

Public servants should not cross their remit

UNO penalising lockdown violators?

It is not very uncommon to see one branch of the state exceeding its defined responsibility and stepping into the territory of the other branch. However, sometimes the executive, particularly those that are at the field level, carry it too far by becoming judge, jury and executioner at the same time, forgetting the bounds of their duty. In a blatant display of such an action, a UNO recently fined a doctor for “violating” lockdown orders. However, two days after that incident, the said UNO, of Satkania in Chattogram, has been withdrawn and made officer on special duty. Although the Divisional Commissioner was evasive of the question regarding whether the posting had to do with the officer’s fining a doctor, it would be a fair surmise that it was indeed so.

In this instance, it was not only the executive arrogating to itself judicial authority—penalising a doctor, a frontline soldier in the fight against the pandemic, also betrayed a dismal lack of common sense of the UNO. As the chief executive, he should have known the details of the lockdown orders, more so the fact that a health worker’s services fall within the category of essential services and hence are outside the purview of lockdown. Such an imprudent action was also replicated in Habiganj, where an executive magistrate of Ajmeriganj upazila fined a doctor for violating the lockdown. Later, good sense prevailed and the money was returned.

We would hope that our public servants, particularly those in charge of the administration at the ground level, should not only be more judicious but more humane and sensible in enforcing government orders. They should also not assume such authority or power which, by the Constitution of the country or by its rules and procedures, does not devolve on them.

Abandoned planes to be confiscated and sold off

High time cargo village area got cleared up

AUTHORITIES at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport have finally decided to confiscate and auction off 12 airplanes that have been occupying a large part of the cargo village for years, disrupting the loading and unloading of goods. It is a much awaited initiative that should have been taken years ago by the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab).

The cargo village has essentially been turned into a graveyard for planes, with United starting this practice way back. And the Caab’s inaction against United prompted other rogue airlines to follow suit. Out of the 12 planes, eight were abandoned by United Airways, two by Regent Airways, and one each by GMG and Avina. According to the airport’s executive director, these airplanes have not been in operation for one to eight years.

United, Regent, and GMG owe Tk 750 crore to Caab in different unpaid charges. Of the total sum, United owes Tk 190 crore, GMG Tk 360 crore, and Regent Tk 200 crore. Caab has written to these companies multiple times to remind them of these unpaid fees, but never got any response. Additionally, the abandoned planes have been taking up space that could have been used by four or five additional cargo planes, allowing Caab to earn more.

These airplanes have finally been de-registered, clearing the way for them to be sold off. And according to a report published by this newspaper on July 6, officials will soon call for tenders from parties interested in buying them.

We hope the authorities have done their homework when it comes to the legal and other hurdles in selling off these abandoned planes. They have been taking up cargo space for long enough and have caused the Caab to incur enough losses. It is high time the authorities sold them off and freed up airport space.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Raise Covid-19 awareness in rural areas

Coronavirus cases have been on the rise, not only in cities but also in rural areas. However, the level of awareness is higher in urban populations compared to rural ones. People in the countryside don’t take Covid-19 symptoms seriously. They also do not follow health guidelines properly. Although they sometimes wear masks, many of them do not know how to use them properly. It is important to raise awareness in rural areas in order to curb the pandemic.

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Can we be doing more to ensure vaccine equality in Bangladesh?



SHUPROVA TASNEM

BANGLADESH is facing one of its worst weeks since the Covid-19 pandemic first hit the country in March last year. On Monday, we saw the highest daily death toll since the pandemic began (164 lives lost) and yesterday, we had the highest number of new Covid-19 infections detected over 24 hours (11,525 new cases). This is the third day in a row where the daily death tally has gone over 150. The positivity rate is currently at 31.46 percent.

Amidst this worsening situation, the only silver lining is that we finally have vaccines in store, ready to be distributed across the country. A consignment of 106,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine under Covax, the global vaccine alliance, reached Dhaka on May 31, and 11 lakh doses of the Sinopharm vaccine was gifted by the Chinese government at around the same time. Early this month, 25 lakh Moderna vaccines provided by Covax and another 20 lakh shots of Sinopharm vaccines bought from China, also arrived. According to reports, Bangladesh will be purchasing seven crore Johnson & Johnson vaccines from Covax as well.

After the sudden vaccine drought faced by the country when Serum Institute of India failed to deliver its promised shipments to Dhaka, the resumption of the vaccination programme is a light at the end of what often feels like an endless tunnel. The government has recently announced that the vaccination registration process will be open to the general public from Thursday, with anyone from 35 years of age being able to register.

While this is good news indeed, we must remind ourselves that only a meagre 3.5 percent of the country’s total population has been vaccinated so far. According to Prothom Alo, we have received 1.6 crore doses of vaccines since the pandemic began. To reach the government’s target of vaccinating 80 percent of the population, we require over 25 crore doses. With limited resources and with the very real issue of global vaccine inequality still looming large—according to Our World in Data, only one percent of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose of the country, a situation that WHO Director-General termed as “vaccine apartheid”—what steps can be taken to make vaccine access more equitable within Bangladesh?

If we look at DGHS data on the vaccination campaign that began on February 7, before grinding to a halt on April 26, there already exists a few glaring disparities. The most obvious is the gender divide—out of the 58 lakh people who have received the first dose of the vaccine, only 38 percent were women.

It also comes as no surprise that the most vaccines have been administered in Dhaka division, where over 18 lakh

have received at least one dose, and over 15 lakh received both. While this might have made sense in February, the current situation in other divisions gives us every reason to regret this lack of foresight. Barishal division, for example, is experiencing positivity rates up to 54 percent, but only 1.8 lakh people there have received both vaccine doses. This excessive centralisation of the public health system has not only affected people outside of Dhaka in terms of vaccine uptake, but in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis. Already, there are growing concerns of limited oxygen supplies, a lack of ICUs in many district hospitals, as well as basic equipment such as high flow nasal cannulas—not to mention the dearth of Covid testing facilities (according to a recent report in this daily, Rangpur, Mymensingh and Barishal have only two RT-PCR labs in each division, compared to Dhaka division’s 88).

While there is no specific data available on those who have received their first vaccine dose so far, it would not be unfair to assume that the digital registration process can create significant difficulties for the digitally illiterate, or for people on the wrong side of the digital divide. Even of the 46 million internet users in Bangladesh (which in itself is less than a third of the population), being online does not necessarily demonstrate digital literacy. A 2019 survey conducted by the BRAC

Including widows in the vaccine list would also be a step towards bridging the gender divide in vaccine uptake, as would the efforts to bring vaccine registration to the doorsteps of marginalised populations.

Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) on 6,500 rural households found that, of the 40 percent of respondents who had regular internet access, only about 13 percent were able to navigate the homepage of the Department of Immigration and Passports, where the information is clearly marked in Bangla, in order to retrieve information for passport applications. BIGD research associate Maria Matin, in an article in *The Daily Star*, detailed how it also took the respondents “two to three minutes per information, which should be a matter of seconds for anyone with some digital literacy.”

In this context, how do we ensure that it is not just the urban, tech-savvy groups who continue to register for and receive vaccines? Last month, it was announced that migrant workers, medical students, residential students of government universities and law enforcers will receive vaccines on a priority basis. According to Prothom Alo, the government will also target farmers, industrial workers and transport workers, and the relevant ministries have been asked to prepare

It must be mentioned here that urban areas do not have a version of community healthcare centres and union digital centres. So where can the urban poor go to receive assistance in registering for the vaccine? If there are any such centres, are its target groups aware of its existence? While the most recent announcements have prioritised formal workers, we are yet to see a similar push to vaccinate urban, informal workers who have been most affected by lockdowns



Fulmoti, 75, lost her job as a cooking assistant during the pandemic. Although she is in the vulnerable age group, women like her are far less likely to get vaccinated.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

a list of recipients. Targeting workers in specific sectors is a commendable step, and one that must be taken urgently. I would request the authorities to also include the city corporations in this initiative, so that the sanitation workers, garbage collectors and cleaners who have silently kept our cities functioning throughout the pandemic are given adequate protections.

However, if previous experience (especially with disbursement of Covid-19 relief funds) is anything to go by, the preparation of such lists can be slow, laborious and often, flawed. Since anyone above the age of 35 will be able to register online for vaccines soon, the authorities can take some immediate steps to ensure elderly, rural and digitally illiterate populations are included in the vaccine uptake.

The most obvious one is a mass public awareness campaign, coupled with efforts to bridge the digital divide. After low vaccine registration rates in February, the government decided to engage community healthcare centres and union digital centres in helping people to register. What is stopping representatives from these centres from going to the more remote locations and registering people door-to-door? We are all familiar with the auto rickshaws/vans with loudspeakers that make an appearance during every election season. Can we not treat this awareness campaign with the same enthusiasm that manifests during election campaigns? Why not reach out to student leaders, NGOs and volunteer organisations from across the country, and engage them in helping members of their communities to register?

and the resultant economic downturn. Door-to-door registration in urban slums, or setting up of centres to assist with registration in nearby areas, should be a priority for the authorities—whether done via government actors, or with the help of NGOs.

Finally, although we are seeing a push to vaccinate workers to keep the economy running, we must remember that the majority of Covid-19 deaths are happening in populations aged over 65. Since the Department of Social Services already has a list (though incomplete) of people receiving elderly and widow allowances, it would not be difficult for the authorities to reach out to them and ensure they are vaccinated. Including widows in the vaccine list would also be a step towards bridging the gender divide in vaccine uptake, as would the efforts to bring vaccine registration to the doorsteps of marginalised populations.

The attempts to take our education system online have already demonstrated the digital divide that exists in the country. When it comes to a major public health issue like mass vaccinations, we cannot allow this divide to create vaccine inequality in the country, where marginalised populations who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic end up falling through the cracks. Bangladesh’ past successes with mass immunisation programmes show that we have the capacity to make the vaccine campaign more equitable—all we need now is effective planning and management to see it through.

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Bangladesh needs to invest in climate diplomacy



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE
SALEEMUL HUQ

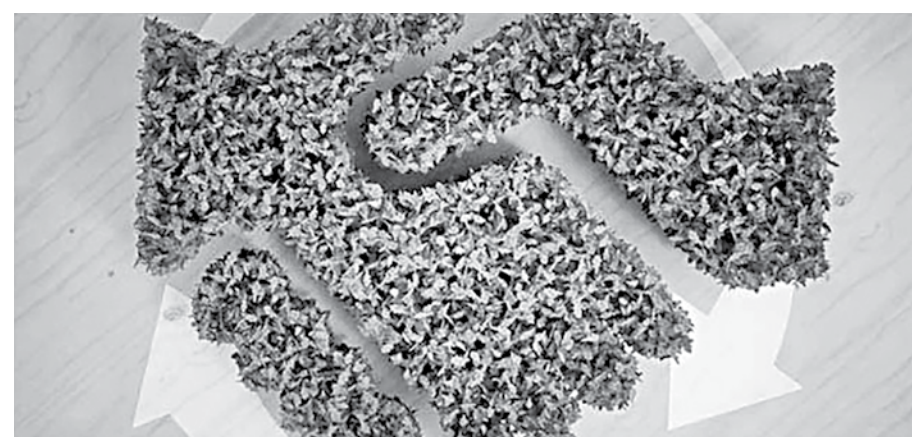
AS Bangladesh aims to graduate out of Least Developed Country (LDC) status over the next few years and become more intimately involved in various international activities and

issues, we need to make tackling climate change a national and diplomatic priority as well.

This means that every new Bangladeshi diplomat should have a basic understanding of what climate change is, how Bangladesh is tackling it, and how we can share our knowledge and experience with other countries. Fortunately, the Foreign Service Academy under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has had an arrangement with the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) to provide a short course on climate diplomacy for each new batch of Foreign Service officers these past few years. Hence, our new diplomats now have a basic understanding of the main climate change-related issues that the country is facing, and on how to share information with other countries and international institutions.

At the same time, as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has taken over the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) for a second two-year term, it is now incumbent on all Bangladeshi ambassadors and high commissioners in different countries to raise their voices on climate change-related issues, at both bilateral and multilateral levels.

For example, the Bangladeshi High Commissioner to the United Kingdom has already initiated and set up a group of CVF ambassadors in the UK in anticipation of the upcoming COP26, which the UK will host in Glasgow this November. The Permanent Missions of Bangladesh in Geneva and New York have also set up CVF ambassadors’ fora in their respective cities. Bangladesh is increasingly recognised as a significant player in the global climate change arena,



as we don’t only represent one country but nearly 50 vulnerable developing countries. This is certainly one of the reasons why we received visits from President Biden’s climate envoy John Kerry, as well as the COP26 President-designate Alok Sharma, in the last couple of months. These are in recognition of Bangladesh’s growing role at the global level on climate change issues.

Another important development is that the Bangladesh Finance Minister is now chairing the V20 Group of Finance Ministers of the CVF (this actually

includes 48 countries), and the Economic Resources Division (ERD) of the Ministry of Finance has an important role to play in helping the V20 Finance Ministers implement their own work programmes to make their countries more resilient as well as prosperous. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC) continues to hold the lead role on behalf of the country at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meetings,



such as the COPs. All three, namely the MOEFCC, MOFA, and ERD, have very important international roles to play on behalf of Bangladesh on the global stage.

In addition to the government ministries, civil society, youth, the media and the private sector have significant roles to play in tackling climate change, with an added international dimension. This will enable Bangladesh to speak at many different international forums with a whole-of-society voice on tackling climate change.

Finally, let me end with my message

to the newest batch of Bangladeshi diplomats when I spoke to them this week. Wherever they are posted over their upcoming careers, whether to another country or to an international agency, they will be expected to know something about climate change and what Bangladesh is doing about it. This is because Bangladesh has already earned itself a global reputation as a climate vulnerable developing country. However, the task of our diplomats is now to change the narrative from emphasising our vulnerability to climate change impacts to our resilience in the face of those impacts, and indeed towards becoming prosperous despite them. This shift in narrative from vulnerability to resilience to prosperity is outlined in the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan, currently being finalised. At the same time, they need to offer to share Bangladesh’s experiential knowledge and learning in locally led adaptation to climate change with other developing countries in a South-South knowledge sharing, as well as with developed countries in South-to-North knowledge sharing.

There is a very important upcoming summit event on climate finance, chaired by the Prime Minister with the UN Secretary General as well as other heads of government of the CVF and Finance Ministers of the V20 countries, being held virtually on July 8, which can become the springboard for enhancing Bangladesh’s climate diplomacy globally.

Bangladesh has a golden opportunity to enhance its image in tackling climate change and getting globally recognised for this achievement in the years to come.

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