

Covid vaccination: Third dose versus the first dose

The economics and ethics of the booster

Delays and cost overruns in Dhaka-Sylhet-Tamabil highway projects

We cannot continue to accept this as the norm when it comes to major infrastructure development

WE are disappointed, but not at all surprised, to find that the project to acquire land and relocate utility service lines for expanding the Dhaka-Sylhet-Tamabil highway is likely to be delayed by two and a half years and cost double, according to the latest revision proposal of the project. It is hugely concerning that such delays and cost inefficiencies in government projects are continuing to occur, despite repeated expressions of dissatisfaction at this state of affairs from the prime minister herself. In fact, in February this year, she directed the authorities to take legal action against those responsible for flawed project designs that ultimately push up costs.

Such delays are not only detrimental for the project at hand, but have knock-on effects on other development projects as well. In this case, delays in clearing the land will put on hold the two major projects taken up by the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) to turn the Dhaka-Sylhet and Sylhet-Tamabil highways into dual carriageways with separate lanes for slow-moving vehicles. The physical work for this was meant to begin by June next year, and the process of floating tenders to hire contractors has already begun—but what will the contractors work on, if the land itself is yet to be acquired?

What makes the situation even more complicated is that this is the first project in Bangladesh's transport sector that is being funded by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which laid out the specific condition that the highway expansion cannot begin if the land is not cleared first. Yet, over the past three years, the project to clear the land has only progressed by about 25 percent. The delays have been attributed by RHD sources to the fact that the project proposal was based on a feasibility study and detailed design from 2015, which has undergone changes to make way for wider roads and better road safety. However, this does not in any way explain why these factors were not included in the original design in the first place.

The director of the highway expansion project told reporters that the land was supposed to be readied before starting the infrastructure building work, but "that does not happen in reality". It is disappointing to hear such acceptance of cost overruns and delays as the norm. We urge the government to investigate why we are continuing to see such lethargy, even in the case of implementing major infrastructure development projects, and take prompt actions to change this disheartening state of affairs.

Covid-19 cases in Thakurgaon school a cause for concern

Those exposed to the students must get tested, kept in isolation

IT is a cause for concern that five students of a government primary school in Thakurgaon town have tested positive for Covid-19 two weeks after schools reopened in the country. Since the students who have contracted the virus are of Grade IV and V, the school authorities have suspended the classes of those grades temporarily. Reportedly, all the five students live in an orphanage run by the government. According to the deputy administrator of the orphanage, on September 17, only one child of the orphanage had fever and cold and the five students of the primary school developed symptoms later. Until now, the orphanage authorities have sent the samples of 25 girls for Covid testing and 13 of them came out positive, including the five students of the primary school. It is, however, reassuring to learn that the 13 girls are being treated in the isolation ward of the local government hospital and are doing well now.

So far, we haven't learnt of any other instances of the spread of Covid-19 in our schools besides this one in Thakurgaon. We hope other schools will take note of this case and remain ever alert to avoid the spread of the virus in their institutions.

In this case, we hope the orphanage authorities will remain alert since there could be more cases in the coming days. Each and every child of the orphanage with the slightest of symptoms must be kept in isolation and get tested. The school authorities also have a lot of responsibilities here. They need to strictly maintain the health safety guidelines, such as making sure that all the students wear masks and wash their hands at regular intervals. However, we know that keeping a safe distance is really difficult in our primary schools where many students have to sit in close proximity to each other. Even then, the school authorities must try to find a way so that students can maintain at least some distance from each other. Moreover, they need to make the guardians aware of the health guidelines and Covid risks their children might be exposed to. Similarly, guardians should never hide the truth about their children's health conditions and should report to the school and keep their children isolated if they suffer from any Covid-19 symptoms. Only awareness can make a lot of difference in keeping our children safe at school during this pandemic.



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE current debate over the necessity, cost, and effectiveness of the third dose or "booster shots" for Covid is generating a lot of heat. The battle lines are clear. On the one side are the pharmaceutical

companies, Pfizer, BioNTech, Moderna, and others who will benefit financially from the production, distribution and administering of booster shots in the USA and other first-world countries. Aligned on the other side are international organisations such as WHO and UNICEF, and advocates for vaccine equity.

The advocates for boosters point out that vaccination does not offer protection against the virus forever and a third dose enhances immunity. So far, so good! The jury is out on the issue of who needs the third dose and when. Also, with a global shortage of vaccines, a thorny ethical issue has resurfaced. Would the demand for a third shot increase the price and decrease the availability for those who are yet to receive their first dose?

If we take a global perspective, only a few of the people in low-income countries have been vaccinated. According to the Our World in Data project at Oxford University, just 31.7

percent of the world's population has received a single vaccine dose, while only 23.7 percent of people worldwide are fully vaccinated. In developing countries, a scant 10 percent of individuals have received a single vaccine dose. It is worse in Africa, where 25 people are dying each minute from Covid-19.

Last month, Israel became the first country to offer the coronavirus booster amid fears that vaccine efficacy dwindles over time. The UK has already authorised the booster, and the USA and

other countries are likely to follow suit, raising fears that the disparity in global vaccine distribution would be further accentuated. The WHO has urged the US and other wealthy nations to wait until the end of this year and requested a four-month moratorium, to "give more people in other countries a chance to get a first dose of these lifesaving shots."



A health worker prepares a dose of the Sinopharm vaccine against the Covid-19 coronavirus at a vaccination camp held in Colombo on August 14, 2021. PHOTO: AFP

established Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) to procure and fairly distribute vaccines. But much of the vaccine development, production, procurement and distribution are ad hoc, generating controversy and inconsistency. Pharmaceutical companies have been criticised for knowledge hoarding, secret pricing, unreasonable profits, unfair bilateral deals and extortionate demands for indemnification against liability. COVAX has been criticised for an absence of transparency and accountability

Ghebreyesus late last month called for a moratorium on boosters, questioning the necessity of a third jab and highlighting the risk of "more potent" variants emerging in countries with "low vaccination coverage."

"We don't understand who is going to need a booster, how long after their last dose, or which vaccine combination works best," says physician-epidemiologist Bruce Aylward, a senior adviser at the WHO. "You need to understand all that before you decide how boosters should be used."

If everyone in high-income countries received boosters, that would use up one billion doses, Aylward estimates. "You're dealing with a finite, zero-sum resource," he says. "You are reducing supply for those who need it more."

In my final observations, I will offer some thoughts that my readers might also wish to consider. According to a report published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), "some features of the Delta variant mean that vaccines alone may not be enough to control the virus. Delta is far more transmissible than the original strain of the coronavirus (someone infected with Delta contaminates another 5-9 people, compared with 2-3 from the original strain). Israel, which has one of the highest immunisation rates in the world, illustrates how Delta is a game changer; after hope that the disease was under control, the country is now grappling with a fourth wave of cases."

The nations of the world must address the disparity in immunisation to minimise the loss in GDP and growth in poverty in Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa. In a Health Policy paper published in *Lancet*, eminent scholars and international experts point out that there are many dimensions of an effective global immunisation strategy against Covid-19. The paper, titled, "Challenges in ensuring global access to Covid-19 vaccines: production, affordability, allocation, and deployment" opines that an ethical approach to Covid-19 vaccine production and distribution should satisfy four uncontroversial principles: optimising vaccine production, including development, testing, and manufacturing; fair distribution; sustainability; and accountability.

"Having licensed vaccines is not enough to achieve global control of Covid-19: they also need to be produced at scale, priced affordably, allocated globally so that they are available where needed, and widely deployed in local communities," the experts said.

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Last month, Israel became the first country to offer the coronavirus booster amid fears that vaccine efficacy dwindles over time. The UK has already authorised the booster, and the USA and

have been the main drivers behind the third shot movement. According to an article published in *Science*, the mouthpiece of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), "The greater infectiousness of the Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 has scientists and governments debating whether booster shots of Covid-19 vaccines are needed in some countries given limited vaccine supplies elsewhere."

The *Science* paper entitled, "Unethical? Unnecessary? The Covid-19 vaccine booster debate intensifies" also observes that, "as United States reveals its plan to offer an extra dose of Covid-19 vaccine, equity and scientific questions abound."

Studies show that even after five to eight months, vaccines still remain highly protective against severe illness, hospitalisation and death. In comparison, billions of the world's population have not received a single shot due to a shortage of vaccines. Consequently, one is faced with a moral and ethical dilemma. Do the less fortunate amongst us deserve a chance to live and avoid the inevitable fate once they get infected?

The WHO, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, have

and for ignoring the need in Covid-19 vaccine distribution, according to a research paper in the science journal, *Lancet*.

Access to vaccines for all (and I mean all the people in the world) is fast becoming a global issue at all international gatherings, and has superseded climate change at the current General Assembly meeting in New York. This comes after 18 months since the pandemic first started because "it's clear the world is likely to be riddled with Covid-19—and its many variant successors—for years to come," according to a BBC report. "The next big question is whether two doses of each vaccine is enough" and when can we expect to have enough to vaccinate everyone, rich and poor.

"All indications are that [Covid-19] is going to become endemic, but the hope is that it can be managed through vaccines," said Flavio Torres, an economic epidemiologist at the University of Cambridge. "The practical policy at this point, given the low cost really should be to get as many people vaccinated as possible."

In light of these sentiments, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom

Uncontested victories are an ominous sign for democracy

MOSHTAQUE AHMED

WITH some improvements in the Covid-19 situation in Bangladesh, the country recently witnessed elections in 160 union parishads and nine upazila parishads. In these elections, according to election commission reports, 43 candidates in union parishads and four in upazila parishads won uncontested—and all of them were affiliated with the ruling party, i.e. Awami League (AL). With these

of the ominous signs that this kind of uncontested and voter-less elections might have on the future of the democratic process?

According to available information, elections were supposed to be held in a total of 379 union parishads in April this year in the first phase. But due to Covid-19, it was deferred to June when elections were held in 204 union parishads, with 167 being further postponed for various reasons. Of these, in 160 parishads, polls were held on

are not a sudden phenomenon in the country—a lack of confidence in the electoral system has been growing since 2014 in Bangladesh. We have been noticing the result of that in recent elections, which has manifested firstly in people's disinterest or indifference in going to the polling stations, and secondly in not being interested to run for elections. This is how the whole system has been approaching its demise. An objective analysis of all post-2018 elections can shed light on this situation.

parishad level—the lowest tier of local government—would lead to a kind of festive mood at every corner of the villages. Today, that tradition is all but gone. People, except government party supporters, do not feel like coming forward to even stand for such local elections. Needless to say, it is a kind of silent protest against the current electoral institutions that people are turning away from the polls.

One can view this degradation of the electoral system in Bangladesh from two angles. Firstly, starting from 2014, the Election Commission has, willingly or unwillingly, failed utterly to create a "level playing field" for all stakeholders and political forces to ensure their participation in the electoral process. Ruling party candidates took advantage of this situation and played their own game with the unholy support of local administration. From my own experience, I can tell that in the 2018 elections, many of the age-old electoral rules were ignored in certain locations, such as the system of casting votes in "closed and secret rooms", and many voters felt directly intimidated, especially where election officials and administration did not strictly enforce the rules. Such experiences led many opposition candidates to believe there was no use of participating in elections, and many voters at polling centres also felt disheartened and disengaged, which has been responsible for creating widespread voter apathy in the face of potential disenfranchisement.

It is a well-established fact that since 2014, the people of Bangladesh have been losing confidence in the electoral system and in electoral institutions. This is an ominous sign of a looming disaster for the nation. We must now put serious thought into how we can keep democracy alive in the country. By now, it should be clear that this cannot be achieved by killing the electoral system.

Moshtaque Ahmed is a former UN official.



PHOTO: STAR

43, a total of 69 candidates have been elected uncontested in union parishad elections in its first phase. Apart from these, last week's parliamentary by-election in Cumilla-7 constituency also saw the unopposed election of an AL candidate. As time goes on, the number of unopposed winners in local elections have been on the rise. But has anybody thought of the dire consequences or

September 20, and the remaining seven are yet to be held. Polls have been held in nine upazila parishads as well. The results of these polls indicate that 27 percent of the winners in union parishads and 45 percent in upazila parishads have secured their victory unopposed, which raises serious questions regarding their democratic legitimacy. However, such uncontested elections

As I remember, the first City Corporation election in Dhaka after 2018 could attract only 30 percent of voters. After that, the by-election of the Dhaka-5 constituency attracted only 10.43 percent of voters. This is how the fall started, but now, it has spread all over the country like a fast-spreading virus. One might remember a time when elections held at the union