

Should in-person learning be left to chance again?

Govt plan to stage a phased return to in-person classes must deliver

THE news that the government is planning to initiate a phased return to in-person classes starting in September is indeed an encouraging one. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, education ministry officials said the government is preparing to reopen all educational institutions beginning with universities, where a large number of teachers and students are said to have been fully or partially inoculated. Colleges and schools will follow shortly, again beginning in phases and subsequently increasing class numbers depending on the Covid-19 situation. While talking to reporters, Education Minister Dipu Moni also appeared to confirm the plan, saying "If the Covid-19 infection rate drops to the lowest level, we can have a situation to reopen all educational institutions." Deputy Education Minister Mohibul Hassan also said the government is working on reopening schools, but it all depends on the Covid-19 situation.

Apparently, two factors that will play the decisive role in this regard are the vaccination of enough teachers and students, as well as the Covid-19 infection rates reaching a level safe enough for in-person class attendance. The question is, what chance is there that both will happen at the same time? So far, according to an estimate provided by a ministry official, till the first week of August, 30,000 out of 34,000 public university teachers who registered for the Covid-19 vaccine have received their jabs. Around 1.79 lakh university students also registered, of whom around 80,000 received the first dose and 6,000 received both doses. Meanwhile, all government schoolteachers and 2.78 lakh out of 3.63 lakh non-government teachers at the secondary level have been administered both doses of the vaccine. Still, a lot of teachers and students remain unvaccinated. And even if all of them are inoculated on a priority basis, there is no certainty that the countrywide infection rate will simultaneously go down to create the ideal situation.

So for both targets for reopening (vaccination and reduced infection) to reach fruition, it will take a massive effort to tackle the coronavirus through mass vaccination and rigorous infection containment measures countrywide, which, unfortunately, didn't happen since the pandemic began last year. What this means is that we may once again miss the deadline of reopening educational institutions. The fact is, it is because of such unclear and, frankly, unrealistic plans that the government has frequently missed reopening deadlines. The safety of teachers and students is of course paramount, but tying a reopening plan with the rise or fall of infection rates has proved to be ineffective.

At this point, many of the decisions seem to be based on mere conjectures rather than sound data. If the September deadline is to work, we must come up with better policies. The government needs to engage experts in formulating a plan that incorporates blended learning as an essential feature of pandemic-time education, relies more on enforcement of health guidelines than on divine intervention to curb infections, is flexible enough to apply to specific areas and situations instead of a fixed, ideal scenario for the whole country, and equally importantly, ensures that there's no digital divide to disrupt learning should re-opening bids fail. After nearly 17 months of all education institutions remaining closed, we must be brave, realistic and at the same time innovative about reopening them, rather than leaving the fate of students to chance.

Taliban victory is writ large in Afghanistan

It's essential that the power transfer happens peacefully

ALL events indicate that a Taliban victory in Afghanistan is now a certainty. The former prime minister Ashraf Ghani has reportedly left the country, saying that he did so to prevent any further violence. The Taliban themselves have said they are pleased that the transfer of power so far has happened without bloodshed. We, too, would like to see a peaceful transfer of power take place, and the onus is now on the Taliban leadership to ensure that the people of Afghanistan are not exposed to any form of cruelty.

Since entering Kabul—and from even before—the Taliban have said that the citizens will not be harmed. That pledge should be carried through. There must not be any revenge killing, as the Taliban have pledged. Having willingly taken over the responsibility, the Taliban must protect the people and guarantee their safety—even from their own individual soldiers by maintaining strict discipline. The responsibility to protect the lives and property of the people, as well as different minority groups, now rests on their shoulders—including from criminal elements that may try to take advantage of the existing power vacuum.

On the other hand, we have seen disturbing footage of people trying desperately to flee Afghanistan and a number of people have reportedly died amidst the chaos. This indicates that the people are afraid of what is to come, and there is a great sense of insecurity that could potentially lead to even more loss of lives. The Taliban leadership has to intervene here and reassure the people that they have nothing to fear. They should coordinate with other forces to arrange a way for people who wish to leave the country to be evacuated in an orderly fashion.

Now that the foreign forces have mostly left Afghanistan, and the former government seems to have more or less dissolved, the Taliban have a great responsibility at hand. It is one thing to take over power, but it is a completely different matter altogether to form the administrative structure necessary to form a government that serves the people in the long run, while maintaining peace. That will require winning over the hearts and minds of all the people, not just those whom the Taliban see eye-to-eye with.

Kabul falls. What's next?

A CLOSER
LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

NOVEMBER 13, 2001: A victorious United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, popularly known as the Afghan Northern Alliance—an anti-Taliban joint military front—entered Kabul supported by the US-launched Operation Enduring Freedom, as the Taliban fled the Afghan capital.

Fast forward 19 years, nine months and two days. August 15, 2021: A victorious Taliban—having secured swift control over most of the war-ravaged nation's 34 provincial capitals—takes over Kabul, as the Afghan president flees to Tajikistan. The president's departure came as talks were ongoing to ensure a "peaceful transition of power" to the Taliban.

There was no major incident of bloodshed as the Taliban overthrew the Afghan government. The Taliban, in a statement earlier, said that they did not intend to take the capital by force, nor did they plan on taking revenge on those

people were reportedly killed. It is unclear whether this was a result of a stampede or gunfire, since both the US military and the Taliban are firing rounds at and around Kabul airport. The former fired in the air to prevent people from boarding a military flight meant for US diplomats and embassy staff, while the latter fired rounds to stop people from getting inside the airport. All international flights have been cancelled.

A Chinook helicopter was seen flying above the US Embassy in Kabul as the US evacuated their officials. Germany is sending an A400M transport aircraft with paratroopers to help its diplomats and their supporting staff exit the city. Canada has already evacuated its officials, while NATO has suggested that despite Taliban advances, it will continue to maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul.

After the killing of more than 6,000 US service members and contractors, 1,100 NATO troops, 73,000 Afghan defence personnel, including police, and around 47,000 Afghan civilians over almost two decades, Afghanistan has fallen back into the hands of the Taliban.

The US had previously spent USD 84 billion to train an elite Afghan troop of 300,000. But in the face of

and the political solution of the issue with the presence of a mediator, but on the contrary, the Taliban violated this commitment, intensifying war, and violence, and launched offensive attacks on cities," said Abdullah Abdullah during a meeting with representatives from the UN, EU, US, Britain, China, Russia, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Qatar.

Similarly, while the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had expressed concern about the development regarding the Taliban, calling them "deeply, deeply troubling", he did not do anything to try to stop the Taliban advances, except for an ineffective air intervention.

Abandoning the country and its people without providing them with strategic support to keep the Taliban in check has been an act of cowardice and selfishness, to say the least.

Emboldened by their recent success, the battle-hardened Taliban is now unlikely to act as a malleable force that could be manhandled—let alone handled—by the international community. Moreover, there is no guarantee that they will not support the al-Qaeda. Abdullah Abdullah, the Afghan government's chief negotiator, had earlier blamed the Taliban for committing "grim crimes", and said that, "Thousands of terrorists, along with the constant presence of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, from Jaish-e-Muhammad to Lashkar-e-Taiba, have entered Afghanistan and are fighting against our people."

A UN Security Council report dated June 1, 2021, suggested that, "A significant part of the leadership of Al-Qaida resides in the Afghanistan and Pakistan border region, alongside Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent. Large numbers of Al-Qaida fighters and other foreign extremist elements aligned with the Taliban are located in various parts of Afghanistan."

The report further added, "Ties between the two groups remain close, based on ideological alignment, relationships forged through common struggle and intermarriage. The Taliban has begun to tighten its control over Al-Qaida by gathering information on foreign terrorist fighters and registering and restricting them. However, it has not made any concessions in this regard that it could not easily and quickly reverse, and it is impossible to assess with confidence that the Taliban will live up to its commitment to suppress any future international threat emanating from Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Al-Qaida and like-minded militants continue to celebrate developments in Afghanistan as a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global radicalism."

The Taliban, despite acting sensible during the international negotiations, have consistently gone back on their words. "A few days ago, here in Doha, we talked for 48 hours with the representatives of the Taliban and agreed to speed up the negotiations



Women with their children try to get inside Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 16, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS

working for the Afghan government. The latter is in contrast to the actions of the Taliban over the last few weeks, when they actively sought out and summarily executed individuals who had worked for the Afghan government or international forces, in every district they captured.

The frightening prospect of retribution from the Taliban had forced many to leave their homes in the districts and flee to Kabul, where they felt they had some sort of safety. But within two weeks of a stunning encroachment drive, the Taliban surrounded the Afghan capital and demanded the surrender of the current government. While unbelievable—an assessment by the American military had earlier suggested it would be a month before the Taliban could aim for the capital—the worst nightmare of most Afghan citizens unfolded in front of their very eyes. The scenes at Kabul airport were heart-wrenching, as thousands attempted desperately to leave the capital and five

the unflinching encroachment by the "75,000-strong" Taliban force, the Afghan army could not hold its ground. In places, force was not ever required; the army and policy simply fled their posts in fear of the Taliban. Perhaps, the elite Afghan troops were not trained well enough by the US. The failure of the Afghan troops should be assessed by the US to identify the gaps that have led to this shameful disaster.

So, what's next for Afghanistan? While world leaders are expressing concern, their words ring hollow. The British Prime Minister, in a television interview, said, "Nobody wants Afghanistan to be a breeding ground for terror... or to lapse back into the pre-2001 situation". If this was the case, why did the UK pull out its troops from Afghanistan without first putting in place a mechanism to support the Afghan government?

As recently as August 13, 2021—despite the rapid advances of the Taliban—Boris Johnson told the media the West will not

Why the long lines and confusion over Covid-19 vaccines?

MEHNAZ RABBANI and FARUQ HOSSAIN

FOR the past week or so, we have been hearing of experiences from the latest vaccination drive. People were forced to queue for hours, often only to find that the centre has run out of vaccines. Some are claiming that there is preferential treatment—the "better-connected" are cutting queues. Many had registered for vaccinations on the Surokkha app, but when the announcement came for the mass drive, they were confused. Can they go for the walk-in mass drive if they are already registered, or do they have to wait until they get an SMS?

In an informal experiment, we requested a group of our friends facing this confusion to call the 333 helpline and confirm if registered people can go for walk-ins. Each person had to make repeated calls for over several hours, only to find the helpline busy. At the end of the day, only one person could get through to get the response that registered people who have not received the SMS are not eligible for the walk-in vaccination. Amongst all this confusion, people showed up at the centres from the early hours of the morning, many without masks, sometimes for days in a row, to get the much-coveted vaccine. This is the case not only in places outside Dhaka where logistics and management capacities are low. We saw pictures of people standing in long lines in the rain in Dhaka as well, where the facilities are better than elsewhere in the country.

This was not the scenario only a few months ago. In February this year, when Covid-19 vaccines first came to Bangladesh, we had many apprehensions about vaccination management. In fact, many sceptics predicted mismanagement and chaos. We feared that the socially and politically connected would get preference, and regular citizens would

be deprived, and that information about how and where to get vaccines will be confusing. We thought there would soon be a black market where we would have to pay high prices for vaccines, with no assurance of authenticity. We predicted that there would be long queues and waiting times, with thousands of people fighting to get it.



People demonstrate at the gate of Chattogram General Hospital on Thursday as the authorities stopped the vaccination programme due to shortage of Moderna jabs.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

However, to our pleasant surprise, none of this happened during the first round of the vaccination programme, and the vaccine experience was found to be better than what most people had anticipated. There were no long waits, no chaos at the centres, and no undue preference of one citizen over the other. Volunteers at the centres were there to help, and seating arrangements with social distancing were available. This early experience put many of our skeptical anticipations to rest and we congratulated the government on their

success. Much to our disappointment, just when we thought Bangladesh had figured out how to manage mass vaccination, the scenario drastically changed for the worse.

Why is the already tried and tested system failing now? One possible reason may be the number of vaccines being delivered daily. In February this year, the daily vaccination rate was, at most, 2.5

infection rate of the current second wave, the demand for vaccines has risen. Added to that, the age bar for the vaccine has been lowered, increasing the number of people who are eligible for it. With some disruptions in the supply of vaccines between May and July, there was also a backlog of registered people waiting for their shots. So the mismanagement that we witnessed recently is likely a result of vaccine centres operating above capacity. If that is the case, the possible outcomes of large crowds gathering for vaccines, dissatisfied with the waiting time, must be considered seriously. It may not take long for the citizens to forget the successful vaccine management in the first round.

The vaccination drive for Covid-19 is here to stay for some time, with a possibility of boosters in the long term. It is important to have a clear understanding of our capacity to plan how to administer vaccines efficiently without citizens suffering, and estimate by how much we need to increase capacity to face the upcoming demand for this service. For the time being, given the risks of infection, it is urgent to devise a plan with government and non-government actors on how to avoid crowds and chaos at vaccination centres. Systematically providing appointments to those who registered on the app and deploying an adequate number of guards at vaccination centres to ensure social distancing could be some of the immediate measures. If we have walk-in vaccination drives, the centres must have adequate stock so that people do not have to return without being jabbed. Turning a Covid-19 vaccination drive that ultimately aims to reduce infections into a potential source of spreading the disease is something we must prevent.

Mehnaz Rabbani is the Head of Operations, Strategic Engagement and Partnership, and Faruq Hossain is a Senior Research Associate at BIGD, BRAC University.