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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Last-minute changes to inoculation plans display lack of foresight

Govt must have a long-term strategic plan for its vaccination drive

WE are disappointed, but not at all surprised, to find that the government's ambitious six-day vaccination programme, which aimed to inoculate around one crore people in six days from August 7, has had to be revised even before it could take off. From its onset, we have seen the vaccination drive plagued with uncertainty, with it grinding to a halt in April due to a shortage of vaccines. At the time, the government was criticised for not planning for this eventuality. Although the arrival of more vaccines restarted the programme in July, the last-minute retreat from a massive vaccination campaign has again raised questions about the government's lack of coordination and planning when it comes to Covid-19 inoculations.

What is the reason behind this change of plans? According to a *Straight from Star Newsroom* report, the government was expecting to receive more vaccines from China and COVAX at the beginning of this month, which have been delayed. However, since such delays have already happened before, we are confused why the government did not keep this in mind while planning the drive. Given that over half of the people who have received the first jab are yet to receive the second dose, some simple calculations would have yielded the fact that aiming to distribute almost all of the vaccines currently at hand to new candidates at the ward and union levels might be impractical, especially since the government had said it would prioritise vaccinating other groups as well.

The main special vaccination campaign is now set to begin on August 14, whereas today the government will be conducting a trial run aimed at vaccinating the elderly and people in rural areas. Given that we have seen the recent wave of coronavirus hit the rural areas of Bangladesh, with the highest mortality rate being among populations over the age of 50, it is a good decision to focus on the elderly in rural areas in today's vaccination run. However, we must also remind the authorities involved that there has to be a long-term strategic plan involved in achieving its inoculation target.

So far, the government seems to have made many open-ended promises about inoculating almost all of the adult population, without outlining any concrete plans on how it will be done. At different points, the authorities have said they will prioritise different groups (the elderly, disabled, migrant workers, families of frontline workers, students, etc)—but with limited supply, how exactly will this work? Will this be done in phases? Will Covid-19 hotspots be specifically targeted?

The health minister has said the government will use this trial run to identify the problems of vaccine rollout and fix those accordingly before the main drive, and that there will be a special focus on raising awareness in rural areas. We sincerely hope that this will be the case, and that today's vaccination drive will operate smoothly and efficiently. We urge the authorities to ensure that the August 14 programme goes forward as promised. Otherwise, this constant back and forth and confusion over its plans, not just in terms of the vaccination drive but with regard to lockdowns and other Covid-related decisions as well, could place the government in a credibility crisis.

The time to combat dengue surge is now

Govt, citizenry must all be vigilant in preventing more cases

ONE of our worst fears of current times is too close to realisation for comfort, as the cases of dengue infections keep rising. The last major dengue upsurge was in 2019—when 101,354 people had contracted the virus and at least 179 had died—and the situation this year appears to be even more frightening given the accompanying Covid-19 pandemic and how it has all but crippled our healthcare system.

In case of the dengue surge, the numbers from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) speak for themselves. For instance, in May, there were only 43 hospitalised dengue patients. The number shot to 272 in June, and to an alarming 2,286 in July. Besides, it has also been observed that most of the patients are in Dhaka. Of the 218 people hospitalised with dengue in the 24 hours till Thursday morning, only 10 were from outside Dhaka.

What's worse is that the particular variant of dengue which has been prevalent this year is Serotype-3. According to experts, this variant is one of the more dangerous ones and increases mortality risks in infected patients. Since the dengue surge began last month, we have tried to highlight the severity of this situation given that it is deteriorating at a time when the deadly Delta variant of the coronavirus is also sweeping across the country. If a patient becomes infected with both viruses, not only will it increase their chances of mortality, but their recovery will also be challenging as the treatment for one may interfere with that for the other.

In order to combat the dengue virus, there are no better alternatives to early detection and hospitalisation. Apart from the city corporations' spraying of larvicides/insecticides, citizens should also make sure to not store water (clean or stagnant) anywhere for more than a few days at a time, so that Aedes larvae do not get the chance to breed.

We commend the DNCC's initiative of arranging free dengue testing facilities at 46 centres across its territory. However, we would also like to stress the importance of making similar arrangements elsewhere in the country, especially in all other parts of Dhaka where the concentration of this virus seems to be the most widespread. Testing facilities alone are also not enough to combat the dengue virus. Given the ever-worsening Covid-19 situation, authorities' top priority right now should be to bulk up healthcare resources—and to assist our already overburdened doctors and healthcare staff—in any way possible. We would urge the government to handle the dengue epidemic more seriously than it has done so far, because the challenge is huge and the consequence could be catastrophic if not handled with the urgency it demands.

The never-ending charade of vaccine calculations



GOLAM MORTOZA

been procured by Bangladesh; astonishing anomalies lie in the price-related information of vaccines; and apparently, despite what the official narrative tells you, there is no workable vaccine procurement plan including precise timelines and quantities.

For the last few days, we have been constantly bombarded with announcements that within the six-day period between August 7 and 12, one crore people would be vaccinated. We were also told that there was a stockpile of

LET us begin with three news highlights related to our vaccine procurement scenario—No one can show an accurate breakdown of how many doses of vaccines have

a little predictable turn of events, we can understand that there are doubts and confusion regarding the timing and quantity of any subsequent consignments of vaccines. The question is, why then, despite having doubts and uncertainties, was such a massive promotion made and that too by multiple individuals?

Given the scenario, it appears that neither the relevant ministry nor the minister has an accurate idea of the actual inventory of vaccines. Coming against this backdrop, the threat to punish the unvaccinated by another minister and subsequent dismissive statements made to cushion its fallout—that “it was not our statement”, or “we are withdrawing the statement”, etc.—rather made a mockery of the whole situation which could be, frankly, done without at this critical time in our fight against the coronavirus.

Let's also recall that an announcement was made about importing 21 crore vaccine doses but no other information was given. Despite questions raised about

crore vaccines. The government did not respond to that proposal. The government did not make a deal on its own either. In that case, how will these seven crore doses of Russian vaccine arrive? And when will they, if at all?

Now the question is about the seven crore doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. There is a big question mark on Johnson & Johnson's capability to export such a large quantity of vaccines. Bangladesh did not even sign a contract with them. That means, all this talk of the Johnson & Johnson's seven crore vaccines is probably just a charade. A source tells us that Bangladesh will get seven crore doses of Johnson & Johnson as part of the COVAX initiative. Even if this information is accurate, it cannot be claimed with certainty that we *will* get the vaccines. Production of vaccines by Johnson & Johnson, their storage at COVAX and then the chance of getting it—the whole thing is based on possibilities. Even if we end up getting our hands on the doses, those

of procuring one lakh and 50 thousand doses of vaccines at a price of Tk 3,045 crore. The claim was made through a newspaper advertisement some time ago. On that advertisement, approximately 11 lakh free doses of vaccine received from COVAX were also included in the price calculation of paid vaccines. According to that flawed calculation, the price of each dose was shown as Tk 3,000 (or USD 35-36). However, the government procured seven million doses of vaccine from India's Serum Institute at a cost of USD 5 per dose, including carrying costs. Also, it bought vaccines from China at a price of USD 10 per dose, with carrying costs to be added to it. Thus, it's evident that the health ministry in its ad inflated the prices of each dose by at least USD 25 to 30. Till date, the health ministry has offered no explanation for this anomaly.

Now, Bangladesh government is vaccinating people from the age group of 25 and above. The possibility of further lowering the age bar to 18 has been discussed but is yet to be put into effect. In our country, the number of people above the age of 18 is almost 14 crores, and all of them need to be vaccinated. Given the two-dose requirement for each individual, we need at least 28 crore doses of vaccine. Till now, one crore and 40 lakh people have received a single dose, while 40 lakh people received both doses. Still, another 13 crore people need to be included in the vaccination drive. Even if we manage to deliver one crore doses per month, 26 months will be required to cover the entire target population. This, too, depends on an uninterrupted supply of vaccines. At this point, we neither have the required stockpile nor can we hope to have the needed amount in the near future.

What, then, are the next steps for Bangladesh?

We need to urgently learn how to add and subtract properly, and we also need to eliminate all anomalies within the calculations in order to establish transparency. The most important factor is to increase the national capacity. We have to take effective steps for collecting the required amount of vaccines—mere words will not suffice. Even if we manage to do that, we still cannot save everything. The only path to our survival and recovery is through producing vaccines locally. It doesn't matter whether the formula comes from China, Russia or any other country. Going ahead, Bangladesh has no other choice but to produce its own vaccines.

Golam Mortoza is a journalist at The Daily Star. The article was translated from Bangla by Mohammed Istiaque Khan.



PHOTO: REUTERS

one crore and 25 lakh doses, in addition to another 21 crore doses that would arrive in the country by the beginning of next year. We were assured that the trend of vaccinating one crore people per month would continue. “There are no shortages of vaccines, nor will there be any”—this message was generously and enthusiastically spread on behalf of the government, by both those you would expect to hear it from and those you wouldn't. But then, just one day before the inauguration of this massive drive, we were told that the promised vaccination campaign period has been cut short. No, it is not going to continue for six straight days. Instead, it'll simply be a daylong affair.

From this bizarre and by now perhaps

the authenticity of this statement, we were given no subsequent information or explanation. It has been claimed that among the 21 crore doses, seven would come from Russia and seven from Johnson & Johnson. We have had no information thus far—from public, private or foreign sources—validating the claim that Bangladesh has struck a deal to buy seven crore doses of the Russian vaccine. What we know instead is that Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK) had sent a letter to the foreign minister along with supporting documents and informed him that Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital had been nominated as the official agent of Russia's Sputnik-V vaccine in Bangladesh. They reportedly gave a proposal to the government for the procurement of two

are likely to arrive in consignments of lakhs, not crores.

Among the 21 crore doses, it has also been mentioned that three crores will come from India. India, as we all know, is itself in a bind in terms of vaccinating its own populace. It is highly unlikely that it will lift the export ban on vaccines this year.

All this simply means that the possibility of getting 17 out of the 21 crore vaccine doses is completely uncertain. Bangladesh might get some vaccines from COVAX and China, but that will not be sufficient enough to keep a massive countrywide vaccination drive running.

Now let us come to the issue of pricing. A glaring calculation error was identified in the health ministry's claim

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Among India's Believers



SHASHI THAROOR

comprehensive survey, based on interviews with 30,000 adults in 17 languages between late 2019 and early 2020, have astonished many.

In particular, this nationwide, multi-faith study finds that Indians value both religious tolerance and co-existence, on the one hand, and religious exclusivity and segregation, on the other. But this apparent contradiction is in fact not entirely surprising.

For over 25 years—notably in my 1997 book *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*—I have argued that India is not a melting pot like the United States. Rather, it is a *thali*—a collection of different dishes in separate bowls that don't necessarily flow into one another, but nonetheless combine satisfyingly on your palate. Pew's study, titled “Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation,” appears to confirm my hypothesis.

For starters, India is deeply religious: 97 percent of Indians say they believe in God and about 80 percent are certain

that God exists. “Not only do most of the world's Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs live in India, but it also is home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations and to millions of Christians and Buddhists,” the Pew study observes. “Indians of all these religious backgrounds overwhelmingly say they are very free to practice their faiths.” Some 53 percent of adults say religious diversity benefits India. An overwhelming majority (84

two-thirds of Hindus feel the same way.

Disappointingly, Indians also prefer making friends within their own religious community. Religious identity has a strong hold: 64 percent of Hindus say it is very important to be Hindu in order to be “truly Indian.” North Indian Hindus say speaking Hindi, a language fiercely resisted in the country's south and northeast, is essential, too. Although Indians have many beliefs



PHOTO: AFP

A Pew survey reveals that India is a highly religious country that is profoundly committed to respecting its diversity while practicing what Pratap Bhanu Mehta calls a “segregationist form of toleration.”

percent) of respondents say that respect for other religions is a fundamental aspect of their identity. “Indians see religious tolerance as a central part of who they are as a nation,” say the study's authors. “Across the major religious groups, most people say it is very important to respect all religions to be ‘truly Indian.’” Tolerance is also a religious value: “Indians are united in the view that respecting *other* religions is a very important part of what it means to be a member of *their own* religious community.”

But for all this mutual respect, segregationist impulses remain strong. For example, 36 percent of Hindus do not want Muslims as neighbours (though that does mean 64 percent are willing to accept them). Likewise, opposition to interfaith and inter-caste marriages is widespread. About 80 percent of Indian Muslims disapprove of, and wish to prevent, interfaith marriages. Roughly

in common—there are startling overlaps among all faiths on topics such as reincarnation, karma, identification with a caste, and the purifying power of the sacred Ganges River—there is a marked preference for religious segregation. Adherents of every religion want to maintain a safe distance from those of other faiths.

What are the national political implications of all this, at a time when the ruling party's Hindutva dogma has put identity politics in the ascendant? Many supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has long propagated a “Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan” version of Indian nationalism, strongly believe that being Hindu and speaking Hindi are vital to being truly Indian.

That suggests a risk of discrimination against India's minorities. Yet according to the Pew survey, only one in five Indian

Muslims say they have faced religious discrimination. People in the south, where the BJP struggles to win votes, emerge in the study as less religious and more inclusive and accommodative.

At the same time, 95 percent of India's Muslims say they are proud to be Indian and 85 percent agree with the statement that “Indian people are not perfect, but Indian culture is superior to others.” Those Hindutva ideologues casting doubt on the patriotism of India's Muslims should take note.

Other religious fault lines in Indian politics also appear less troubling than previously imagined. Although Pakistan has sought for three decades to foment disaffection toward India among Sikhs in Punjab, the study finds that 95 percent of Sikhs say they are very proud to be Indian, while 70 percent say that a person who disrespects India cannot be a Sikh.

Overall, the study reveals that India is a highly religious country that is profoundly committed to respecting its diversity while practicing what Pratap Bhanu Mehta calls a “segregationist form of toleration.” Given this, reviving and reaffirming the civic nationalism enshrined in India's constitution, with its commitment to empowering the individual citizen rather than privileging his or her religious group, is all the more important.

This is the thesis of my most recent book, *The Battle of Belonging* (to be published internationally in October as *The Struggle for India's Soul*). The Pew survey confirms some of my concerns, but also offers hope for affirming a liberal constitutionalism that the BJP's nationalism has sought to eclipse.

There is one more straw in the wind for those, like myself, who would like India's current religious-identity politics to yield to a focus on governmental performance and issues that affect citizens of all faiths. The Pew survey shows that unemployment, corruption, and crime are the top concerns for people of all religious groups. A government that tackles those effectively, irrespective of whether it does so in Hindi or after offering prayers at a Hindu temple, is bound to win gratitude—and votes.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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