

Who gave GCC the right to break the law?

Unlawful demolition of public property, grabbing of land shameful

THE Gazipur City Corporation's (GCC) ongoing drive to demolish public properties and grab valuable land owned by the citizens in order to widen city roads, drains, and footpaths is unacceptable. Several thousand residents have reportedly already lost their precious land to the mindless demolition drives of the GCC. Of course, roads and footpaths in our cities need to be widened, but that has to be done following due process, abiding by the laws of the country. The GCC mayor, however, seems to be completely indifferent to the existing laws when it comes to developing the city he is in charge of. It is really shocking to hear a sitting city mayor saying that nothing can be done in this country following the laws.

According to a report published by this daily, around 800 km of roads are being widened, and drains and footpaths are being constructed under two projects undertaken in 2013, at a cost of Tk 2,200 crore. The GCC authorities started implementing the project in 2019 and began demolishing the structures earlier this year. In many cases, they forced the landowners to knock down parts of their own residential buildings, factories, shops, and boundary walls. The GCC did so without acquiring the lands or without compensating the landowners. Reportedly, only those with political connections received some compensation. Moreover, two private companies filed writ petitions with the High Court for being threatened and for losing their land to forceful grabbing, following which the High Court issued status quo orders on the possession of those lands. Surprisingly, the GCC also violated those orders.

We think the example that the GCC has set by not lawfully acquiring the land and not compensating the city's residents is shameful. How a city corporation can violate the High Court's orders is also beyond our collective comprehension. If vital state organisations like our city corporations do not abide by the laws, then how can they expect the citizens to do it? It is understandable that the GCC has fund constraints, but that does not justify their grabbing of public properties. We would also like to ask: Why were there no provisions for land acquisition and compensation when the projects were approved? The GCC must answer this question.

We now hope that the GCC authorities will come to their senses and follow the proper procedure of land acquisition. We need development, but not at the expense of people for whom this development is—and certainly not by disregarding our laws.

An uncontested election is not an election

EC deserves a huge share of the blame for the present state of our democracy

IT comes as no surprise that the elections to 160 union councils and 11 municipal corporations, held in the first phase of the UP elections on September 20, were marred by violence and alleged electoral frauds. But perhaps what's worse, and even a bit surprising, is that 43 Awami League chairman candidates won uncontested, according to the Election Commission. This prompted Election Commissioner Mahub Talukdar to ask whether we could call these unopposed winners "elected" at all. Given that they were the only candidates contesting for the positions, it cannot really be said that they were elected by the people; rather, they were—for all intents and purposes—selected by the ruling party.

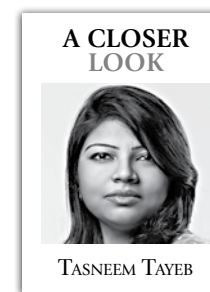
The only opposition to the candidates fielded by the Awami League came from its own rebels, who surprisingly won a significant number of chairman seats. Is that a sign of the lack of popularity enjoyed by the ruling party? The truth is, we might never know through such elections, where hardly any other party—apart from those associated or formerly associated with the ruling party—participates. What is certain, however, is that such elections are creating a clear apathy among voters which, according to the election commissioner, is an ominous sign for democracy.

For a multi-party democratic system, participation of many parties is a prerequisite, said the commissioner. The fact that we have now had several elections in which only one party has contested—which completely defeats the purpose of an election—is a clear sign that our democracy right now is in a severe crisis. And for it to have any chance of overcoming this crisis, changes have to be made in the current electoral system, based on a consensus among all political parties. That, however, seems to be miles away at the moment.

In the absence of any credible opposition, intra-party feud among different Awami League factions has been hogging the election headlines regularly. Recent violence during the polls again claimed three lives. Such tragedies, unfortunately, seem to have become customary. The Election Commission must take responsibility for these deaths and alleged electoral frauds that have become a common feature of elections, both local and national. The commission cannot shirk its responsibility for failing to prevent widespread irregularities in the elections, with the obvious outcome being a drastic, sustained fall in voter turnout. This cannot go on indefinitely. The commission must take meaningful actions to restore the tradition of fair and participatory elections in Bangladesh.

Where has all the money gone?

The Evaly scam has put our entire e-commerce industry into question



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

EVALY was known for its mega discounts and 150 percent cashback offers. The company—once the second-largest e-commerce platform in Bangladesh—is now recognised as a front for a massive Ponzi scheme, which lured unsuspecting customers in with promises that were impossible to keep. Today, the company is mired in multiple allegations of fraud, irregularities and embezzlement, among other crimes. It has, thus, essentially committed major financial crimes. The company's CEO Mohammad Rassel and his wife Shamima Nasrin, who is Evaly's chairman, have admitted that their company's liabilities stand at more than Tk 1,000 crore.

Now the question is: Where has all the money gone? Why is the company not being able to pay back its customers?

The risk of money laundering here cannot be overlooked. It is highly likely that the owners internally laundered the money, or siphoned it off abroad. There can be other possibilities that we are not aware of yet. Whatever the case is, the whereabouts of the money may continue to elude us, in a "fitting" tribute to the mystery surrounding the extraordinary rise and fall of Evaly. The authorities would like to have us believe that both Evaly and its customers are responsible for the current debacle. But if we follow the trajectory of this case, the blame goes both ways.

One may recall that it was on August 28, 2020 when the media reported that the Bangladesh Bank would investigate the financial transactions of Evaly. The Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) then informed us that bank accounts belonging to Evaly and its top management had been frozen for investigation.

On September 9, 2020, it was reported that various agencies would be engaged in investigating the activities of Evaly. The agencies included BFIU, the National Board of Revenue (NBR), and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), among others. This happened as a result of a directive from the Ministry of Commerce to these agencies.

Fast forward to February 25, 2021, it was reported that the central bank was in charge of investigating the financial irregularities of the e-commerce company. To that effect, the commerce ministry reportedly wrote to Bangladesh Bank Governor Fazle Kabir, along with the Ministry of Home Affairs' Senior Secretary of Public Security Division Mostafa Kamal Uddin, on February 18. The ministry also wrote letters to other bodies to investigate Evaly's misadventures.

Then, on September 2, the High Court issued an injunction order restraining Evaly from selling and transferring its assets, as a distressed customer filed an application seeking directives to liquidate the company and pay off the creditors.

On September 14, 2021, it was estimated by the e-commerce platform itself that its dues to the customers stood at about Tk 311 crore, while its dues to the

merchants were around Tk 206 crore. But the recent revelation by the company's chairman and CEO that it owes Tk 1,000 crore overshadows the previous estimates.

Finally, in a shattering blow to the creditors and customers of Evaly, Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi said on Wednesday: "I don't think Evaly has any money—there is not much scope to recover any money from them." He further added: "It seems Evaly will not be able to return the money to customers. Because, either Evaly has moved the amount or it has spent most of it on advertisements. It sponsored sports and many other events."

These statements, coupled with the earlier developments in the case, raise certain questions: Why was this sorry state of affairs allowed to come to this point? Why was the company allowed to continue its operations and ensnare many more customers and vendors, even after allegations against it surfaced last year? Which mechanism did Evaly use to move the money that slipped the radar of the financial intelligence unit? How much did Evaly use in advertisement, because Evaly's campaigns alone certainly cannot account for such a huge amount of money? And

roles to play here. It needs to follow the money. The Anti-Corruption Commission, along with other relevant bodies, should also seriously investigate this."

Despite the host of challenges in this situation, the authorities now need to focus on finding the money in order to be able to pay back the customers, and they must also ask themselves why this was allowed to happen in the first place. Dr Iftekharuzzaman suggests that this could have happened due to two factors: a) The lack of responsibility and professionalism of the various bodies who should have investigated this earlier; and b) The inability of the regulators and relevant authorities in perceiving this situation. "This could also have been due to their lack of capacity, in the sense that perhaps the regulatory bodies were unable to sniff out the irregularities in the business model of these e-commerce platforms. Jubok, Destiny have committed similar multi-level marketing crimes in the past, although not in the e-commerce space. Therefore, it surprises me that the authorities could not identify the issues earlier," he said.

In failing to address this situation at



Evaly CEO Mohammad Rassel, and his wife and company chairman, Shamima Nasrin, must be made to give up all the money they stole from their customers and vendors.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

most importantly, will the customers and vendors get their money back, and who will take responsibility for that?

Evaly's transgressions have been in the news for quite some time now. As early as mid-2020, customers started lodging complaints against Evaly for not delivering products on time. And one can safely assume that this scam of Tk 1,000 crore has not happened overnight. So, how did Evaly conduct such financial mismanagement and fraud under the nose of the authorities?

"When such unrealistic advertisements and aggressive marketing offers were being offered by Evaly, they did it in public, and the relevant authorities should have looked into it back then," said Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB). "Now, the BFIU should look into the money laundering aspect of it, to trace the money of the customers who have paid Evaly for undelivered products. If the money is not in the bank, then where is it? BFIU has both preventative and curative

the right time, the authorities have not only given Evaly a free run, but they have also enabled a conducive environment for other such e-commerce platforms to take advantage of the booming industry.

Right now, the government and the authorities should take a two-pronged approach to address the situation. First, the government needs to assess the gaps within the system that allowed a platform like Evaly to rob the common people of their money, and to establish a separate independent commission to regulate the e-commerce space and empower it to bring all such businesses under an accountable process to ensure transparency, good governance, and integrity. The commerce minister's statement that the government is considering forming a regulatory body for the e-commerce sector, along with a Digital Commerce Act, indicates a positive—if long overdue—move. However, two factors are important here: independence and empowerment, and the timely application of the act, so that

rogue e-commerce platforms cannot take advantage of the people or the loopholes in the system. Other rogue players have already penetrated the e-commerce space, and are applying similar unrealistic marketing tactics to entrap customers. It is essential that these e-commerce sites are brought under regulations, irrespective of who are running them.

Second, the BFIU needs to take a closer look at the money trail of Evaly and its top executives, so that the victims can be repaid. A source from BFIU confirmed to this writer that they were investigating the financial irregularities committed by the company and its management. One can only hope that the BFIU investigation will yield results. There have been multiple cases of financial irregularities and capital flight by influential individuals that still remain unresolved. The Evaly case must not be one of those.

The e-commerce industry has incredible potential in Bangladesh, but it is at risk of being manipulated because of the malpractices of a few e-commerce sites. It has become a pressing need to identify the rotten apples and pluck them out of the system, so that the e-commerce

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industry can flourish in a healthy way. There are those who are playing by the book, ensuring transparency in their transactions, but because of the unhealthy practices of a few, these compliant platforms are losing the advantage of a level-playing field. This cannot be allowed to happen.

The government also needs to ensure justice for the criminals—by meting out adequate punishment to them—and for the victims—by making sure they get back their hard-earned money—which the government can by tracing the money and bringing it back from wherever it is now. Otherwise, the e-commerce industry will suffer from a serious lack of public trust, which will hinder its growth. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, e-commerce sales have already seen a five-month low in July, when online transactions fell to Tk 740 crore. The July figure is also 42 percent lower than that of June, when customers spent Tk 1,277 crore. For the sake of this industry and all those people who are relying on it, we cannot allow the downturn trajectory to continue.

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The Global North's Great Test



GORDON BROWN

WITH low-income countries in Africa and elsewhere still exploring rich countries to stop stockpiling millions of unused Covid-19 vaccines, there are still real doubts as to whether the United States and Europe will honour the promise made at this year's G7 summit to vaccinate the world by the end of 2022.

US President Joe Biden's administration has said that the Global North can deliver enough doses for everyone by next September's United Nations General Assembly. But the gulf between the vaccine-rich and vaccine-poor has grown so vast that under two percent of adults in low-income countries are fully vaccinated, compared to over 50 percent of adults in most high-income countries. Worse, millions of doses in high-income countries are now being wasted because they are not being used in time.

Earlier this year, for months, Western governments could at least say that there was not enough vaccine supply to meet global demand. But we are now producing 1.5 billion vaccines every month. As I write this, around 300 million doses of vaccines are lying unused, hoarded in warehouses or on their way to fulfil delivery contracts that have been monopolised by Western countries. As a result, the World Health Organization's September 2021 goal of vaccinating at least 10 percent of the population in every low-income country—the basic level needed to cover health workers and the elderly—remains unrealised.

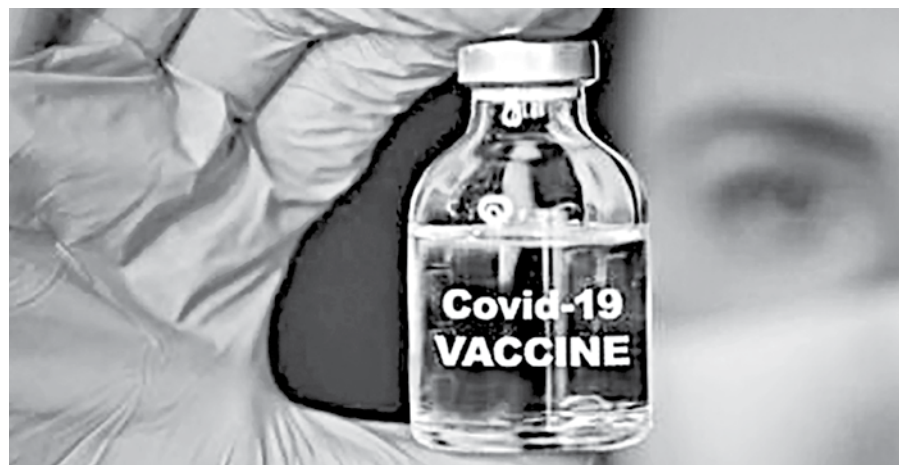
According to a major study by the research firm Airfinity, the number of unused doses will reach one billion by this

December. To put that staggering figure into perspective, it is enough to meet our year-end goal of vaccinating 40 percent of the African population.

Making matters worse, Airfinity shows that if we do not act, 100 million unused vaccine doses will have passed their expiration dates by the end of this year. And if we cannot airlift surpluses to where they are needed on a schedule that preserves a two-month shelf life, this figure could rise to 241 million. Either way, that

million or more doses to be wasted is thus tantamount to condemning hundreds of thousands of unvaccinated people in low-income countries to unnecessary suffering or death.

The upshot is that at Biden's vaccine summit this week, more lives hang in the balance than at any other peacetime gathering that I can recall. If the West does not deliver the necessary supply of vaccines to the rest of the world, low-income countries will have little reason



'The longer Covid-19 is allowed to spread in low-income countries, the greater the likelihood that it will develop new variants that will come back to haunt even the fully vaccinated.'

PHOTO: COLLECTED

is near-criminal wastage.

Exaggeration comes easily to politicians. But it is no overstatement to say that unless more vaccines, diagnostics, and treatments are made available to the Global South, there could be at least one million more Covid-induced deaths over the next year.

We know that more than 100,000 lives have been saved in Britain, owing to the administration of fewer than 100 million vaccine doses. Allowing 200

ever to trust it again. Failing to transfer millions of surplus doses to those in desperate need would be a grotesque failure of the most basic test of human solidarity and decency.

And so for world leaders convening at the UN this month, the stakes could not be higher. We are at a make-or-break moment to mitigate the monstrous, unforgivable vaccine inequality that has prevailed so far.

The data compiled by Airfinity suggests

that 200 million doses can be transferred immediately to the Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) facility and the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust for distribution across Africa and other low-income countries. That would be enough to meet the WHO's 10 percent target for every country. Moreover, Western countries can send the same amount of additional doses—around 200 million—to COVAX each month thereafter. That would be enough to address Africa's deficit of nearly 500 million doses, ensuring that some 40 percent of the continent's population is vaccinated by the end of the year, in line with WHO's goal.

We have seen how vaccine nationalism leads to inequality, wastage, and far too many avoidable deaths. Not only is this approach self-serving, but it is self-defeating too. The longer the disease is allowed to spread in low-income countries, the greater the likelihood that it will develop new variants that will come back to haunt even the fully vaccinated.

This basic truth lies at the heart of pleas that have been building this week from African leaders, former heads of state and government, the Pandemic Action Network, and groups like The Elders. NGOs and faith leaders in the Global South have issued statements calling for immediate action to prevent an epic moral catastrophe.

In a global health crisis born of a highly infectious and communicable disease, there is no alternative to collective global action. This week's vaccine summit represents the rich world's best chance to show that it means what it says.

Gordon Brown, a former prime minister of the United Kingdom, is United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education and Chair of the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021 www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)