this ever-spreading pandemic alone.

In enforcing the lockdown successfully, the government needs to overcome three major challenges. The first will be keeping people indoors, and for this, each and every family whose livelihoods will be

affected must be provided with sustenance for the duration of the lockdown. Raising awareness among the grassroots about Covid-19, its transmissibility, its symptoms and why social distancing is necessary, will be another challenge. And the third challenge will be to roll out vaccine programmes at the district level. And none of these will be possible without collaboration with private and development sector actors.

As an immediate measure, the government has said it is working to provide cash and food assistance to families affected by lockdown. The finance minister, in the 2021 fiscal budget, proposed a fund of Tk 10,000 crore that would be used to meet the pandemic's emergency requirements. The prime minister is expected to announce the government's steps in this regard in her concluding budget speech on June 29.

Moreover, there are multinational and local companies, including banks and development sector actors, who are announcing Covid relief measures of their own. During lockdown, the government can collaborate with these actors and align its own financial assistance programmes with theirs to make them more effective and minimise possibility of irregularities. For this, the government needs to bring onboard these stakeholders with its plan—if there is one in the first place.

Secondly, the government must utilise mass communication tools to raise awareness about Covid-19 at the grassroots levels. For example, a picture in this daily, published on June 26, depicted people in Khulna, one of the worst hit districts, flouting lockdown measures. The report reads, "On the fourth day of the weeklong lockdown, droves of Khulna city residents gathered and crowded at kitchen markets, ignoring health guidelines amid an increasingly worsening situation."

However, people are not adhering to the lockdown for two reasons: either they are not aware of the existence and/or dangers of the pandemic, or they are out in search of livelihoods. To rectify the former, the government needs to roll out a mass communication drive, involving national and private communication channels in both online and offline mediums, to spread awareness on Covid-19, its impact and how every single person can play a role in shielding themselves and their loved ones. Finally, the government needs to utilise this lockdown window to roll out mass vaccination programmes focusing on affected districts, especially the ones bordering India. The government has already started using the Sinopharm

concentrations of the urban poor, meaning the slums mostly. We know the physical locations of these places. So, we can move forward in an area-based approach for targeting."

Apart from the Tk 10,000 crore budget allocation, the Asian Development Bank, on June 18, approved a USD 250 million policy-based loan to the Bangladesh government to support the Strengthening Social Resilience Programme. Among other parameters, this programme will "expand its outreach to vulnerable women by increasing the coverage of both the old age allowance for women over 62 and the allowance for widowed, deserted, and destitute women in 150 sub-district units or upazilas". The government must ensure effective distribution of this fund and can also consider expanding the scope of the programme to support families affected by Covid-19.

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Why does Canada hide its shameful history and its consequences for Indigenous peoples?



TAMANNA KHAN

TRAVELLING was my hobby before I emigrated to Canada. During my trips both within and outside Bangladesh, I always tried to taste local and regional food to appreciate the culture of the place I visited. Naturally, I looked for Canadian food when I arrived in 2016. I found the "United Nations of Cuisines", especially on the Danforth in Toronto. The neighbourhood, which is close to my new home, offers dozens of eateries specialising in culinary delights from countries all over the world.

My white Canadian husband, in reply to my interest, recommended poutine and dishes related to his Irish-Italian ancestry. His suggestions did not include the cuisine of Canada's Indigenous communities. In fact, none of the restaurants along the five-kilometre stretch on The Danforth between Broadview and Main Street served the food of First Nations, Métis, or Inuit communities. My husband, who has spent more than four decades in Toronto, couldn't name a place where I could enjoy a dish that carries centuries of history and heritage. Finally, three months after my arrival, with the help of Google, I found Tea n Bannock. There, I first came across wild rice and sipped Labrador tea with crunchy yet soft Bannock bread.

I am sharing this experience because I feel, as a newcomer, my exposure to Canada's Indigenous people and their rich culture and heritage has been very minimal.

I knew very little about Canada and its history before coming here. My exposure to North America has been mostly through Hollywood movies and TV shows. There were few examples of Indigenous people and mention of Canada was limited to the Mounties. That more than 600 First Nations communities, representing more than 50 Indigenous languages, as well as Métis and Inuit peoples, live on the land called Canada is a very recent discovery for me. I stumbled into that understanding through the news of the National Inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, when it made international headlines just before my arrival here.

As a reporter at *The Daily Star*, I worked

on stories of rape and murder of young Indigenous women and girls, while on their way to school or the jhum fields. Some of the incidents happened in the cities and suburbs where they would come looking for work. When I read the Canadian news, I was struck by the similarities that Indigenous women and girls face on opposite sides of the globe. How the crimes committed against them are often unaccounted for. No one is charged for

in the name of development. Goons under the protection of various political parties flooded and burned homes of Indigenous communities, raped and killed their women, and forced them to escape to neighbouring countries. The crimes committed against Indigenous communities in North Bengal, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other regions of the country have been more recent and direct.



A woman embraces her daughter during a rally after the remains of 215 children were found at a residential school, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

PHOTO: REUTERS/CHRIS HELGREN

their murders. No institution is held accountable.

In terms of percentage, Bangladesh has a smaller Indigenous population. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 1.8 percent of Bangladesh's and 4.9 percent of Canada's population identify as Indigenous or Aboriginal based on each country's 2011 census.

Just like in Toronto, it is hard to find a restaurant that serves Indigenous food in Dhaka, the biggest city in Bangladesh. It is easy to find a burger joint, a pizzeria, Japanese, Korean and Mexican restaurants. But places serving the rice cakes or green bamboo shoots common in eateries in the Chittagong Hill Tracts remain absent from Dhaka's posh restaurant rows.

Bangladesh's history with its Indigenous people has been a difficult one. The state often took up the role of the oppressor

in the name of development. Goons under the protection of various political parties flooded and burned homes of Indigenous communities, raped and killed their women, and forced them to escape to neighbouring countries. The crimes committed against Indigenous communities in North Bengal, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other regions of the country have been more recent and direct.

Many died from isolation, abuse and trying to escape the tyranny of these schools, which were finally closed in the late 1990s. Till date, hundreds of children of these residential schools remain missing and unaccounted for. Until recently, the Canadian government did not make any effort to find out what happened to the missing children. Generations of missing Indigenous children remain hidden in the records of churches, which ran the residential schools, and have not been cooperative in releasing these records. Meanwhile, the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples carry the grief of missing loved ones in their hearts.

What troubles me is how we try to hide such shameful history and its consequences. In Dhaka, Bengalis are reminded of the country's other ethnic groups mostly on days such as the International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples. Some cultural programmes are held here and there, and then all is forgotten.

To some extent, I feel the same thing is done here in Canada. Special programmes are aired on National Indigenous Peoples Day, but when I walk around Toronto, I do not come across a statue of an Indigenous hero or art installation representing a pre-colonial culture. Similarly, there is no road in Dhaka named after any of the country's Indigenous martyrs, who sacrificed their lives for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

I have been to a couple of heritage sites in Toronto, including a park in the east end, which features pioneer houses. Before the pandemic, visitors could see performers dressed in costumes acting out daily life in the 19th and the early 20th centuries. I have not seen any such interactive performance art in any of Toronto's parks or heritage sites that provide a glimpse of what life used to be like for the First Nations communities of Ontario.

I feel as a newcomer that our knowledge and perception of Canada's First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities is shaped by existing colonial narratives. Without meaningful exchanges, I wonder if our understanding of this country's Indigenous Peoples will remain as incomplete and prejudiced.

vaccine in 67 centres across the country, after 600,000 doses arrived earlier in June. According to the health minister, the government plans to procure another 10.5 million doses of this vaccine, which will arrive in three instalments over three months. Moreover, on June 1, 1.06 lakh doses of the Pfizer vaccine arrived in the country, and 25 lakh doses of the Moderna vaccine is expected to arrive in the next 10 days.

While the currently available vaccines will not be sufficient to inoculate the entire nation in one go, the government will have to take a strategic vaccination approach in order to make the best use of this opportunity and contain the spread of the Delta variant. Bangladesh has also received USD 500 million in additional financing from the World Bank to strengthen its vaccination programme, which will enable it to vaccinate around 54 million people. The country needs to utilise this fund to ensure maximum inoculation.

However, there remains another major problem: the upcoming Eid-ul-Adha and the massive cattle and leather trade surrounding it. Experts have shared concerns that if the government allows cattle traders from all over the country to gather in Dhaka, it might expose the capital further to threats of Covid-19 variants. The gathering of thousands of people in cattle markets would further exacerbate the situation. It has been reported that many cattle traders and their animals will come from Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga and Jhenaidah of Khulna division—many of which have turned into Covid-19 hotspots. So far, as reported by this newspaper, around 23 cattle markets will be set up in Dhaka.

According to Department of Livestock Services director-general Sheikh Azizur Rahman, "We've given a proposal to transport cattle on wagon trains if the lockdown is continued." The DNCC mayor has also suggested blocking entry into Dhaka of cattle from highly infected districts. But how will this be implemented?

There is no denying that the government's initial complacency has led to the surmounting challenges today—a mess that could have been avoided with foresight and timely, proactive strategic measures. Whatever initiatives the government chooses to take now to contain the spread of the virus, it is certain that this is not a battle, but a full-fledged war that will require each and every single citizen of this nation to fight from their own position.

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