

Why are we not bothered about Pegasus?

It contradicts all democratic norms and must be shunned

THE world is abuzz with the news reports by several major international news outlets that have revealed how people among 45 countries have been spied upon with the help of Pegasus spyware. Created by Israeli company NSO Group, this spyware has the most invasive techniques to get information on any person with a mobile phone. It can harvest data, turn on the microphone and camera of any smartphone without even the user doing anything, track location and record conversations and even initiate downloads without the user knowing it. So far, according to reports, rights activists, journalists, politicians and jurists in the 45 countries have been targeted including French President Emmanuel Macron, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan and Indian politician Rahul Gandhi.

The *Washington Post* has documented Pegasus infections in 45 locations and this includes Bangladesh though the paper has added that infected phones do not necessarily mean that a country's government is a client.

So far the Bangladesh government has totally rejected such a possibility. The Post and Telecommunications Minister has said that neither the telecommunications division nor the ICT division purchased such spyware. The director (media and legal wing) of Rapid Action Battalion, has also denied buying or using the spyware.

We applaud the 17 news organisations in 10 countries that launched the Pegasus Project, an investigative reporting consortium, following the leak. If it was not for these intense investigative efforts we would never have known the extent to which our privacy is being invaded.

Though Bangladesh has officially denied acquiring this spyware, the fact that the probe has found Bangladesh to be one of the locations where phones have been infected is cause for alarm. We have already seen the way private conversations, confidential documents are leaked in social media that serve to benefit certain quarters and malign or discredit others. Phone-tapping has been practiced in this country for many years so the existence of such surveillance software would not be surprising. Unfortunately we the general public cannot feel confident that various kinds of technology will not be used to invade our privacy and the data used to hurt us. The way the Digital Security Act is being abused, for instance, to intimidate and incarcerate any kind of dissenting voice or just purely to settle personal scores gives us little confidence regarding how such spyware could be used if the state is using it.

We sincerely hope that the official denials of acquiring such spyware can be trusted. But the fact that a leading international news outlet has identified Bangladesh as one of the locations where Pegasus exists should prompt the government to vigorously find out who the clients of this spyware are. Fortunately the investigating media outlets have said that they will gradually publish the names of the clients of NSO Group so we will be able to know. Surveillance of citizens with such techniques are a blatant violation of our privacy and contradictory to democratic values. We hope Bangladesh will put an end to all speculations and find out whether this spyware is being used and if so, against whom.

Crores' worth of disaster response equipment collecting dust

Why are we not using the machines we so desperately need?

A recent report by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) revealed that different types of emergency response equipment bought under a Tk 746.05 crore project funded by the World Bank, are collecting dust sitting in warehouses and satellite control rooms across Dhaka city. The report found that there was no allocation for the maintenance of these machinery, some of which are sensitive and may decay if left to be like this.

The equipment was bought as part of the sub-project being conducted by the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) in a bid to improve the country's capacity for emergency response, including fire incidents and earthquakes. Between July 2015 and April 2020, the project had had a progress of 80 percent but the deadline was extended by a year until June 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the authorities then sought further extension of the project timeline until April 2022 and a cost increase to Tk 805.90 crore. This revision is currently pending approval by the Planning Commission.

But what of the equipment which is already here in several warehouses and satellite rooms? For one, the three turntable ladders (brought from Germany), which could be used to douse fire in high-rise buildings, were not found in a useable state by the IMED team in May. While one was found to be operational, another was being repaired by foreign experts, and the third had its side plate damaged during transport. Many ICT equipment were also still in their boxes. The team observed equipment, ambulances, and furniture to be covered in dust in the warehouses and satellite control rooms in Kallyanpur, Mirpur 10, Mohakhali, Azimpur, and Karwan Bazar areas.

Upon visiting the Karwan Bazar warehouse on July 8, reporters of this daily found from nearby construction workers that it had last been opened during Ramadan. Though the executive engineer of area-3 of the DNCC suggested the reporters contact project officials for further queries, the project director said the control rooms and warehouses had been handed over to the zonal executive offices of the DNCC around two years ago. The explanations given by project officials regarding why the turntable ladders were not being fixed are flimsy and shows indifference towards the maintenance of such crucial equipment. The horrible Narayanganj factory fire and other such devastating disasters remind us of the crying need for such emergency response equipment. If the revision is approved and the April 2022 deadline is accepted, we would urge authorities to ensure that the project is seen through by that time and also that all the equipment procured under it is maintained and used as necessary.

Crisis in the oil market and EU's new environmental plan



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

climate change.

In early July, the world was abuzz when the oil-producing cartel, known as OPEC Plus, failed to agree on a production plan, and crude oil prices soared to a record high in the trading markets. Then, within a week in mid-July, the EU announced new measures to curb carbon emissions and to force its trading partners to do the same. EU is attempting to streamline its existing carbon-taxes



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programme known as Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). If implemented, its expanded tax programme known as carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) will affect imports from its trading partners outside the bloc, including possibly Bangladesh.

The International Energy Agency (IEA), a Paris-based intergovernmental organisation established in the framework of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) warned that the recent failure of OPEC and its allies to agree on a plan to ease production cuts in August means oil-market investors face the contradictory worries of both undersupply and oversupply. In early July, the price of oil jumped to over USD 75 a barrel, the highest seen in seven years. While the price went down a little soon thereafter, it stayed in the range that is significantly higher than in recent times.

To understand the price gyrations, the possible outcome of the infighting, particularly the tussle between Saudi Arabia and UAE, and the role of OPEC Plus in this drama, one has to dust off the old undergraduate

economics books and revisit the "cobweb theorem", market equilibrium, and theory of oligopoly.

Price of oil depends on supply and demand, but crude oil market is controlled by a few large producers, and OPEC. The latest phase of the drama started last year, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. In anticipation of the drop in world demand for oil, OPEC and non-OPEC oil-producing countries, collectively known as OPEC Plus, took the pre-emptive step of cutting back oil production to hold up the price of crude. Now, as the global economy and concurrently demand for oil heads for a comeback, OPEC Plus is hoping to ease production restrictions and allow more crude into the market. Top OPEC producer Saudi Arabia wants output raised in stages by a total of two million barrels per day (bpd) between August and December and wants to extend remaining OPEC Plus cuts until the end of 2022, instead of letting them expire as planned next April.

The UAE balked at the extension and said it could support raising production by two million bpd until the end of 2021 but wanted to defer discussion on extending



PHOTO: AFP

the pact beyond April 2022, a position Saudi Arabia has so far rejected.

The virtual meeting of OPEC Plus at the beginning of this month ended in a deadlock. It was expected that the members would agree to a gradual increase in output, to accommodate the growing demand but to allow price to hold steady. On July 5th, it was announced that Saudi Arabia and UAE could not agree on the combined output of the group, with UAE holding on to its demand for a greater share of the quota.

An agreement reached on July 18, restores a temporary calm in the market since an open split between Saudi Arabia and UAE could lead to a scenario where OPEC members could have simply opened up their spigots and flooded the market with oil.

Last Sunday's deal calls for OPEC Plus to raise production by 400,000 bpd each month through the end of 2022. That will unwind all the cuts the two groups agreed to make at the beginning of the pandemic, when it

slashed 9.7 million bpd a day in its collective output or 10 percent of its 2019 demand.

The price of oil has an impact on alternative sources of energy including coal, gas, and renewables. At this critical juncture, the world economy is set on a course to recover from a slowdown and cheap energy will be an important consideration in the future choice of technology and carbon intensity of goods.

Prices of oil, coal, and gas determine a number of decisions that economies will make in the coming years as greenhouse gas emissions continue unabated. Cheap oil, an abundance of fossil fuels including coal and gas, and the Covid-related global crisis, has managed to sideline implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change. It is hoped that COP26, to be held in November in Glasgow, and initiatives by OECD countries will reset the clock to salvage the goals necessary to keep global warming below 2 degrees Celsius.

As mentioned, EU has stepped up to the plate. The European Commission, the EU executive body, set out in detail how the bloc's 27 countries can meet their collective goal to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions by 55 percent from 1990 levels by 2030—a step towards "net zero" emissions by 2050. The "Fit for 55" measures will require approval by member states and the European parliament, a process that could take two years (*The Daily Star*, July 14, 2021).

The Commission also wants to impose the world's first carbon border tariff, to ensure that foreign manufacturers do not have a competitive advantage over firms in the EU that are required to pay for the CO2 they have produced in making carbon-intensive goods such as cement, steel, and fertiliser.

It is not clear how the EU's Green Deal will fare or what its overall impact will be. There are several trade restrictions aimed at protecting the environment but these could run afoul of WTO regulations. Border tariffs would require the establishment of a new agency to monitor the carbon content of imported goods. Companies importing covered products would need to register with the EU agency and hire companies to audit the greenhouse-gas emissions of their suppliers. The proposal has unsettled some US officials.

EU is apparently making an effort to nudge China which is now contributing to 27 percent of global carbon emissions. China is overly reliant on coal for its power generation. In view of the recent increase in the price of coal, China's planning agency Natural Development and Reform Commission announced a plan to boost coal production.

Unfortunately, other developing countries will be adversely impacted by CBAM. Brazil, South Africa, and India, in addition to China, have already expressed "grave concern" that CBAM could impose unfair discrimination on European imports of their products. Economic models show that it will lead to declines in exports in developing countries in favour of developed countries, which tend to have less carbon intensive production processes. To compensate the affected LDCs, UNCTAD suggests that the European Union could consider "flanking policies", including the use of revenue generated by the CBAM, to accelerate the diffusion and uptake of cleaner production technologies to developing country producers.

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WORLD DROWNING PREVENTION DAY

Anyone can drown, no one should

AMINUR RAHMAN

TODAY, July 25, 2021, is not just an ordinary day. It is a new United Nations international day. It is a day of aspiration to prevent drowning, which claims hundreds of thousands of lives every year globally. As the slogan of the day says, "Anyone can drown, no one should". In the past decade, over 2.5 million people have died due to drowning, the majority of which could have been prevented.

On the April 28, 2021, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a historic Resolution on drowning prevention, acknowledging the issue for the first time in its 75-year history, and proclaimed July 25 as World Drowning Prevention Day. The new Resolution was initiated by the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the UN, H.E. Rabab Fatima, in partnership with the Government of Ireland and co-sponsored by 79 Member States. In presenting the draft Resolution to the UN General Assembly, Ambassador Fatima said, "Every drowning death is preventable, through tested, low-cost solutions. And action on drowning presents us all with an opportunity. An opportunity to advance several of the UN sustainable development goals."

The WHO estimates that drowning is the cause of 236,000 deaths every year, excluding the drowning deaths caused by flood-related events and water transport incidents. This results in the under-representation of the true mortality by up to 50 percent in some countries. Over 90 percent of drowning deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, with Africa recording the world's highest drowning rates and Asia carrying the highest burden of drowning deaths by number. Drowning is a social equity issue that disproportionately affects children and adolescents in rural areas. Globally drowning is among the 10 leading causes of death in children. In most of the low- and middle-income countries, including Bangladesh, children aged 1-4 years are the worst affected followed by children aged 5-9 years.

The groundbreaking Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey (BHIS) 2005 and its follow-up survey in 2016, revealed a staggering figure of drowning mortality. The surveys were conducted by Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) with the support

of the Directorate General of Health Services and Unicef-Bangladesh. BHIS 2016 estimated that about 19,000 people of all ages die due to drowning each year. Over three quarters of these deaths, approximately 14,500, occur in children under 18. In other words, each day about 40 children die from drowning in Bangladesh. When children under 5 years are considered, this number is 30 a day, about 10,000 per year. The survey also identified wide exposure to water bodies, lack of awareness, lack of supervision of young children, lack of swimming skills of children and first response skills of communities were the major risk factors



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of children drowning in rural Bangladesh. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in their Report on Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2020 also found that drowning is the second leading killer of under 5 children after pneumonia.

Bangladesh does not have the luxury to implement the interventions which are found to be effective in high-income countries. Moreover, those interventions may not be appropriate for the Bangladesh context. The country needs context specific interventions which are culturally acceptable. The CIPRB with the support of the government, development partners and donors including DGHS, Unicef-Bangladesh, UKAid, AusAid, Grand Challenges Canada, Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, UK has been conducting various community-based research activities since 2005 to identify country- and context-specific effective

interventions to prevent children from drowning. Two major innovations of low-cost solutions have been identified - community daycare (*Anchal*) for under 5 children, and SwimSafe, a survival swimming programme for children 6-10 year olds. An *Anchal* provides institutional supervision of 20-25 children aged 1-5 years by two caregivers during parents' busy hours, 9 am to 1 pm, when majority of the drowning incidents occur. It also takes the opportunity to provide early childhood development (ECD) stimulations, which are very important for children's development, during their four hours stay in the centre. Through SwimSafe



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activities, children 6-10 years old learn survival swimming skills from a locally trained community swimming instructor in a local pond, modified by a bamboo structure to ensure safety. Through half an hour lesson a day for two weeks, on average, a child can learn to swim 25 metres and float for 30 seconds, which are the criteria to become a survival swimmer.

Research carried out by CIPRB identified that Anchals are over 80 percent protective, that is, if a child participates in an *Anchal* for the full duration of four hours a day, there is 80 percent less chance of that child drowning than those who do not participate. Similarly, SwimSafe was found to be over 90 percent protective. Another study explored that there was 88 percent reduction of drowning in children 1-4 years old in the rural communities where Anchals were in place and children were participating for at least one year. Another notable study was equipping community

volunteers with the skills of first response including cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR). The study showed that over 80 percent of the community volunteers could learn the required skills and also apply them during emergencies.

The WHO in its *Global Report on Drowning: preventing a leading killer* incorporated these three interventions and suggested the LMICs to adapt and implement those according to their settings to prevent child deaths from drowning. These interventions have potentials for scale-up not only in Bangladesh but also in other similar settings. Considering the benefits, the Vietnam government utilised these evidence-based Bangladeshi, child drowning prevention measures with some adaptation in their country.

The Bangladesh government recognises that child drowning is one of the major child health and protection challenges the country now faces. To achieve the SDGs, particularly Goal 3—good health and wellbeing—child drowning needs to be addressed. The Directorate General of Health Services of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has taken some awareness raising initiatives and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs is in the process of establishing 8,000 community day-care centres to provide supervision of 200,000 under 5 children and to teach swimming to 6-10 year old children through primary schools. However, these interventions are yet to scale-up throughout the country.

The Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the UN in partnership with the government of Ireland took a time honoured initiative to secure a first-ever Resolution on global drowning prevention, supported by WHO, Unicef and RNLI

The Resolution encourages the Member States to consider certain drowning prevention interventions in accordance with national circumstances. All actions are very relevant for Bangladesh, however, the first and the foremost thing is that the country should develop its national drowning prevention plan with a special focus on children to prevent unnecessary deaths. Bangladesh could rephrase the slogan for World Drowning Prevention Day to be: Any child can drown, no child should.

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