

Lax policing of mask use a cause for concern

New wave of awareness needed to tackle the upcoming wave of the pandemic

MASKS help save lives. There can't be a clearer or more powerful message than this to stem Covid-19 infections, especially at a time when the supply of vaccines has been consistently inconsistent, to say the least. Yet it continues to be ignored. Large numbers of people are still seen on the streets without their faces covered, with little or no initiative from the authorities to enforce the safety guidelines. This is especially disconcerting given recent warnings by experts that another wave of Covid-19 might be just around the corner, despite a steady dip in infection and death rates over the last three weeks. Against this backdrop, a new survey shows that there is no alternative to proper mask wearing as it can reduce the chances of contracting Covid-19 up to 34 percent.

The study—conducted by researchers from Stanford Medicine School and Yale University between November 2020 and April 2021 in rural Bangladesh, and involving nearly 350,000 individuals in 600 villages—is said to be the largest of its kind. Among its major findings are: a) Awareness campaigns can increase the use of masks up to three times; b) Surgical masks are more effective than fabric ones in preventing transmission; and c) Wearing masks properly reduces the symptomatic infection rate by 34 percent among the most vulnerable group aged 60 and above. These findings are more or less consistent with that of other studies on mask-wearing norms that invariably conclude that while getting people to wear masks consistently is no easy task, it is not very difficult either with proper interventions, including strict monitoring by law enforcement agencies, exemplary initiatives by local leaders, free mask distribution, and other promotional activities.

Such preventative strategies assume additional significance when you consider the poor state of mass inoculation in the country, with only 4 percent of the population fully vaccinated so far. This state is a far cry from the official target of vaccinating 80 percent (135.1 crore) of the population in the country. If the vaccination campaign continues at its current pace, it may take around 10 years to reach that target. This simply can't be the way forward. Although the prime minister is confident that the government can get more than one crore doses of vaccines every month—and the health minister has recently claimed that the government purchased vaccines worth about Tk 3,000 crore within a short time—our past experience with assurances vs reality regarding vaccine delivery makes for guarded optimism. In any case, with widespread vaccination still a work in progress, our best line of defence remains preventative strategies like masks.

We urge the government to provide a renewed focus on enforcing mask-wearing among other safety guidelines—by engaging local administrations, political parties and faith leaders to give the awareness campaign a boost—while urgently securing vaccines, both through purchases and local production. Law enforcement agencies also must step up their game to ensure that people wear masks.

Public hospitals must be freed from outside influences

Increase security at hospital premises, but also ensure proper services for patients

IT is disappointing to know that regular services at Patuakhali Medical College Hospital (PKMC) are being disrupted by a variety of factors and outside influences, including the activities of private clinic/hospital brokers, ambulance staffers, and representatives from pharmaceutical companies. As per a report by *The Daily Star* on Thursday, agents of private medical services are seen loitering inside and outside the hospital every day, approaching patients and trying to lure them away from the PKMC. This state of affairs—a common sight in most public hospitals—shows, once again, that even a pandemic couldn't bring the change so essential in the public healthcare system. The quality of public healthcare in general—and the services provided by hospitals in particular—continue to be a source of frustration in the country.

At different wards of the PKMC, our reporters last week witnessed “the hyperactivity of brokers, representatives of pharmaceutical companies and private ambulances” as patients were persuaded to go to private clinics to get X-rays done at a cheaper rate, while pharmaceutical company reps took photos of patients' prescriptions. We also cannot help but be concerned at the claim of the president of Patuakhali Ambulance Owners' Association—justifying why private ambulances were parked inside the hospital premises—that the public hospital only had two ambulances of its own. Obviously, this is an insufficient quantity of emergency vehicles for a district-level hospital to have, and it is perhaps understandable why the services of private ambulances would be needed. Even so, we wonder why there are not enough ambulances at this hospital in the first place, given the Covid-19 pandemic and now the dengue outbreak.

The activities of private healthcare company representatives at public hospitals is nothing new, but they are especially harmful during a pandemic when patients need to be able to rely on the country's public healthcare system. In any case, these agents must not be allowed to cause disruptions in public hospitals.

We hope the letter that the PKMC's superintendent sent to the Patuakhali deputy commissioner on August 27, seeking legal intervention, will help stop this nuisance there. Most importantly, security measures are needed to screen and prevent private agents from even entering the hospital premises.

However, we must also urge the authorities of public hospitals to acquire adequate healthcare resources from the government, so that patients do not feel the need to turn to private healthcare providers of dubious backgrounds.



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

TWO news reports caught my attention on Friday: one was about a wild elephant being electrocuted, and the other was about the dwindling international funds for the Rohingya refugees. It made me wonder how their travel paths and fates are intertwined, and how they have become critical ecological, political, and international issues for our hill tracts. It made me think of a personal encounter I had with a wild elephant in the hill tracts of Chattogram.

Once, when trekking along the Naikhongchhari range, my team and I

happened nearly 25 years ago. But the feeling of being an uninvited guest in the territory of others stayed with me.

For those whose livelihood depends on the forest, the presence of elephants is a nuisance. And for the elephants, the human invasion must be equally irritating. The close contact between humans and elephants has yielded tales of conflict; the death toll is heavy on both sides. The big question remains: can humans and elephants live together?

According to a 2020 report, 90 elephants were killed in Bangladesh in the last 17 years. In 2019 alone, 11 elephants were killed as per an estimate by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The figures of dead elephants between 2015 and 2019 stand at 34, according to the conservator of the Wildlife Management and Nature

developed a serious distrust of humans as they were the ones responsible for severing its ears. Even though locals traditionally address the elephants like one of their kin—“Mamu” (uncle)—there seems to be no real respect for the largest mammal in the world. The address is more of a code word as, according to legends, naming the animals may physically conjure them—just as is the case with tigers and snakes in a forest, who are called “big lord” and “creepers”, respectively. The local people have enough reasons to be unhappy about their big neighbours too.

Elephants move across vast areas of the forests in search of food. During their regular movement from one range to another, they face man-made obstacles such as highways and railway lines, expanding villages, and even national borders. The food requirements for these

to local people as their normal lives are disrupted because of these animals. They are known for waylaying people (not for extortions like in the city, though). Hence there are often mixed feelings over the killing of elephants, especially among those who have to share space with them. Elephants are also killed by poachers for their ivory tusks. Often, we hear news of elephants being shot down or electrocuted, despite the government initiatives to protect and conserve them.

We need to remember that we share the planet with other species who have equal rights to exist. This planet is home to both humans and other animals. Then again, how do we designate a large area of protected land for this animal, especially in a country with a dense population and fewer natural resources? And even when we have a protected range, these animals are drawn to human habitation, since it is an easy source of food. While it takes seven to eight hours of grazing in the wilderness for the elephants to be fed, they can get filled in two hours when feasting on agricultural land. In many cases, electric fences are used to contain the elephants. However, they are hardly any match for the tusks which do not conduct electricity, and elephants are smart enough to recognise that. Sometimes, the fences are brought down by the humans who need the grassland for their cattle. So, there is the other concept of organic fencing in which chilli fences and bee hives are used to keep the elephants away.

The migration patterns of the elephants are changing because of deforestation, particularly after the resettlement of the Rohingyas. The UNHCR and the IUCN have taken some steps to foster “safe co-existence” between wild animals and sprawling refugee settlements. These include awareness programmes to teach the refugees to respond properly when encountering an elephant or stopping them from entering the camps. Some watchtowers have already been erected, and large decoy elephants are installed to ward off the animals.

But the challenge now is to keep the pressure intact on the international community to allow the refugees to return to their homeland. With the new spotlight on Afghanistan, it is feared that the Rohingyas are about to be the forgotten people all over again. The appeal for repatriation needs to be made through multiple channels and ways. The protection of wildlife is one of them. We need nature activists to talk about wildlife conservation and reforestation. We need energy specialists to talk about the need for alternative fuel supply for the local inhabitants to stop them from going to the forest for firewood. We need humanitarian stories to highlight the issue. Indeed, both humans' and elephants' lives matter.

Shamsad Mortuza is acting vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), and a professor of English at Dhaka University (on leave).



Deforestation is a big reason why elephants often stray from their usual routes and end up invading human habitats, searching for food.

PHOTO: MA AZIZ

were chased by a wild elephant. Our guide pushed us into a narrow bushy trail and made us run for 20 minutes towards the opening of another hill. I was travelling with our university's nature club. It was one of the scariest moments of my life, to say the least. The other was having to climb a tree to avoid two rhinos chasing one another in Nepal's Chitwan forest, but that's another story. To add to our fear, the guide was saying how this particular elephant had killed five people that year. It was a lone elephant that got separated from its herd after a local woodcutter hit one of its ears with an axe. The injured elephant could not travel with its pack and was left behind to fend for itself. This

Conservation Division. Incidentally, this is the same period when we have had a huge inflow of humans from Myanmar. The establishment of Rohingya camps and other government agencies in Teknaf and Ukhijya upazilas disrupted the main roaming grounds of elephants, making the “human-wildlife conflict” inevitable. Between 2003 and 2016, a total of 227 people were killed by elephants. The death numbers of both humans and elephants are worrying. In 2015, the elephant population in Bangladesh was between 280 and 290, which is under threat of further decline.

In my personal anecdote, I hinted at why that particular elephant was ticked. It

animals are in proportion to their size; they require up to 300 kilograms of vegetables and 200 litres of water every day. The cultivated crops in the land along their travel route are easy sources of food for them. We often hear news of wild animals raiding farmlands and destroying agricultural fields. In 2019, the government paid Tk 53 lakh as compensation to people whose crops were damaged by the elephants.

The over-consumption of food and water by the elephants can negatively impact other livestock. I have already mentioned how accidental encounters can cause casualties. Living in fear of a marauding herd can also cause trauma

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

A rare triumph of US bipartisanship



KOICHI HAMADA

AFTER months of negotiations, the United States Senate recently passed a USD 1 trillion infrastructure bill. Passed by a vote of 69 to 30, it was an impressive display of bipartisanship at a time of deep polarisation. While there are still challenges ahead—in particular, disagreement over the USD 3.5 trillion budget blueprint that was subsequently passed by the House of Representatives along the party lines—the approval of the infrastructure bill offers a useful case study of what makes bipartisan deals possible.

The US has a long history of bipartisanship, from the Great Compromise of 1787 to Lyndon B Johnson's Great Society initiative in 1965 to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. As the late senator John McCain proved in 2017, when he defended the Affordable Care Act from efforts by his fellow Republicans to repeal it, even one or two defectors from a party can prove transformative.

But such defections are difficult to come by in a deeply two-party system in which the two sides at times seem like they live in a different reality (as is true of climate change or voter fraud). In such a context, crossing the party line can be perceived as a betrayal, threatening transgressors' position within the party and hurting their re-election chances.

A cornerstone of modern political science is that political actors behave rationally. Simply put, people will not initiate, join, or support any action that would undermine their own well-being. Given this, a policy can win bipartisan support only if it simultaneously advances the interests of both sides.

So what do America's two main

parties want? Republicans tend to support unbridled competition, with the expectation that markets will naturally reward people in the ways they deserve and provide for people in the ways they need. Democrats argue that public intervention is crucial to correcting imbalances and protecting the disadvantaged.

Public infrastructure investment is thus a more natural cause for Democrats. But while Republicans might not like the idea of large-scale public investment generally—they prefer tax cuts to spending increases, and would prefer lower social spending—they do recognise that the private sector depends on public infrastructure, from roads and bridges to internet service. They might not like entitlements, but they do want the economy to run—and their constituents to keep voting for them. That means meeting certain basic needs.

This is one way that leaders achieve what the political scientist John AC Conybeare called “leadership surplus”. After competing with other potential leaders for ascendancy, they “maximise their surplus or profit by providing collective goods against taxes, donations, or purchases promised in the election process”.

Another way to accumulate a leadership surplus and pass broadly beneficial legislation is to find areas of common interest and show the other side how their priorities overlap. Moreover, leaders must sustain bipartisan buy-in while negotiating the details. For example, even if both sides see the need for modern, functioning physical infrastructure, progress can be stymied by disagreement on how to pay for it.

Republicans, at least when they are out of power, express concern about the growing budget deficit, which would ostensibly increase the tax burden on future generations. But this introduces an ideological constraint that has little merit: standard economic theory holds that future generations' welfare depends on

the total national resources left to them, not on their resources minus their tax obligations.

Of course, Modern Monetary Theory would take this a step further, stating that a country like the US can accumulate virtually unlimited amounts of debt. Of course, this remains controversial—and certainly unconvincing to US Republicans. But the standard view is enough to demonstrate that investing in resources like infrastructure will bolster long-term

But, while doling out pork can certainly be wasteful, it can also be a practical tool for enabling progress in delivering public goods. Rather than condemning the practice outright, we should ask whether the benefits of the main legislation are enough to justify the tacked-on provisions. One might describe this as political leadership on the ground.

In an ideal world, perhaps such provisions would not be needed. But there is nothing ideal about US politics,



US Capitol Hill.

PHOTO: REUTERS

welfare, regardless of the size of the public debt. It is the politician's job to make the case to ideological opponents in language that is most convincing to them.

There are also other means of securing bipartisan support for a policy or bill. Consider so-called pork barrel politics: the practice of slipping a localised project into a budget, in order to secure a particular legislator's vote. This is often considered to be an abuse of the political system, not least because such provisions might have little to do with the legislation to which they are attached.

as years of congressional paralysis clearly demonstrates. The bipartisan vote for the infrastructure bill in the US, therefore, should be commended. One hopes it will serve as a reminder to both sides that, as contentious as the political climate gets, common ground can be a rewarding place.

Koichi Hamada, Professor Emeritus at Yale University, was a special adviser to former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021
www.project-syndicate.org
(Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)